

Fostering Annual Report 2021/2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on The Isle of Wight Council's fostering service in line with fostering services statutory regulations and guidance.

Fostering Services work within the Fostering Regulations and the National Minimum Standards for Foster carers as well as the Children Act and Care Standards Act.

Foster carers can be approved by independent fostering agencies or the Local Authority. When the local authority do not have enough foster carers or the right foster carers to meet a child's needs they purchase placements from Independent fostering agencies.

Local Authority fostering services are inspected by Ofsted as part of the overall inspection of Children's Services.

During 2021/2022 the service successfully recruited and approved 6 new General fostering households.

At the end of March 2022 there were 98 registered and approved foster carer households in the isle of Wight.

There is a target to recruit 10 fostering households in 2022/23.

The number of foster carers needs to considerably increase and this is planned to be delivered by an improved offer to foster carers and targeting of prospective foster carers through the delivery of a Modernising Placements Programme.

1. Marketing

- 1.1 Marketing activities have continued holding Virtual drop-in which has enabled the service to interact with wider audiences. Virtual drop-ins have a higher level of convenience for attendees as they can engage from their home or on the move. Timings are also more convenient as events can be played back at a later date, the team are undertaking more face -to -face events to re-establish a physical presence in the local community.

- 1.2 Participation activities have been celebrated in the local media, via press release. Good news stories that we have promoted have gained positive attention. Foster carers have given praise to the service for their work in this area. It is intended that the programme will continue to influence positive word of mouth referrals. Carers are positive about the regular activities and competitions and have also expressed that they appreciate the birth children being included in these activities as it promotes the entire household involvement. This will continue and we are asking carers for ideas for future activities.
- 1.3 Digital was the highest platform enquiry lead, with 24 individuals stating that they had come across the service online, either via social media or organically through search engines. More must still be done to improve the Service's digital activity, but to ensure a return on investment, the service is reliant on the new website going live
- 1.4 The service has also taken part in the southeast regional fostering forums 'mystery shopper' exercise. This is now in its 6th cohort and the IOW have undertaken the mystery shopper role. This was interesting as it gave us the opportunity to experience other agencies responses to enquirers and to use the learning to improve our own. Out of 24 LA's and IFA's we had the third highest average score of 7.38. The issue noted for us was the accessibility of the website and the lack of a contact phone number on the current fostering webpage. The website, as stated below, is being refreshed and we have asked for the phone number to be more prominent.
- 1.5 Due to previous reallocation of corporate resources the launch of the new website was delayed until 2022. Work continues with the Comms team to ensure this enables the fostering service to be on a more competitive level with other recruiting agencies.

2. The Fostering Service

- 2.1 The Permanence Team is formed of three hubs who each focus on one area of activity. Recruitment and Assessment of Foster carers, support to foster carers and all aspects of Adoption.
- 2.2 The two Isle of Wight Fostering hubs are comprised of the following:
- 1 Team Manager,
 - 2 Assistant Team Managers,
 - 6.59 FTE Social Workers
 - 1 ASYE
 - 2 Fostering Practitioners

- 1 Marketing Officer
 - 1 FTE Social Work Personal Assistant
 - 1 FTE Team Administrator.
- 2.3 The recruitment and assessment hub includes the marketing officer who has a focus on all aspects of marketing to ensure we are attracting applicants who can meet the needs of our children. The social workers undertake joint viabilities with the childcare teams and assess and support all general and connected applicants through to Panel and approval.
- 2.4 The Assistant team manager of the support hub attends the placement meetings held three times a week with the commissioning team to ensure appropriate matching and placement stability. The support hub provides a focussed team of social workers to promote stability and development of our approved carers.
- 2.5 This has enabled each hub to focus on their specialisms of work and has enabled a more focused approach and improvement to timescales, compliance, and quality assurance.

3. Recruitment of Foster Carers

- 3.1 Recruitment stats are lower than the previous year. It is understood that other local authorities are experiencing the same trends. Influencing factors in foster carer recruitment are believed to be higher costs of living, and adjustments to life post lockdown.
- 3.2 Since lockdown restrictions have been relaxed, all initial visits and recruitment activity has been in person.
- 3.3 In the year 2021 – 22, community events began to re-open, yet many large events such as the County Show continued to postpone for safety measures. The fostering service found that town centre recruitment stands were successful in gaining attention and generating enquiries. These were booked throughout the summer from May to August.
- 3.4 5 new General Fostering households were approved in this period. With an initial enquiry count of 53, the end of year conversion score was 9.4% - which is an improvement on the year before.
- 3.5 There are two parts to the general fostering assessment – part one where we gather initial checks and references and part two which is the assessment itself. The service continues to complete these concurrently to reduce the time applicants are in assessment.
- 3.6 Recruitment Data for 2021/22
- Number of enquiries 53
 - Number of Initial Home Visits 27

- Number of assessments initiated 7
- Number of approvals 6
- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval 9.4%

4. Fostering support

- 4.1 It continues to be the aim of the service to ensure that we have foster carers available to meet the needs of Isle of Wight children.
- 4.2 The Fostering support hub continue to provide support and supervision to all approved foster carers and carers who remain caring for children under staying put (continue to care for children after they turn 18). We continue to provide numerous support groups including monthly lunch and learn/ lite bite sessions, connected carers group, men's group and deliver training which includes Skills to Foster, Fostering Changes, Attachment, Safeguarding/ Safer Caring and Supervised Contact etc.
- 4.3 As the government restrictions were reduced and then ended, more of the fostering groups have begun to take place face to face. However we are continuing to provide virtual groups to promote and enable a wider attendance from carers who live on the mainland or have issues that had previously prevented them attending in person. We will continue to work with our carers to review this and ensure that we adapt our practise to meet their needs. We will be returning to face to face 'lite bites' sessions on a quarterly basis with a hybrid presence for those on the mainland. We are still working on the technical issues of providing this. The support hub continue to offer a duty telephone line and are able to arrange virtual teams meetings promptly for carers to ensure they receive the support etc that they require.
- 4.4 The support hub has worked hard to move training and support online to increase the opportunity for carers to feel supported and part of the fostering community. This has been especially welcomed by carers who do not reside on the island as they have been able to feel more included and able to access all aspects of Fostering virtually. The support hub has worked with our work force development colleagues to enable carers have access to the e learning courses available to the wider workforce. The team have ensured that bespoke training has been recorded and uploaded to the Learning hub so that this is available to carers.

5. Annual Fostering Survey

- 5.1 In 2021 / 22 the Annual Fostering Survey was sent electronically with expectation that it would increase participation on grounds of convenience.

After one month of the survey being live, the number of responses were reviewed.

- 5.2 Individuals from the Council's volunteer programme stepped forward to support the service in collecting feedback from carers. Telephone surveys were offered to Foster Carers, yet engagement in sharing feedback was still very low.
- 5.3 In total there were 29 participants. Again due to a low number of responses the findings were hard to generalise as the sample size was not representative of the population.
- 5.4 The findings from those who participated in the survey (17 General / 12 Connected), revealed the following key stats:
- 5.5 15 (88.2%) of the General Foster Carer respondents felt that they had **not**, in the past year, taken a placement that they did not feel equipped to care for.
- 5.6 62% of **all** respondents feel that they benefit from attending the support groups that are provided by the service.
- 5.7 When asked what they benefit from most about these sessions, one person wrote: *'Live events are an important opportunity to meet and network with staff and other carers. Being a Foster Carer can be isolating, maintaining a support network is important'*.
- 5.8 93% of **all** respondents feel that the Fostering Service keep them well informed.
- 5.9 When asked how fostering has impacted their family, one respondent stated that they 'don't get to see their own family as much', while another has shared that fostering 'can be incredibly stressful and lonely'.
- 5.10 41% of **all** respondents claim to be very happy with the fostering allowances that they receive, although three people have said that they do not feel the recent increase is in keeping with the raise in all living costs and expenses.
- 5.11 One person said that they are very dissatisfied with the allowances as it feels that they match the needs of the carer rather than the child – giving the specific example of a child with autism. Others also say that they disagree in the difference between Impact rate and general rate.
- 5.12 When commenting on support one respondent wrote that they *'have found the service to be easily accessible, nothing is too much trouble all questions have been answered and I feel very supported'*. Another shared that *'it is easy to get in contact as and when you need it. However, lots of changes in people.'*

- 5.13 In the Permanence Team there have been a number of staff changes that carers have commented on. One person has said that the *'a careful look needs to happen with the permanence team as there is a lot of movement and is making people feel uneasy'*.

6. Placements

- 6.1 Based on findings from the survey, 76.4% of General Foster Carer respondents, felt that they had **not** had children placed with them outside of their approval. In addition, 88.2% of the respondents felt that they had **not** had a child in placement who they were un-equipped to care for.
- 6.2 The Assistant Team Manager or Team Manager attends placement meetings three times per week to discuss and plan potential placements with the commissioning team and the childcare teams. This has continued to support careful matching and has maintained placement stability for our children and young people in care.
- 6.3 The supervising social worker ensures that placement planning meetings are held within 72 hours of placement and that the Personal Development Plan provides carers with training to support caring for the child. This is overseen by the Assistant team Manager.
- 6.4 The limited evidence from the Foster carer's survey would suggest that the strategies in place to support placements is having a positive impact and will be continued.

7. Placement Endings

- 7.1 47% of General Foster Carer respondents said that they have experienced a child leave their care in the past year. 87.5% of whom, felt that they were able to support the child during this time but not all in this position felt supported by the Team.
- 7.2 Respondents who did not feel supported during their end of placement said that on one occasion they felt as if they were doing something they shouldn't as the member of fostering team was busy. Another said that 'It was all very last minute and impacted on the young person because they didn't know what and when things were going to happen'.
- 7.3 End of placement reports and disruption meetings are called when a placement ends. The Child's Social Worker, the child and the foster carer are requested to write an end of placement report which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the placement. This information is used to inform and

improve practice and to support carers who have experienced an unexpected ending to a placement.

8. Training:

- 8.1 IOW Fostering will continue to offer a variety of training in a range of mediums as we maximise on the opportunities offered by the new ways of working developed over the previous two years. This will include guest speakers, peer led discussions, group programmes and online training platforms via the Learning hub.
- 8.2 Supervising Social Workers identify new training opportunities that will support the Carer's Personal development record. Any specific requirements can be discussed and commissioned with approval from the Team Manager and Service manager. This may include 121 training from home. Training will be provided weekdays, weekends and evenings to facilitate attendance.
- 8.3 The Foster carers training pathway has been revised and includes wider training courses available to carers and we will continue to work with Work Force Development to enhance and refine this over the next year. Personal development records are now maintained within the learning hub so that these are routinely updated each time a course is completed. This has enabled carers to be able to access training on specific needs for their children as and when they need it. The Support hub are also exploring how 'lite Bites', our Lunch and Learn sessions, can be recorded and available on the learning hub to enable carers to have a wider access to these at a time that suits them and also to be able to revisit the topics.

9. Improving the Service: the main themes

- Foster Carers want to be more involved in supporting recruitment and the service with different activities.
 - Foster carers to have access to support and training to maximise the use of IT to engage with learning and the virtual world.
 - Foster Carers want to see improvements to allowances.
 - To return to more face-to-face training and social events
 - Continue to focus on compliance and quality of reporting by the social workers.
 - Focussing on recording systems and refining how current data is to be more aligned and ready to transition to the new IT system Mosaic
- 9.1 The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Approach is being embedded within the service. All supervision notes and household reviews are written in the

strengths-based way. We are applying this approach across the service. There is still work to be done to review the current forms used to promote this across the service. One example of this is the change from respite request to sleepover requests thereby making this a more 'normal', less stigmatising and understandable terminology for children and young people.

- 9.2 The Fostering hubs are exploring with carers which activities they would be happy to support. We intend to develop this into a spreadsheet so that we can approach identified carers for each area e.g., training. We are also planning to establish a focus group to engage foster carers in future developments of the service to ensure we are continuing to meet their needs.
- 9.3 The Support hub are working with the inhouse volunteers to provide individual IT training and support for carers who are less confident with using computers as this is a potential barrier for them going forwards. We need our carers to be able to monitor and safeguard our young people online. Some carers have also expressed issues in accessing laptops etc that are able to support this activity and we are working with the transformation team to be able to provide equipment to carers in the same way we do to staff. This would also enhance the security of data and recording for carers as it would be protected via the Isle of Wight security processes.
- 9.4 Mainland carers and carers in France have been able to access the IOW fostering training and community and are pleased with the support they have been able to access in this new way of working that was not previously achievable. This will be maintained and continued.
- 9.5 Some foster carers have requested that allowances and payment structures are reviewed. The IOW service is currently engaging in the Modernising Placements programme with Hampshire to not only review allowances but to review the whole service delivery to ensure we are prepared for the future.
- 9.6 The service is returning to face-to-face visits and events as we all missed that personal and social interaction. However, we also want to maintain the positive gains experienced over the last year. We envisage having a more agile approach that can be more responsive to individual needs to promote stability and foster carers feeling supported. We will need to work with our carers to achieve this as it is unlikely that we will return fully to the previous ways of working and some may struggle with this.
- 9.7 The service will maintain the focus on performance and quality of reporting to ensure that prospective applicants and carers receive a high-quality service. This will assist in promoting a positive image of IOW fostering to the wider community.

10. Fostering Panel

- 10.1 The service has 12 fostering panels per year which are held monthly. Each panel will hear a maximum of 6 cases. The Panel Chair and all panel members receive an appraisal annually.
- 10.2 Panel feedback from applicants is routinely sought, however limited feedback is received despite creating an online survey designed to encourage greater participation. We are asking assessing social workers to promote this given that panels are now virtual.
- 10.3 The Service Manager and the Team Manager meet with the panel chair on a quarterly basis to discuss any themes in panel, policy or process issues, and training & development needs.
- 10.4 Now restrictions have been lifted a training day is being arranged for panel members, to include in part meeting with the Fostering Service Hubs, to update knowledge of policy, thresholds, good practice and to encourage a more coherent way of working.
- 10.5 The team manager has recruited two new panel members this year and one member retired after long service. The Team Manager is still actively recruiting to expand the diversity and to increase the skills, knowledge and experience available to the panel.

11. Statistics

In House Fostering

- 11.1 There are different types of foster placement as below. This includes registered carers, Staying Put placements, Supported Lodgings providers and the addition of Connected assessments with children in placement.
- 11.2 This is a decrease from the previous year. These households can be broken down into their different registrations as follows:

Registration and numbers of households	March 2021	March 2022
General Foster Carer (a person assessed to be a foster carer for any child needing care)	49	42

Connected Foster Carer (a person known to the child who is assessed as a foster carer and specifically approved for this child only)	51	40
Supported Lodgings (carers for children 16+ only)	3	1
Family Link (families providing short breaks to children with disabilities)	1	0
Connected Assessments with Child in Placement (a person who is known to the child who has had a short assessment to ensure that they are safe and has had the child placed with them whilst a fuller assessment is completed to enable a child to continue to be cared for by someone they know).	6	4
Staying Put (An arrangement to allow a young person to remain living with their foster carer after they have turned 18)	4	5
Total	114	92

i) *Data Source: Data Provided by Isle of Wight Fostering Service.*

ii) *Date Period: Snapshot as at 31st March 2022.*

- 11.3 A previous challenge for the team was the timely return of application forms impacting on the timeliness of checks and references being requested. To address this application packs are now sent out with a 2 week deadline for completion and return. The Fostering Practitioner attached to the Assessment hub will also contact the applicant if the form has not been returned within this time frame to offer support.
- 11.4 This is a particular focus for connected carers with children placed as these are usually within the court arena. The team are ensuring regular contact with the children's social worker to provide a supportive approach to these households.
- 11.5 A further challenge for the team remains obtaining sections 4 and 5 of the connected assessment from the Child/ren's Social Worker in a timely manner. To address this when a connected application pack is posted out, the admin worker will also email the section 4 & 5 templates to CSW involved with a request these are completed and returned within 10 working days and the Fostering Practitioner will continue to chase and monitor to ensure this is completed.
- 11.6 This has encouraged some improvement in the time taken to receive the documents back but requires ongoing monitoring and oversight to ensure it continues to improve.

Foster carers on hold

- 11.7 The average number of general foster carer households on hold at the end of the year is 2.6 households. This is 6.04% of the available households. These

have been for a variety of reasons, including foster carers choosing to take a break, and other family or work commitments.

Timeliness of household reviews

Reviews completed on time %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
100	97	100	100	100	100	96	100	100	100	96	94

- 11.8 This was identified as a focus for the hub to address last year and we have seen sustained good practice in this area during the whole of this year. This has been an increase of 86% in 2019/20 to 99% in 2021/22

Timeliness of supervision visits

Supervision completed on time %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	93	100	92	98

- 11.9 This is a good area of performance and evidences that the supervision of foster carers has remained a high priority this year and we have even seen an improvement on last years high performance (95%). This is an area that has benefitted from a dedicated support hub; prior to this the average percentage for 2019/20 was 90% and in 2021/22 it was 99%

Timeliness of unannounced visits

Carers who have had an Unannounced visit within last year and have been approved for one year + %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
56	55	52	65	60	45	50	88	81	85	83	84

- 11.10 Face to Face unannounced visits have proved a challenge during the lockdown periods of Covid. However, as restrictions were lifted this was a target for the hub. The hub also explored creative ways to achieve this and to focus on visiting all households. This continues to be an area for development and improvement, and we can see that improved performance has been achieved since November 2021. The average this year has been 67% and the average (pre-lockdowns) in 2019/20 was 84.4%

Medicals

Percentage of Foster carers with health assessments within 3 years											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR

91	91	93	83	83	80	80	85	84	85	82	96
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11.11 In line with policy Hampshire and the isle of Wight complete review health medicals every 3 years. Progress was been made with health assessments utilising the covid self-reporting format and since then we have seen numbers rise again since more face-to-face medicals were possible. The average this year has risen to 86% which compares to 77.4% in 2019/20 pre-pandemic.

11.12 Carers were informed of the need to book face to face health assessments once the surgeries were facilitating these. The supervising social workers continued to promote this. The carers received a communication to try and start booking their medicals again and to alert the service if this was refused so that we could escalate this as a priority. Health issues are discussed in supervisions with a particular focus on ensuring carers were not neglecting their health during the pandemic.

DBS checks

DBS checks completed with 3 years %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
100	100	97	97	99	99	98	97	99	99	93	99

11.13 This is now an area of sustained area of good performance following sustained targeting since the team was restructured. During this time, they have improved the average in 2019/20 of 78% to 98% in 2021/22. However, it is a requirement that all carers have a valid and in date DBS check. This is continued to be monitored closely and the target remains 100% every month.

Deregistration

	Q1 2021/22	Q2 2021/22	Q3 2021/22	Q4 2021/22
General carers	2	3	4	5
Connected Carers	3	6	4	0
Total	5	10	8	5

Over 21/22 there have been 27 fostering household that have been de-registered: 14 general households and 13 connected households.

11.14 Of the Connected carers deregistered, the reasons were:

Reasons for deregistration	
SGO Granted	4
Returned to parents	3

Staying put/ independent living arrangements	3
Move to adoption	1
Child moved to residential.	1
Marriage breakdown	1

11.15 Of the General Foster carers deregistered, the reasons were:

Reasons for deregistration	
Deregistered on conclusion of investigation	2
Resigned prior to conclusion of investigation	3
Change of circumstances	5
SGO granted	1
Heath grounds	1
Death in service	1
Staying put arrangement	1

11.16 Of those where a change of circumstances was provided as a reason for deregistration, the most common theme noted is a change in work commitments or family situation.

12. Complaints and allegations against foster carers

12.1 The Council has a Complaints and Allegations against Foster Carers procedure as required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011.

12.2 In total there have been 7 complaints & allegations initiated within the 2021-22 period.

12.3 These were concluded as the following

Complaint	Allegation
0	7

12.4 Of these complaints and allegations, the outcomes were.

Ongoing case, not concluded	1
De Registered	1
Resigned prior to conclusion of investigation.	3
Continuing to foster	2

13. Modernising Placements Programme.

- 13.1 The fostering team have continued to make significant progress over the last year. The service has become more efficient, and the timeliness and quality of work has improved. They have provided more timely assessments, supervision, reviews and safeguarding checks.
- 13.2 Whilst this work has provided a better service to foster carers; there is a need to increase the recruitment of foster carers significantly. This will require a planned approach to both marketing and an improved offer to foster carers to be more competitive.
- 13.3 We have began to work on a Modernising Placements Programme to update our fostering service and provide the number and type of placements to meet the needs of children on the island.
- 13.4 The programme will need to attract more foster carers with an improved offer to support foster carers to provide high quality stable care to children. This will need to see them through to adulthood by supporting them to understand what has happened to them and to cope with the emotion that this evokes. In order to do this carers will need high quality training and support and we will need to consider the pay difference between our foster carers pay and that of IFA's.

14. Conclusion

- 14.1 The team have continued to work well and have been able to demonstrate a greater level of compliance across all areas of work with the exception of the unannounced visits. This is an outstanding area for the next year which will be addressed.
- 14.2 Placement stability has been good with proactive support being offered and close links via the placement meetings to ensure better matching with foster carers skills sets. This has also enabled a closer working relationship with the child in care team to provide a holistic approach to supporting children and placements.
- 14.3 Assessment timeliness has improved over the year. Dropout rates concern to be a concern and impact on the number of approvals. This is being monitored and a new marketing strategy will enable us to target more effectively applicants that are able to meet the needs of our children.
- 14.4 The use of IT is being embedded for both staff and carers and this continues to be promoted and supported. The team have developed strategies to move activities to the virtual world to ensure increased accessibility to the service. The foster carers now have access to the wider workforce learning hub and training pathways agreed to support them to achieve training in a more flexible way. Face to face training is returning however we envisage this continuing to be a hybrid approach to meet the needs of carers who find

attending training more of a challenge due to work etc. Fostering recruitment and assessment continues to be a major focus of activity and Fostering Panels are now held virtually to ensure there is no delay to applicants.

- 14.5 The staff team had been stable for the majority of the year however in quarter 3 we experienced some turnover with 4 staff leaving and 1 achieving a promotional secondment. The staff that left the service, moved for positive career moves rather than dissatisfaction with the service. The management team have been actively recruiting and have put interim support plans in place to minimise the impact to our fostering households. We now have an established admin hub which has supported the team and enabled the workflow to be effectively monitored, reviewed and streamlined in preparation for a new IT system due to come on line in October 2022. This has also supported the improvements in performance and compliance.
- 14.6 A Modernising Placements programme is required to move the service to the next stage by increasing numbers, improving support and supporting carers to have the confidence to take and successfully care for our most complex children.
- 14.7 This has been an embedding year for the service following the restructure in 2019. The impact and outcome of this can continue to be seen as performance has continued to steadily improve. Continuity of service has been maintained and stability for foster carers has been at the heart of our practice. This will continue as we develop the service further over the next year. On reflection, the team have shown dedication and commitment to the service and the needs of our children, and I commend them for their resilience. This has been a successful year despite some of the challenges that we have encountered.