

# **Somerset County Council**

## **Children's Social Care**

### **Fostering Service Annual Report**

#### **April 2020 – March 2021**

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## CONTENTS

1.	<b>Summary and Looking Forward .....</b>	<b>3</b>
2.	<b>Service Overview .....</b>	<b>9</b>
3.	<b>Sufficiency of Fostering Families .....</b>	<b>.15</b>
4.	<b>Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey .....</b>	<b>20</b>
5.	<b>Service Performance .....</b>	<b>21</b>
6.	<b>Fostering Support and Supervision .....</b>	<b>35</b>
7.	<b>Complaints and Allegations .....</b>	<b>58</b>
8.	<b>Independent Review Mechanism .....</b>	<b>59</b>
9.	<b>Fostering Panel .....</b>	<b>60</b>
10.	<b>Fostering Panel Chair’s Report .....</b>	<b>61</b>
11.	<b>Foster Carer Retention .....</b>	<b>70</b>
12.	<b>Child’s Voice .....</b>	<b>82</b>
13.	<b>Foster Carer Feedback.....</b>	<b>83</b>
14.	<b>Covid 19 Response.....</b>	<b>86</b>
15.	<b>Supporting carers through agency suspension.....</b>	<b>88</b>
16.	<b>Fostering Service Development .....</b>	<b>89</b>
17.	<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>94</b>

# SUMMARY AND SERVICE PLAN OVERVIEW

## 1. Summary and Looking Forward

1.1 The Fostering Service has continued to provide services to children and adapt and develop throughout 2020-2021 period. The impact of Coronavirus on services, has been felt, however the service during this period adjusted to change and maintained service delivery, addressing the requirements of national guidance and fostering standards.

1.2 As a regulated Fostering Service Somerset County Council is subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act, 2000, and the Fostering Service strives to deliver a quality fostering service that aligns with best practice, and places children at the very heart of all that we do.

1.3 As with many Fostering Services, Somerset County Council is increasingly faced by complexity in delivering services to children and young people who need to be looked after by the Local Authority, and this has not changed through the period. In delivering these services, Somerset County Council requires a range of foster carers who are skilled, adaptable, and resourceful in meeting the needs of children and young people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. In meeting these needs the Fostering Service has continued to look to the future with exploration and vision in all its key areas of responsibility:

- Dedicated support, supervision, and training of all foster carers.
- Innovative recruitment and quality focused assessments of foster carers.
- A local provision of skilled and aspirational foster carers to meet the needs of Somerset children and young people.

- A clear focus on keeping siblings together, where assessed as the right plan.
- The delivery of specialist and innovative schemes to support and care for children, helping them grow, develop, and succeed.
- A whole systems approach to enable children and young people to move to long term, permanent, fostering families.
- The provision of specialist Short Break Care to support children with disabilities and their families and help improve resilience.
- The promotion of family stability and permanence planning, which is reviewed and adapted to meet individual and changing needs of children and young people.

1.4 This report provides information and an overview of Somerset County Council's Fostering Service for the period April 2020 – March 2021 inclusive. The report outlines the achievements and challenges for the Fostering Service, as well as using data, comparable and qualitative information as an enabler for future planning.

1.5 The report looks forward and into the 2021-22 period, providing information on the fostering development plan and identifies our key initiatives.

1.6 The purpose of the annual report is to inform the public, elected members, partners and staff of the progress and developments in the service during this period, and our vision for the forthcoming year and beyond.

1.7 The Fostering Service has encountered significant challenges throughout the 2020-21 period, and the coronavirus pandemic has added to the strain of complexity. The complexity of the needs of looked after children continues to be demanding in terms of providing well matched provisions, and service ability to provide support at the right time, in the right area at times has been

difficult. Additional challenges have arisen during the period that have come to the fore due to the pandemic.

- 1.8 The number of children looked after has remained consistent during the period. In March 2020 there were 529 looked after children in Somerset and in March 2021 this was also 529.
- 1.9 The shortage of fostering families and places for children and young people, together with an increase in complex needs, continues to impact upon the Fostering Services ability to match all our children well. During the 2020-2021 period, the number of Fostering families within the Service has remained relatively unchanged, with net numbers of carers being the same in March 2021 as in March 2020. The lack of fostering families to meet children and young people's needs can lead to its own challenges, with opportunity of stability and longevity in existing fostering families being affected. Inadequate matching and difficult endings can also impact upon foster carers' emotional resilience, and therefore enthusiasm to continue to foster can at times be impacted. In recognition to these challenges, the Fostering Service, alongside its drive to recruit, assess and support foster carers, has continued to develop innovative, creative and supportive processes to enable the best opportunities for children and young people to remain with their fostering families. Future developments in 2021-2022 and beyond are further detailed in this report.
- 1.10 The Somerset Fostering Service has continued to face challenges in respect of our ability to recruit new carers and recognises that this continues to be a significant challenge felt nationally. Sadly, nationally, statistics show that there remains a slow decline in the number of foster carers, while the number of children who are in need of foster care continues to rise. Nationally it is reported that there are fewer carers, looking after more children. However, although Somerset have not seen an increase in fostering families, we have

not seen an increase in deregistration's, which has enabled the service to maintain a constant foster carer base with no net loss.

- 1.11 This continued focus of the Kinship Service has assisted the Fostering Service, and in terms of sufficiency and outcomes. Temporary connected persons and connected persons within the period have increased. We have continued to improve our service to those who are temporarily approved by offering support and supervision which is aligned to the child/young person and carer, alongside completing the assessment. There has been an increase in temporary connected carers successfully transitioning through the assessment process and being approved as connected persons. This in turn has assisted the service to offer children permanence within their families or networks. The creation of the specialist Kinship Team in 2018 has continued to develop through the 2020-21 period and has provided a consistent approach to the assessment of potential connected carers as well as providing dedicated support to promote stable and secure placements for the children they care for. Between the period of April 2020 and March 2021, 28 Kinship connected person assessments were taken to panel. 26 were fully approved and 2 brief reports as the assessments were ended.
- 1.12 Following on from the 2018-19 period, where it was recognised that a significant concern had been highlighted in respect of the number of carers resigning or being de-registered, especially carers in the first 2 years of fostering, the service adjusted in the 2019-20 period which enabled deregistration's to reduce. In the 2020-21 period, deregistration's have remained level (no increase or decrease). Resources and processes to identify difficulties early; offer intensive support when this is needed; and a systemic approach to working across teams has assisted in this improvement.

1.13 In the 2018-19 period, 28 foster carer(s) left the service, 18 in the 2012-20 and in 2020-21, there were 21. Common patterns identified in the deregistration analysis were:

- a) Own personal circumstances: family needing time for self, have other caring responsibilities; caring for older parents/relatives (12).
- b) Carers retiring after many years (2)
- c) Ill health and the impact of fostering on health, wellbeing and emotional resilience (2)
- d) Fostering not suitable, unable to match over a period of time (2)
- e) Dissatisfied with support during and after an allegation (1)
- f) A small number of foster carers stated that they also needed to stop caring for children as this did not fit with their work commitments or they felt that SCC did not pay carers a sufficient fee to enable them to stop working.

1.14 These figures are representative of the main Fostering Service and do not include Fostering for Adoption and connected persons. This is due to the nature of these carers being deregistered when moving from temporary approval to connected persons or moving to adopt children.

1.15 There remain positive signs in respect of a small number of carers where they have de-registered to offer permanency and legal stability for a child, for example through adoption or special guardianship. Whilst the service recognises the difficulties supporting carers; the complex needs of children, and that a small number of carers have left the service and been deregistered due to feeling dissatisfied, the overall picture remains improved from 2017-2019. The service in the forthcoming year and beyond, aims to improve on the consistency of practice and continue to embed good practice more widely. The

service also aims to utilise our resources effectively to assist in maintaining our sufficiency as well as our overall improvement journey. Further information regarding the fostering development plan is discussed in this report.

- 1.16 It remains positive that the service benefits from stable, committed, conscientious and skilled management and staff teams who have been willing and able to think creatively to implement changes and take forward practice improvements. However, our approach over the next 12-36 months will focus on developing our service further. Firstly, the restructuring of the service to allow for scrutiny, oversight, and manageable roles, building upon our knowledge of best practice; and secondly to develop, refresh and refocus our vision, values and culture to enable the service to be best placed to understand the changing needs of children; and be able to put the right support in place to allow for positive outcomes.
- 1.17 In the latter part of the 2020-21 period, the service worked in partnership with North Yorkshire under the DfE partners in practice framework, to review the service, and develop a business case for change. Although many of our plans were not developed, implemented, or realised in the 2020-21 period, this report will outline the future of the service and the development of the service and its plan for improvement.
- 1.18 The service remains very fortunate to have committed, experienced, enthusiastic and dedicated foster carers who continue to be inspirational to children and young people. Foster carers that have the capability and willingness to love and care for children, despite the many frustrations and challenges the role can bring are truly valued. We thank them for the many skills they have, for their commitment to working as part of our team, and overall, in helping children and young people reach their potential in all areas of their lives.



1.19 Throughout the 2020/21 period and during the coronavirus pandemic the Fostering Service has adjusted well to change and remained committed in our service delivery. The service has continued to develop processes and used creative resource allocation and development to improve our ability to support children in foster care.

## 2. Service Overview

2.1 The County Plan and the Children and Young Persons Plan 2019 - 2022 outline the organisational values that reflect the Council's Vision and Purpose.

2.2 *'Children's Social Care aims to work with parents, carers and young people in a partnership. This is based on respect, equality and fairness, and to offer advice and support before a situation reaches crisis point.'*

2.3 The Plan provides a set of consistent, simple values that guide our attitudes and behaviours. These values define how we do things and are the principles by which we work together and with our customers and partners.

2.4 As detailed in the children's and young people's plan; *'Our vision is that Somerset children and young people are safe, healthy, happy, are ambitious for their future and develop skills for life'*. We want them to:

- *be treated fairly and have a voice in what matters to them*
- *achieve economic independence and contribute to their community*
- *learn well and develop skills for life*
- *make healthy choices and develop resilience*

- *be confident, ambitious and achieve success*

(CYPP 2019-2022)

2.5 The Fostering Service significantly contributes to ensure sufficient, safe and well supported fostering families are available to meet the needs of children looked after as well as contributing to the 4 areas that we want children and young people in Somerset to have: *Supported families* - 'strengthening families and building resilient communities'; *Healthy Lives* – 'families making the right choices to support happy healthy lifestyles'; *Great Education* – 'high aspirations, opportunities and achievements for all'; *Positive Activities* – 'getting the most out of life through play, leisure, cultural and sporting opportunities'.

## **2.6 Role of the Fostering Service**

2.7 In England, Scotland and Wales all Fostering Services are governed by legislation, regulation, standards, and statutory guidance. The Fostering Service is a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act, 2000. The service continues to develop and improve practice in meeting the needs of children looked after and the requirements set out in the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011, and the National Minimum Standards 2011.

2.8 Fostering services are inspected in different ways as defined by the inspection framework governing the service type, whether that's public sector services such as local authorities, health and social care trusts or independent fostering providers. As a Local Authority Fostering Service, in England the regulatory body, Ofsted, inspects the Fostering Service as part of the Independent Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection of the whole of children's' services in the authority.

2.9 In meeting Somerset's Fostering Services responsibilities as outlined, our overall priorities are to ensure that:

- All children who come into care have a safe place to live in which they can grow, thrive, and reach their potential.
- We achieve early permanence for children in care, and children who cannot remain at home safely are offered a permanent family-based alternative as quickly as possible.
- We respond appropriately to the assessed needs of all children to ensure that they and their families are supported to ensure their life chances are maximised
- And overall, improving the lives of children and families across Somerset.

2.10 Somerset County Council's Fostering Service supports fostering families and together provide a range of temporary and permanent families who have a diverse range of skills, experience and knowledge in meeting children and young peoples needs. Foster carers provide family-based care ranging from short breaks for children who have a disability, parent(s) and child(ren) fostering, to short stays and longer-term and permanency arrangements. We actively work to prepare a child and families for permanence through adoption or to return home as part of an agreed plan. Furthermore, we work with professionals and families to enable permanence through longer-term foster care, that will support a child through to independence and beyond. As well as foster carers who provide care for children unknown to them, as previously, there are a significant and growing number of family members or friends who present for assessment as connected persons to look after children in their extended family or social network as kinship carers.

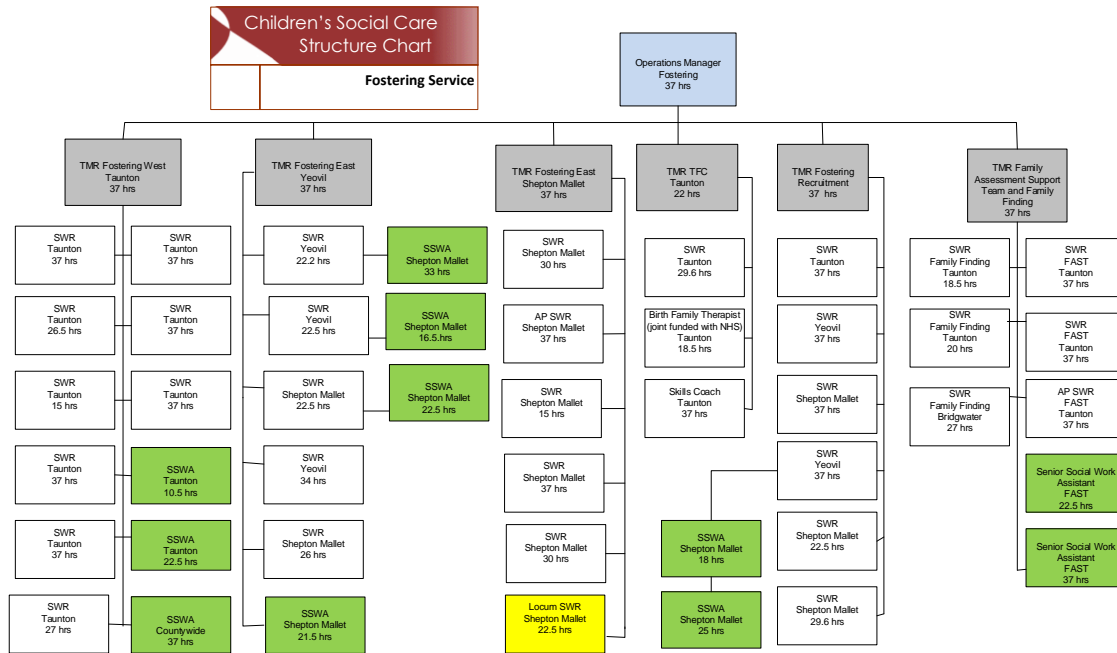
2.11 The Kinship Service, incorporates temporary connected persons, assessed

connected foster carers, and special guardians. Connected persons are afforded the same allowances, training and support as other foster carers and are fundamental in achieving positive outcomes for children. The Kinship Service has further developed and now supports private fostering as well as connected carers, and special guardianships. The Kinship service provides support and supervision to temporary connected persons (those who have children placed under a temporary approval and who are undergoing an assessment of their suitability to foster), as well as involvement from assessing social workers. Successful kinship arrangements offer children permanency, often within their own families, and within their own communities. Approximately 10 to 15 per cent of all looked after children live in with a connected person carer. Most connected person carers assessed go onto become Special Guardians, but currently more than 20 per cent of children who have lived with the same carer for over two years are living with connected carers. Between April 2020 and March 2021, 17 children in care left care to be placed on an SGO (Special Guardianship Order), 2 of which were with non-related foster carers.

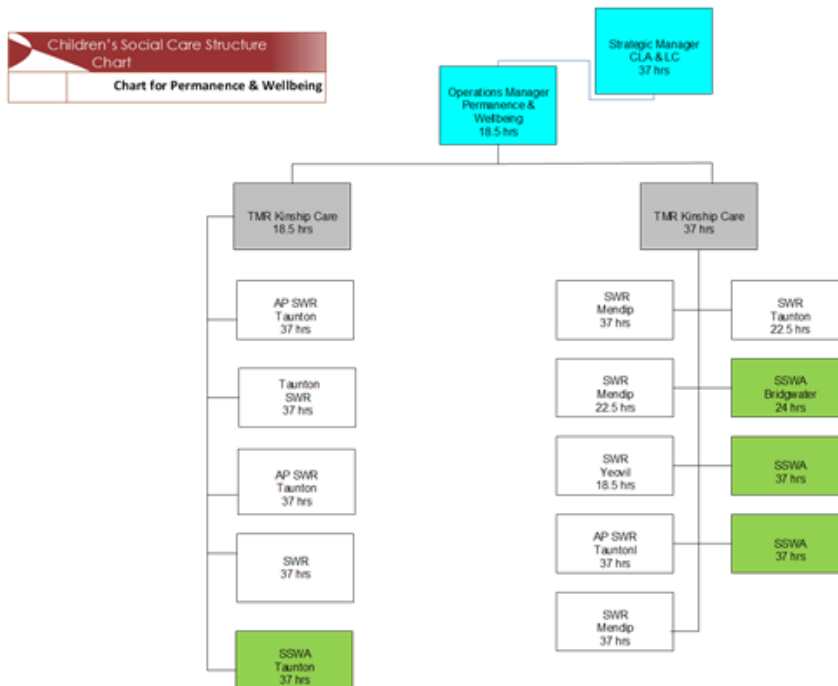
## **2.12 Service Structure**

2.13 During the 2020-21 period the service structure remained the same. The service during this period was overseen by two Strategic Operational Managers who had responsibility for different parts of the service, this being the main fostering service and the kinship service (see service structure 1 and service structure 1a below). However, and although not implemented until September 2021, it is important to recognise in this report that the Fostering development work, led to a restructure of the service (see service structure 2 and 2a below).

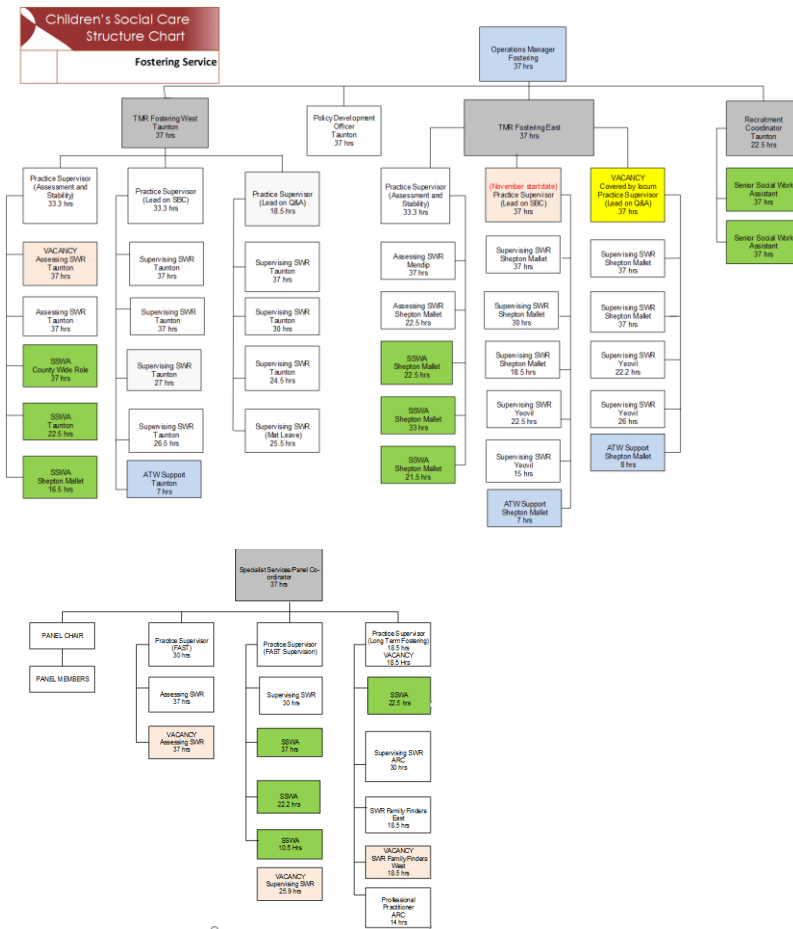
# Service Structure 1, As of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021



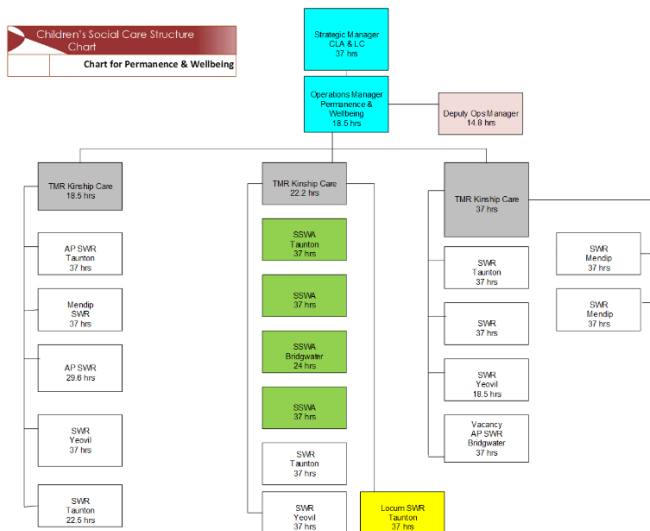
# Service Structure 1a, as of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021



# Service Structure 2, as of September 2021



# Service Structure 2a, as of September 2021



### **3. Sufficiency of fostering families**

#### **3.1 Children Looked After**

3.2 The number of children looked after in March 2021 was 524, and in March 2020 was 529. Although this is a slight decrease, this is seen as consistent with little change, and in line with normal variables and fluctuations. In March 2021, 220 children were cared for by Somerset foster carers (218 in March 2020). There were 172 (170 in March 2020) children cared for by in-house carers, and 48 (48 March 2020) cared for by temporary connected and connected persons foster carers.

3.3 158 children were cared for by independent agency carers (150 in March 2020). 146 children lived in other care arrangements (161 in March 2020), such as children's homes, residential schools or supported accommodation. This also includes carers who are temporary approved by Somerset for adoption (foster to adopt). The children looked after figure has remained relatively consistent throughout the 2019-21 period, with only a slight year on year decline of 5 (March 2019 534; March 2020 529; March 2021 524).

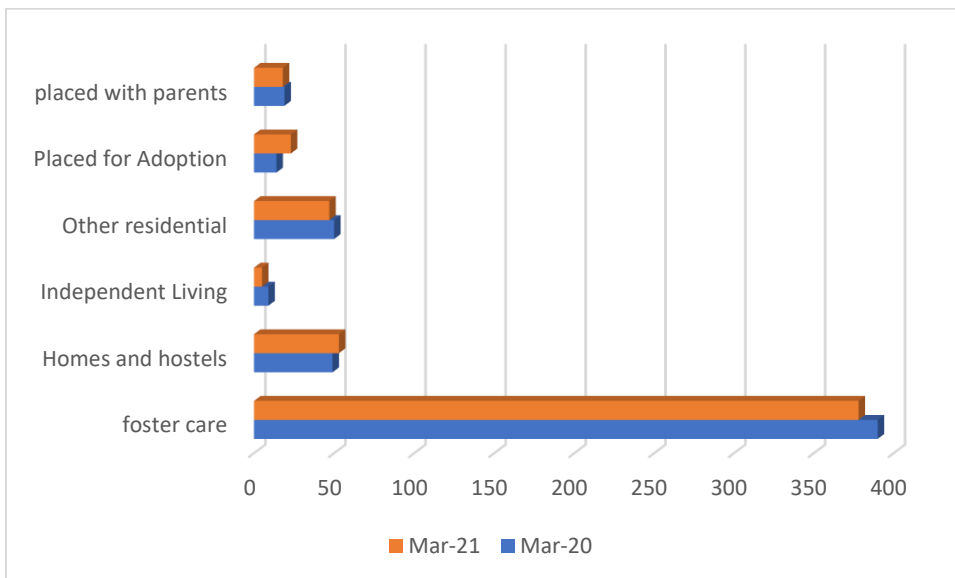
3.4 A high proportion of children looked after in Somerset are placed with foster carers. However, Somerset still has a significant use of agency foster placements and a use of residential care that is higher than the national average.

3.5 The graph below shows an overview of all placements for March 2021. (Foster care 378; Homes and Hostels 53; Independent Living 5; Other residential 47; placed for adoption 23; Placed with parents 18)

### Chart Title

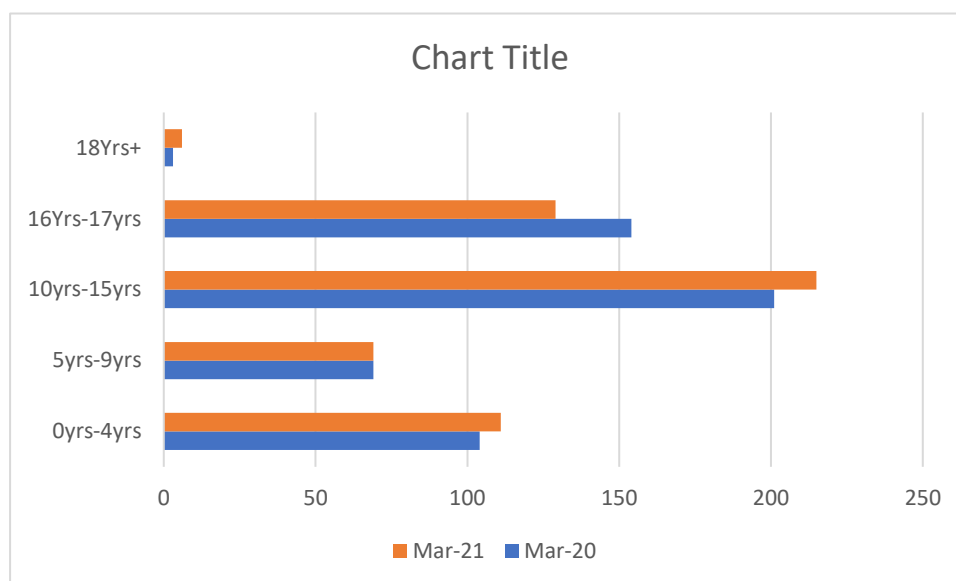


**3.6 Children Looked After by Placement Type:** The Graph below provides an overview of placements, comparing 2020 to 2021. It shows there has been a little change, however there has been an increase of children placed for adoption.





**3.7 Children Looked After March 2020 and 2021, by Age:** The graph below notably shows that there has been an increase in Children Looked after in the 10yrs-15yrs age group, and a decline in Children looked after in the 16yrs-17yrs age group.



3.8 The majority of internal carers are mainstream carers and are supervised and supported through two fostering teams on the East and the West of the county. This remains the case post September 2021, with the introduction of the new structure. However, our Short Break Care Service which in the 2020-2021 period was managed by specialist fostering social workers within the East Fostering Team, is incorporated into the main East and West teams (from September 2021). This was in recognition that short break foster carers, could be inclusively supported by a much larger team, with barriers of logistics of a small team covering a large geographical area being reduced.

3.9 The Somerset fostering service has involved overtime, and has developed specialist schemes to offer more intense support to children and families:

**3.10 FA&ST (family assessment & support team)**

3.11 We have a specialist service for parent(s) and child(ren). FA&ST offer assessment

placements for parents and their children. This service includes independent assessing social workers, and it offers a service for families with babies or young children being assessed in the community. The inclusive independent service offer children and families extensive support through a systemic approach of care and utilises knowledge and experience of staff and carers in providing robust assessments and reports for court. The FA&ST service post September 2021, as can be seen by the structural charts will expand and be under the specialist services arm of the service. In recognition of the importance of offering specialist placements for parents and children, and the need to complete community assessments, moving away from a reliance on independent assessors, and external providers, the fostering service recognised that an adjustment of resources was needed. Over the next 12-18months, the service will be able to offer further provisions to support children and parents, as well as completing assessments in the community by suitably trained and experienced social workers.

### **3.12 ARC Fostering (Attachment, Relationship, Connection)**

3.13 ARC fostering team was created at the end of the 2019-20 period. The service was created following a recognition of the changing needs of the fostering service in respect of stability of placements and supporting children stepping forward from residential provisions to fostering families or their birth families. The team's approach is informed by attachment and trauma theories. It recognises relationships are the most crucial part of recovery from developmental trauma and this therefore underpins their work. It aims to deliver this approach using the extended fostering family model which empowers our families to work together to support one another to care for the children they have living with them. The extended family model also recognises the importance of using community links and resources to further support our

children and fostering families.

3.14 Whilst the team remains within the Fostering Service, it integrates closely with the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team, whose work is informed by the same approach and theories. Through working hand in hand, its aim is to help promote and further embed systemic and trauma informed thinking across fostering and children's social care, as well as directly support children with various complex needs. The ARC service post September 2021 will be under our specialist services team and will develop further with an entesis in supporting our new 'step forward scheme'.

3.15 The 'step forward' fostering scheme was designed and developed in 2020, and in recognition that children and young people who have a plan to move from residential faced barriers in moving to family-based provisions. The 'step forward scheme' offers, enhanced support, training, and development, with an increased fee for foster carers to care for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Somerset. The scheme reflects our 'family model' and carers on this scheme work hand in hand with carers who support children through our 'link carer scheme'.

### **3.16 Link Carer Scheme**

3.17 In 2019-2020 period a 'link-carer' scheme has created, which aims to work with children from residential settings to enable good transitions to be progressed. Children in residential, whom have a plan to move to fostering families, are matched with foster carers, and a plan is implemented whereby the child receives support, guidance, care and overnight stays. This relationship assists with preparing children for foster care and creates a wider network for children as they progress through to living with fostering families and aligns with our

family model and ethos. There is an enthesiis that the link-carer will remain as key support for children once a long-term fostering family has been identified and matched, and the child transitions to the family. The Link-carer remains part of the child's life up to adulthood and beyond.

## 4. Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey

4.1 Somerset Children's Services was inspected by Ofsted under the Single Inspection Framework in November/December 2017. The report was published in January 2018. Children's Social Care was rated Requires Improvement at this inspection.

4.2 The report highlighted the following positives about the Fostering Service:  
*"Fostering services are improving, and there are a range of initiatives designed to increase the in-house offer and raise the quality of the service. A range of specialist fostering schemes are available, and contribute to positive outcomes for some children, including supporting children with attachment difficulties. Foster carers benefit from a significant range of training and support activities, and they exercise delegated authority on an individual basis to help them to make day-to-day decisions for children. Foster carers' assessments are generally of a good quality, and annual reviews clearly inform foster carers' training and developments."*

4.3 Whilst acknowledging the continuing service developments within the Fostering Service, there remains, as highlighted by the OFSTED inspection, significant service challenges for the Fostering Service itself, and within our role as part of the whole service in continued improvement to achieve a good and outstanding service to children looked after.

#### 4.4 Key issues identified were:

- The recruitment strategy for increasing the number of foster carers is not yet resulting in all children who require a fostering placement being offered a timely and suitable match.
- Placement matching when children first become looked after or need to move requires improvement.
- Children and parents are not involved in placement choice and planning, and, too often, they receive little information prior to placement.
- Placement plans are not good enough.
- Long-term placement stability for children looked after in Somerset has deteriorated due to a lack of sufficiency of placements.
- Placement stability meetings identify factors that are leading to placement instability but, they do not always result in clear, action-based, outcome-focused support plans.
- Managers do not yet review any themes from children's placements that end prematurely,
- Social workers are not proactively planning to prevent further future placement breakdowns.

4.5 Due to the Coronavirus epidemic, and the complications that Covid 19 has brought, Ofsted inspections were suspended, and currently the Local Authority are waiting for updates and for the inspection to be carried out.

## **5. Service Performance**

### **5.1 Number of Foster carers**

5.2 There were a total of 252 fostering families at the end of the financial year (including temporary approvals for adoption). These are broken down as

follows:

<b>Households</b>	<b>MARCH 2019</b>	<b>MARCH 2020</b>	<b>MARCH 2021</b>	<b>Percentage change (over 24 months)</b>
<b>Foster carers</b>	185	190	192	<b>3.8%</b>
<b>Kinship (connected and temporary connected)</b>	31	41	46	<b>48.4%</b>
<b>FFA (Fostering for Adoption)</b>	7	10	12	<b>71.4%</b>

5.3 The above shows that the Somerset fostering service has continued to develop and support children and families, and through a very difficult period in the nation's history. The coronavirus pandemic has brought lots of challenges for our services, our staff, and for the children and people we support, however we have remained focused in delivering support where it is needed, and in utilising our resources.

5.4 Over the 2020-2021 period, there has been little change in the number of children being placed compared to the 2019-2020 period (351 and 354):

### **2018-19**

374 Foster placements started during the year. Of these:

- 172 SCC Foster Carers (46.0%)
- 8 FFA (2.1%)
- 76 Connected Person / Kinship (20.3%)
- 118 External Foster Carers (IFA or OLA) (31.5%)

### **2019-20**

354 Foster placements started during the year. Of these:

- 180 SCC Foster Carers (50.8%)

- 19 FFA (5.4%)
- 69 Connected Person / Kinship (19.5%)
- 86 External Foster Carers (IFA or OLA) (24.3%)

## **2020-21**

351 Foster placements started during the year. Of these:

- 163 SCC Foster Carers (46.4%)
- 20 FFA (5.7%)
- 79 Connected Person / Kinship (22.5%)
- 89 External Foster Carers (IFA or OLA) (25.4%)

5.5 In respect of Connected Person and FFA, we have seen an increase in households as well as children placed in comparison to the 2020-2021 period:

### **31st March 2020 / 2021**

Connected Person / Kinship (Households) – 41 / 46

Connected Person / Kinship (Children Placed) – 50 / 61

FFA (Households) – 10 / 12

FFA (Children Placed) – 10 / 12

### **Placement Activity/Placements Team**

5.6 The Placements Team have continued to work with Fostering Teams and childcare colleagues to maximize the use of our in-house placements this year, in addition to developing improved relationships with independent providers in Somerset. Excluding connected persons carers and FFA, on the 31st March 2021 the numbers of children in Foster Care, agency placements were 158 (150 in March 2020). In respect of internal foster carers there were 177 children in

March 2021 compared to 170 in March 2020- a slight increase. There has been a slight shift in the age range of children with our provision, where the 16+ age group of internal fostered children has decreased by 9 while otall other age groups have seen an increase.

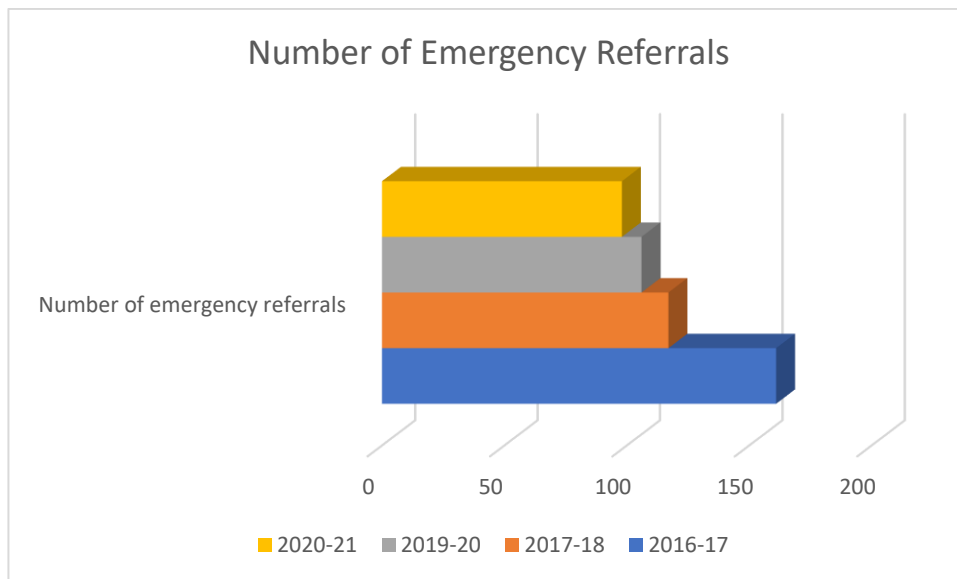
<b><u>March 2021</u></b>	<b>Internal Fostering</b>	<b>External Fostering</b>
Age: 0-4	42	14
5-9	25	20
10-15	67	70
16+	29	21
<b><u>March 2020</u></b>	<b>Internal Fostering</b>	<b>External Fostering</b>
Age: 0-4	50	14
5-9	22	30
10-15	60	76
16+	38	30

5.7 There continues to be continuation of a whole service approach to thinking through placement decisions and actions in order to maximize opportunities for better matching, information sharing, planning and therefore placement stability. This has been achieved through the introduction and embedding of panels and senior management scrutiny of key decisions. Decisions for a child to come into our care are made through the At Risk of Care Panel or the Legal Gateway Panel. Any decision to change a child’s placement and planning to achieve permanence for children has been overseen by Permanence Panel. These panels include input from the Virtual School, Placements Team, the IRO, Legal and other teams, as appropriate.

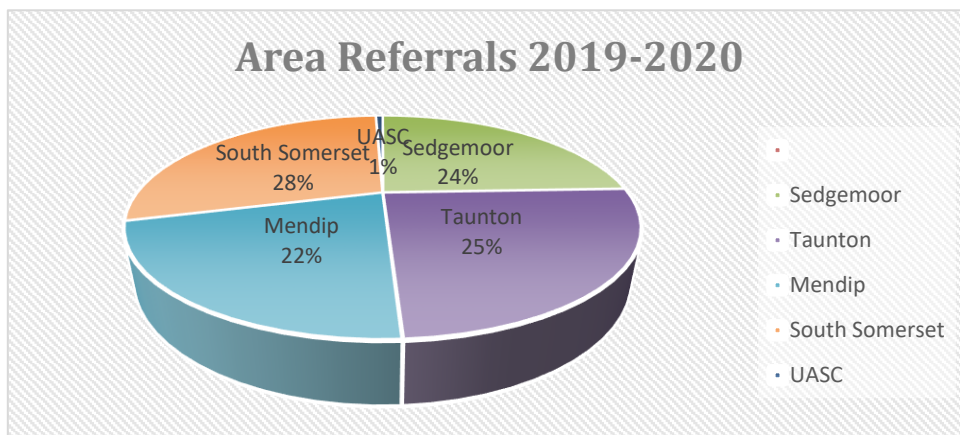
5.8 The numbers of emergency referrals (placements required within 72 hrs) have continued to decline. In the 202/21 period 98 referrals were made. This is in

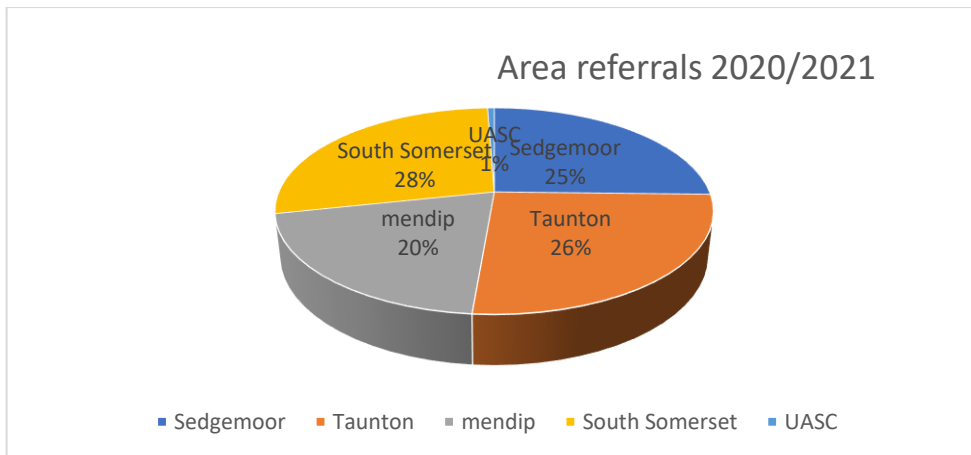


comparison to 106 in 2019/20, 117 in 2017/18, and 161 in 2016/17

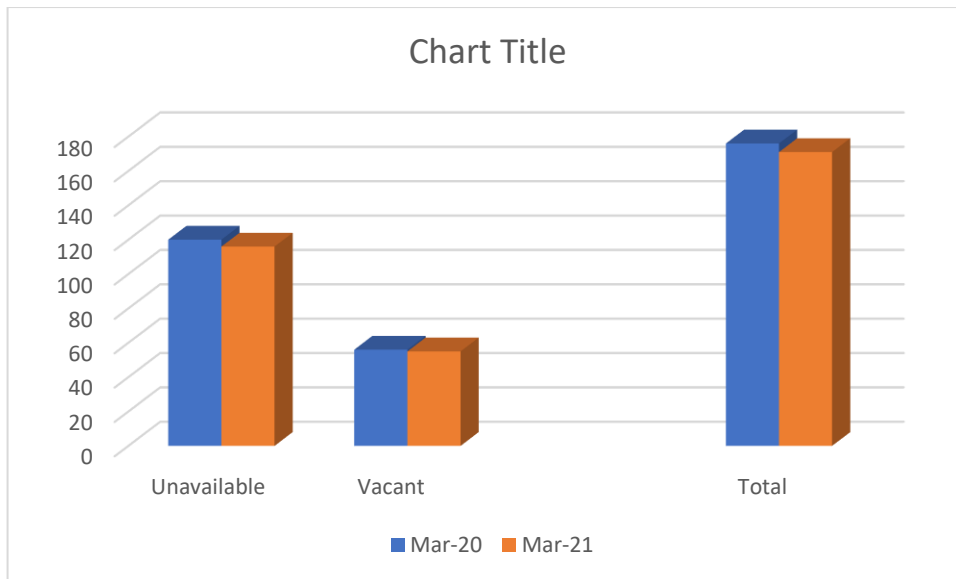


5.9 In 2020-21, there were a total of 335 referrals made to the placement team. In the 2019-20 period there were 336. The charts below show that there has been little change in respect of area referrals over the period in comparison to the 2019-20 period, however and more notable, Mendip’s referrals have reduced by 10% (using a proportionate calculations). while Mendip region of Somerset remains as having the lowest referral rate, the area split has become more aligned.





5.10 As of the end of March 2021, we had 55 vacant places for children with internal foster carers, which is a slight decrease from 56 in March 2020 (not including placement blocks/unavailability; FFA; Short break care). Overall, we have seen an increase in unavailability, where places were not available due to the complexities of children’s needs, or other reason specified. It is notable that the recording of unavailable and vacant placements requires improvement, and the current figure does not give a clear picture. What is noticeable, is that the utilisation of placements requires further consideration, and the increase in Childrens needs together with the challenges of coronavirus (Covid 19) has created barriers for the service, and in its objective to increase the number of children cared for internally. As part of the development plan, we aim to look closely to utilise all available placements where possible over the next 12 to 24 months. The graph below provides an overview of unavailability/vacant places (total) in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 period, and shows that there been a slight improvement, which indicates that the service has remained focused through the challenges of Coronavirus and has been able to explore options for children.



### 5.11 Carer Recruitment

5.12 During the 2020-2021 period Somerset County Council (SCC) maintained a recruitment and assessment team. The Fostering in Somerset (FIS) team’s role was to recruit and assess fostering households. The team works closely with the Communications Team and together with the fostering service they develop an annual Recruitment Strategy. Following the implementation of the fostering restructure (post September 2021), a specialist recruitment team will focus on enquiries, monitoring and evaluating trends, and implement strategies for targeted recruitment, together with completing initial home visits. This focused approach will assist with driving recruitment forward and to prevent and unnecessary delay. Both the East and West teams will have an assessment arm, which will focus on the assessments of focus carers. By incorporating these assessing social workers into wider teams, there will be a more fluid transfer of information, which focuses on trends in referrals that are linked with assessing and developing carers through the fostering journey.

5.13 We continue to undertake a wide approach in general to the recruitment of foster carers in marketing materials but still focus on areas of need when

required, using sub campaigns, and particularly directed through an increase in social media usage, and innovative design and digital marketing. In the 2020-21 period our recruitment campaign was refreshed with a new website, and our 'change a child's story' campaign which was well received. Further information can be found on our website: <https://www.fosteringinsomerset.org.uk/> , and within our campaign strategy in *Appendix 1*.

5.14 During the 2020-2021 period, we adjusted our campaign at various times to coincide with the many changes that were being experienced in the pandemic, this helped fostering enquiries to remain stable. Some of the highlights during this difficult period are as follows:

- a) Delivered a campaign to attract enquiries and assess emergency foster carers.
- b) Adjusted our media and recruitment campaigns to be more digitally focused, and away from face-to-face recruitment drives.
- c) Set up, trained staff, and delivered 'skills to foster' foster carer initial training by Zoom media platform.
- d) Moved our enquiry process, to a centralized system, where calls were directed to people working at home.
- e) Organised radio campaigns to attract enquiries.
- f) Enhanced and improved our social media reach to coincide and exploit opportunities when people were in lockdown and at home.
- g) Created online information sessions

**5.15 Moving forward into 2021-22 our campaign will:**

- Focus on the benefits/motivations of foster carers – the children, the offer and the rewards received from foster caring
- Work on strengthening 'Fostering in Somerset' as a website brand to

compete against IFAs (independent fostering agencies), and we will continue to work on SEO and google rankings. There will be emphasis on 'meeting and working with the team' rather than 'with social services'.

- Focus on our USPs – our not-for-profit status, quality training and support
- Focus on encouraging people with the right attributes and a spare room to make an enquiry – and continue to myth bust.
- Continued promotion welcoming fostering within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LBGT+) community.
- Focus on the children and their story using anonymised case studies, quotes and letters – particularly for Step Forward
- Continue to promote to SCC staff our offer to encourage prospective foster carers to step forward via Our Somerset, Core Brief and other relevant platforms.
- Continue to encourage existing foster carers, staff and councillors to become ambassadors within their communities.
- Continue to encourage County Councillors, SCC staff and partners to promote the message 'we urgently need more foster carers and the support available for SCC carers.
- Encourage fostering to become the 'heart of the community' with local case studies, videos, community groups tagged into social media posts, key event attendance, media editorial and advertising.
- Liaise with the business community and strengthen promotional opportunities
- Build and enhance links with the media to promote our messages

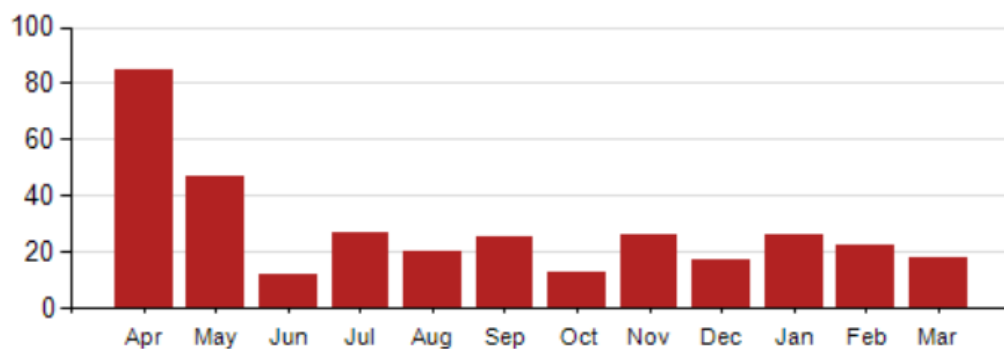
5.16 The number of enquiries received for fostering was declining, year on year: 351 in 2016/17; 312 in 2017/18; 281 in 2018/19; 248 in 2019/20, however we have seen a dramatic increase in enquiries during the 2020/21 period to 338. In analysing this increase, the influx in enquiries was due to 3 factors: Our

recruitment campaign had further reach due to the pandemic people accessed social media and online content more frequently; our campaign to attract emergency carers was well received during and people wanted to help in 'times of crisis', and people had time to reflect and refocus on thoughts about caring for children. The graph below, shows the changes in our enquiries from 2016-2021



5.17 In comparison to declining enquiries we have seen previously, as said in the 2020-21 period we saw an increase. Although, this increase was positively seen, the increase was largely because of Covid 19 emergency carer recruitment in April and May, as can be seen by the graph below.

**Foster Carer Households - Enquiries during Previous Financial Year**



5.18 Although the conversion rates for the 2020-21 period reduced due to the dramatic increase of enquiries, in the period we saw an approval increase from the 2019-20 period. Furthermore, our kinship service also saw an increase in both connected and temporary connected approvals.

**2018-19**

Internal Fostering – 16

Connected Person / Kinship – 38

FFA – 7

**2019-20**

Internal Fostering – 23

Connected Person / Kinship – 54

FFA – 16

**2020-21**

Internal Fostering – 28 (including emergency covid 19 temporary approval)

Connected Person / Kinship – 60 (including temporary connected)

FFA – 18

5.19 We receive a similar rate of enquires to our neighbouring local authorities and are continually consulting with them and with other local authorities; carrying out focussed research with foster carers and monitoring IFAs (independent fostering agencies) nationally to help us improve. However, the coronavirus pandemic has created barriers throughout the 2020-21 period, where the focus of the service and its provisions have been targeted towards maintaining sufficiency and supporting children in the difficult period.

5.20 In order to assess our performance, teams have in previous years visited other

neighbouring and outstanding and good rated Local Authorities to identify gaps and improvements in our marketing; assist with driving efficiency in the recruitment journey; to gain further understanding of placement support and stability; and to look at how our systems and strategy can be improved. We aim to reintroduce this practice over the next 12 – 18 months and when Coronavirus guidance allows.

- 5.21 The team have continued to receive consistently positive feedback from carers about information sessions and our Skills to Foster course. In the 2020-21 period we adapted very quickly to the barriers and risks of the coronavirus pandemic and moved our training to Zoom (video communications system). This has been greatly received; however, this has also created some cautionary deficits in our ability to fully observe an applicant's interaction with others, and engagement in the course. It has therefore been imperative for our assessing social workers, to do further work within the assessment process.
- 5.22 Looking further into 2021 and beyond, as part of our development work, we aim to further develop our vision, focus, and create a stronger, approachable 'Fostering in Somerset' brand within SCC. It is felt this will improve our ability to compete with independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and encourage potential foster carers to foster with us.
- 5.23 The service has been working to continue to improve the consistent quality of our assessments and through working with North Yorkshire have adopted a new Star assessment. This assessment was previously trialled, and received very positive feedback from carers, professionals, and fostering panel. It has now been embedded in the service, as an alternative to the Form F assessment.



- 5.24 In the 2020-21 period Advance Practitioners and Team Managers continued to chair foster carers reviews from other parts of the service than which they are accountable. By having a reviewing officer (chair) for fostering reviews, the service has been able to have better oversight and scrutiny in respect of carers and with those that support them. This system also allows for chairs to provide feedback to the team and relevant staff, of the carers experience of assessment, preparation, and of their first years fostering activity. Moving into the next 12-18 months and beyond September 2021, the service plans to remove this function internally from the service, and support 1.5FTE Reviewing officer posts that will sit in the quality assurance team. These dedicated posts will mean that there is complete independent scrutiny for fostering reviews and continued approval of foster carers. This system will also allow for a uniformed approach by removing the complexity of many different staff members chairing reviews and the barriers that logistics in a large county can create.
- 5.25 Through the 2020-21 period, The FIS (fostering in somerset) team continued to collate and share good practice in a good practice folder and within team CPD sessions, for continued learning. In respect of initial home visits (IHV), There were 100 completed in the 2020-21 period, which is an increase from 83 in both the 2019-20, and 2018-19 period. This increase is due to conducting some initial home visits virtually in the pandemic, where travel and ease of communication and planning has been timelier.
- 5.26 We have seen a decline in the percentage of IHV's being booked within the first 10 days of enquiry, however this does not show a clear picture, as the vast majority of IHV's completed (60%) do not have a booked date recorded. The ability to focus, plan visits, and analyse data will be improved following a change in the service and structure. Post September 2021, there will be a team consisting of one recruitment coordinator and 2 recruitment support officers

(Specialist senior social worker assistants), that will focus on driving enquiries and who will be dedicated in completing initial home visits, with an emphasis on timeliness, recording and tracking of enquiries through the fostering journey. In September 2021, the assessment of foster carers will also move to be within the main east and west teams, which will allow for a joined-up focus on Children's needs, and assessing, supporting and developing carers to meet these needs.

### **2018-19**

83 IHV's completed

14 booked within 10 days of EoI (16.9%)

20 booked over 10 days from EoI (24.1%)

49 with no IHV booked Case Note (59.0%)

### **2019-20**

83 IHV's completed

23 booked within 10 days of EoI (27.7%)

22 booked over 10 days from EoI (26.5%)

38 with no IHV booked Case Note (45.8%)

### **2020-21**

100 IHV's completed

25 booked within 10 days of EoI (25%)

15 booked over 10 days from EoI (15%)

60 with no IHV booked Case Note (60%)

- 5.27 During the 2020-21 period the FIS team continued to seek to 'fast track' referrals where applicants had demonstrable skills identified that were likely to meet the needs of our priority children. This is very positive, and enables, where appropriate for potential carers who have the right skills, ability, and experience

to be assessed in a timelier manner, providing children with well-matched placements. This process will continue after September 2021, with the recruitment team fast tracking initial home visits, and working closely with assessing social workers for assessments to be completed in timely manner.

- 5.28 Team managers throughout the period have had improved communication and access to performance data. The service adjusted quickly to virtual working during the 2020-21 period, and has used communication systems such as; live document sharing, the use of Microsoft teams and zoom, and chat functions to keep in regular contact. Looking ahead post September 2021 and further in our development, team managers will have further access to data sets, which can assist, together with quality assurance activity to implement clear Team Action Plans.

## **6. Fostering Support and Supervision**

- 6.1 The Fostering Service has continued to make improvements in the quality of report writing, supervision, and foster carer reviews to evidence carer's ability and skills to meet children's needs, however further improvements are needed, and inconsistency across the service as part of the development work and review with North Yorkshire (as part of the DfE partners in practice) could be seen.
- 6.2 Placement support (stability) meetings are now part of the working culture of the fostering service, and this has allowed for support and other services to be put in place, enabling a child's or young person to remain in their fostering families. Unfortunately, the tracking of *wishing you well letters and cards* (formally 'end of placement letters'), has been difficult. However, the service has recently adjusted the monitoring of these through creating an addition to the

supervision records of foster carers, which includes a series of prompts for discussion following (or where planned) a child or young person's move. The service plans over the next 18 months, to refocus our work to Children's needs, and whereby fostering supervisions are further improved by linking our support to the impact on the child and positive outcomes.

- 6.3 The Majority of our foster carers (non-specialised) are supervised and supported by our larger East and West Teams.

#### **6.4 Placement Stability**

- 6.5 Placement Stability is an important performance indicator as we know that children's life chances are greatly improved through consistency and stability in their home environment.

#### *6.6 Short term stability*

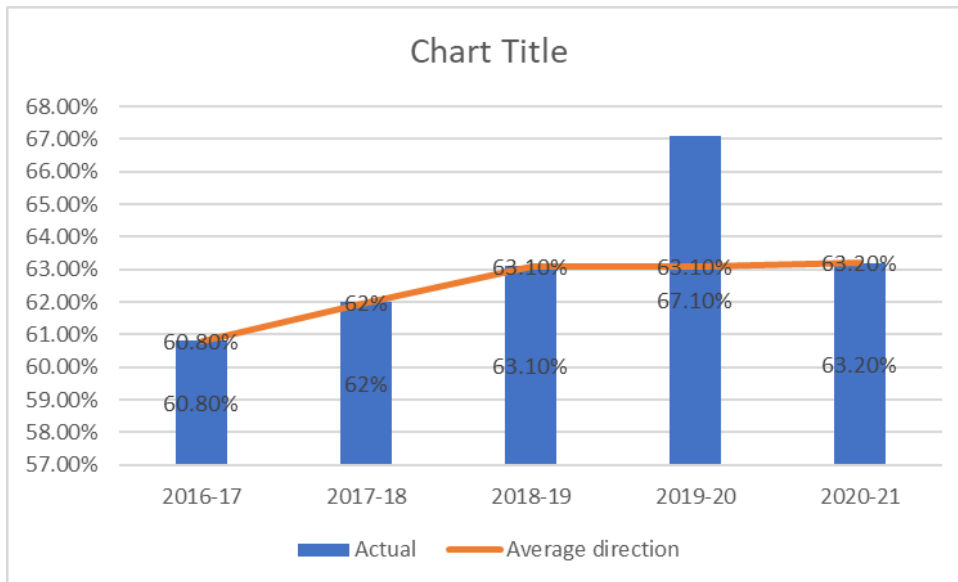
In this year (2019-20) Somerset failed to meet its target of having 11% or less of all its children looked after experiencing 3 or more moves in a 12-month period, whatever the type of arrangement (12.1% as of March 2020). However, this is an improvement from 15.7% in the 2019-20 period. Although this is a concerning figure and is above the national average of 10%, it represents a positive move and overall improvement of 25.9%.

#### *6.7 Longer term stability*

Our performance in relation to placement stability for all children who have been in our care, whatever the placement type, (National Indicator % of children who have been in our care for 2.5 years who have been in the same placement for 2 years or more years) had deteriorated prior to 2016. In 2016-17 it improved to 60.8%, 62.0% in 2017/18, 63.1% in 2018/19 and 67.1% in 2019/20, and this

period (2020-21) 63.6%.

Although below the target of 70%, this is an encouraging trajectory, and although longer term stability slipped back in the 2020-21 to 63.6%, there is positive overall trajectory over a 5-year period.



6.8 These indicators are for all children looked after including children in agency placements, residential care and post 16 accommodation.

### 6.9 Measures in place to support placement stability

6.10 When vulnerabilities are identified, Placement Support Meeting are consistently arranged to explore and identify worries and to agree a suitable plan of action. This process has assisted the service with short and long term stability.

6.11 In 2017 OFSTED recognised this practice improvement however highlighted that the resulting plans 'didn't always result in clear, action based, outcome focussed plans. We have continued to develop in this area, and work with our colleagues to further make improvements, including developing a clear process and team and around the child support process.

- 6.12 Fostering teams moved away from RAG rating placement stability in 2017-18 and 2018-19, with RAG rating for stability being placed on the child's record, and not in fostering records. As the fostering service has become more integrated with Childrens services, and knowledge shared across services, supervising social workers have been able to link with children's social workers to fluidly discuss any concerns and worries, and be able make suitable plans around the stability of a child or young person.
- 6.13 We know that good pre-placement planning, and information sharing with foster carers, children and birth families positively impacts upon placement stability. If children and their families feel involved in decisions being made about them, they are more able to invest and have positive feelings about fostering families. When carers have the right information and support, they are better able to meet the child's needs in their home and family. Fostering social workers and child social workers have co-ordinated Placement Planning, together with meetings with foster carers, children and families. Fostering social workers continue to link with the children's allocated social workers to obtain delegated authority for foster carers to ensure children have a positive family experience, enabling foster carers to make important day to day decisions. In cases where placements have been able to be pre-planned, information sharing has generally been good and there has been a clear introduction visit to help children and young people make a smooth transition. The sharing of foster carer profiles, has further assisted children and young people in the preparation of moving to foster care, and when a pre-placement planning meeting has not been possible a meeting is conducted in a timely manner.
- 6.14 The learning and development plan 2020-21 has continued to develop and offers an extensive range of training courses, workbooks, and online learning

which assists with the move towards further stability of children. **Please see Appendix 2 for 2020-21, and for 2021-22.**

- 6.15 In the 2020-21 period, the Emotional Health and Wellbeing team have continued to develop training for carers in relation to attachment and trauma, and deliver this over several weeks, which helps embed learning. However, due to the pandemic, adjustments have needed to be made, and the service experienced sickness, and limited capacity during periods of national lockdown which led to some training sessions being rescheduled or delayed.
- 6.16 Training courses have received very positive feedback, and the increase in online learning, as well as training sessions being delivered virtually has been well received. By adapting to needs in the pandemic where carers often had children at home from education, training for carers has in the main continued. Carers have found training more accessible, easier to join, and on the whole feel there has been good balance in delivering sessions in a very difficult period.
- 6.17 Along with running support groups, training and development, and individual support from supervising social workers, the fostering service also link carers together as part of mentoring with new carers, and buddying systems for others. This has assisted the service, carers, and children in achieving a holistic approach to care. Furthermore, rest and reflect groups coordinated and chaired by child psychologists in the emotional health and wellbeing team, have been well received. These groups allow for carers to reflect on their experiences, discuss secondary/vicarious trauma, and have a safe space to discuss experiences and feelings, using a trauma informed approach.

6.18 In relation to placement breakdowns OFSTED highlighted that we did not as a whole service learn from premature placement endings/long-term placement breakdowns. The service developed and agreed a policy in relation to this which was implemented in 2018-19. However, unfortunately this was largely unsuccessful. The availability of chairs for meetings, and timely processes for contacting relevant people and completing meetings has proved difficult. In 2020-21, whilst our plan was to trial and develop a new system, this was difficult due to the pressures around coronavirus. However, a temporary chair was appointed to move meetings forward, many meetings were convened, and an analysis was completed in respect of wider service learning. It concluded that there were several key themes:

- 1) **Matching** - requires further work, with a new matching matrix to be developed; Matching should be regularly reviewed.
- 2) **Life story/life journey** - further training required, care plans to further consider language and the child's journey and experiences, further support with transitions.
- 3) **Transfer of cases.** – more in-depth approach needed; systemic approach to case transfers, linking with the right people to gain insight into children and their experiences.

Ongoing work around premature placement ending meetings is required and action plans are in place.

### **6.19 East Fostering Team**

6.20 The East Fostering Team in the 2020-21 period consisted of: 2 Part Time Team Managers (1 PT TM worked 30 hours a week, the other TM worked 26 hours), with responsibility for supervising 8 Supervising Social Workers and 2 Advanced



Practitioners. In addition to this the East Fostering Team had 4 part-time Senior Social Work Assistants.

- 6.21 Although fluctuations occur throughout the period, the East Fostering are supervised and supported around 85-95 fostering households, this includes a small number of Foster Carers approved to provide short break care service to children with disabilities, some having dual approval as mainstream foster carers. There was also a small number of carers living across local authority boarders, Devon, Dorset.
- 6.22 All Short Break Carer in the 2020-21 period were held by the East Team and under the fostering restructure (implementing September 2021) Short Break Carers living on the West of the County, will be supported by the West Team. Carers are carefully matched with specific children and their families, and they maintain relationships often throughout childhood and beyond, enabling children to live within their families and communities. 4 of these foster carers are dual approved as mainstream foster carers. The recruitment of Short Break Care carers is discussed and considered within recruitment activities to try and increase numbers in these very valued services.
- 6.23 The East Team has continued to operate from two offices (Yeovil and Shepton), covering a large geographical area East and South Somerset, including surrounding villages. However, for the majority of the period reported, most members of the team have worked virtually, adapting to new systems and ways of working, during the covid pandemic resulting in 3 lockdowns. Social Workers who are responsible for meeting fostering statutory requirements, in line with the fostering national minimum standards, have worked extremely hard to support, monitor, and review fostering households. The team have ensured that carers work in partnership to promote the needs of children in placement to the

best of their ability, holding support meetings to overcome difficulties or advocating with other professionals as and where needed.

6.24 Compliance within the team including statutory checks, supervision visits, and foster care annual reviews were maintained up to 90%, until later in the year where a pattern emerged showing a dip in some foster care reviews, unannounced visits, and home inspections. The Team had not been able to find a reviewing office to chair all reviews and this added to some delay. However, the team have worked hard to improve in areas of compliance, and post September will be supported by practice supervisors to assist in managing performance.

**6.25 As from September 2021, the East Fostering Team will be as follows:**

6.26 1 FTE (37 hours) Team managers position, which will be an 18.5 hours job share currently between 2 managers. The role of Advanced Practitioner will cease with the service, and the East Team will have 3 FTE Practice Supervisors (PS): 1 PS taking lead responsibility for assessment and stability; 1 lead for quality assurance work; and 1 for lead in SBC (short break care), supporting carers that provide short breaks for children with disabilities. This change mirrors the changes in the west fostering service, as can be seen by the structure charts. There will be 9 Supervising Social Workers (3 FT, 6 PT) within the East team, and 2 assessing social workers. From September 2021 there will be 3 Part time Senior Social Worker Assistants supporting the team.

6.27 Post September 2021 experienced social workers in both the East and the West teams will hold responsibility and oversight of payments, and other tasks associated with supporting carers via the regional adoption agency, and until adoption.

- 6.28 East Fostering Team regularly reviews and update the Team Action Plan at a monthly Team Meeting to promote on-going service delivery and to improve good practice and outcomes. Supervising social workers report having developed good relationships with the children in their foster placements and in many cases these relationships are more long standing than the child's relationship with their own social worker. Work still needs to be done to ensure that this is captured on the child's record and fostering will work with CLA and IRO's over the forthcoming year to implement a clear process for feedback and information sharing.
- 6.29 The child's experience of placement endings is not always positive, with some placements ending with little to no planning and no introductions for the child with their next carer. The Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team have been helpful in reducing the number of unplanned endings and therefore improve the experience of children in this area, whilst helping carers to understand children's trauma, learning strategies to help manage this. East Fostering Team continue to work closely with the Emotional Wellbeing Team to support carers and children needing this.
- 6.30 The experience of foster carers is well recorded throughout LCS, on supervision records, consultation forms, family placement worker reports and in the reviewing officer review form. The service has also captured a number of foster carer feedback forms.

6.31 The experience of newly approved Foster Carers has improved with better transitions from Assessing Social Workers to Supervising Social Workers, as well as Senior Social Work assistants' involvement throughout the fostering journey.

**6.32 Case allocation East and West teams:** A Full Time Supervising Social Worker currently hold and will continue to hold between 13 -16 active carers in both the East and West fostering teams. A Part-time Supervising Social Workers case load varies depending on their working hours and is adjusted on a pro rata basis.

**6.33 Short Break Care (part of the East fostering service)**

6.34 The service has 12 carers who specialise in providing short periods of respite to children who have disabilities and their families (6 of which who were dual approved with mainstream fostering), which represents an increase of 2 from the previous year. Short break carers are matched with specific children and their families, and maintain these relationships often throughout childhood and beyond, enabling children to live within their families and communities.

6.35 Within the 2020-21 period there were 2 short break carer approvals (dual approved with mainstream fostering). 1 short break carer deregistered, who was also dual approved.

6.36 The Short Break Care foster carers have been supervised across the County by 2 part time supervising social workers who are managed within the East Fostering service. However, post September 2021, short break carers will be supported in the East and West teams.

- 6.37 The implementation of the progression scheme has made payments for short break carers clearer and fairer, and carers now feel valued for the care of children with complex social, developmental, and medical needs.
- 6.38 The service has developed further in respect of support and training specifically for Short Break Carers which has been positively received. The service has also developed with the Children with Disabilities service a policy on the use of DLA (Disability Living allowance).
- 6.39 Our Short Break Care service has been involved with recruitment activities, and we regularly run campaigns to recruit these specialist carers.

**6.40 West Fostering Team**

- 6.41 The West Fostering Team, mirrors the east fostering team in many ways, and will be more closely aligned from September 2021. The team provides support and supervision to foster carers who are in the West region of Somerset, covering Sedgemoor, Taunton Deane and West Somerset. In the West there are between 80-85 approved fostering households supervised by the team.
- 6.42 In the 2020-21 period the West Fostering Team consisted of 1 full time Team Manager, 4 full time and 5 part time social workers, and 3 senior social work assistants (1 full time, 2 part time).
- 6.43 During this period, the average caseload of a full-time social worker in the team was 13- 15 fostering households., The average caseload of a full-time social worker in the team was 13- 15 fostering households.
- 6.44 The team have had steady and settled management in the period, following the

promotion of a social worker into the team manager's position.

- 6.45 At the end of March 2020, there were around 20% of foster carer reviews that were out of date. On average we make a 10% allowance for reviews that are complete but awaiting completion on our systems. One reason for the difficulties in the completion of reviews is the lack of reviewing officer availability. This role in the period was shared between fostering team managers, advanced practitioners and a part time reviewing officer who sits in the west team. However, workload pressures have added to the drift in getting review meetings held within statutory timescales, as well as the planning of reports and meeting schedules.
- 6.46 Around 50% of unannounced home visits have been completed. There has been no improvement in this area of compliance. A possible reason for this is that direct visits to foster carers during the pandemic has been very difficult, especially amongst the vulnerable groups we support.
- 6.47 97% of DBS checks are complete – risk assessments are in place for checks pending and 94% of medicals are complete. This is consistent with previous years.
- 6.48 Foster carer supervision records requires improvement. More work is needed to get Supervising Social Workers to write up good quality, reflective supervision records which are sent to carers within a 4-week timescale.
- 6.49 The introduction of Fostering Plus has been a significant development within the team. Foster carers have a clear development plan and are incentivised to progress their skills in meeting the needs of children, especially where these are challenging and complex.

- 6.50 The experience of children continues to be captured through consultation forms for foster carer reviews. However, the completion of these remains inconsistent.
- 6.51 Supervising social workers have developed good relationships with the children in their foster placements and in many cases these relationships are more long standing than the child's relationship with their own social worker. Work needs to be done to ensure that this is captured on the child's record and fostering will work with CLA and IRO's over the forthcoming year to implement a clear process for feedback and information sharing.
- 6.52 The child's experience of placement endings is not always positive, with some placements ending with little to no planning and no introductions for the child with their next carer. Further development of the ARC service and Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team will hopefully, in the next year, reduce the number of unplanned endings and therefore improve the experience of children in this area. In cases where the child's experience of placement endings is positive the supervising social worker has supported the foster carer and child/young person to have planned introductions to their new carer or forever (adoptive) family. This may include an introductory visit for tea or an over-night stay. These planned introductions are not always recorded on the child's or foster carers file therefore the foster carer supervision form will be adapted to include this information.
- 6.53 The experience of foster carers is well recorded throughout LCS, on supervision records, consultation forms and foster carer reviews.
- 6.54 Foster carers and team members have enjoyed events such as fish and chips on the beach, Easter egg hunt and the Christmas party. All of which aim to provide

opportunities for team building, peer to peer support, and to develop foster carers networks, and to help them feel valued.

6.55 Although, there have been some difficulties in the stability of staffing in the team, foster carers have largely had some consistent support from their supervising social workers.

6.56 The experience of newly approved foster carers has improved with better transitions from assessing social workers to supervising social workers, as well as Senior social worker assistant involvement throughout the fostering journey.

**6.57 Roles and Responsibilities for East and West Teams:**

6.58 Expectations of Supervising Social Workers continue to develop to meet both the statutory duties of the Fostering service, and in mutually supporting Children looked after (CLA) and Safeguarding team colleagues with improvements in the overall experience for children in our care. Supervising Social Workers have risen to many challenges through the period and during the coronavirus pandemic and have at times attended more meetings than in the previous years.

6.59 Two duty workers operate both in the East and West service, this responsibility is shared across the teams, and a rota is in place. When on duty, the worker is at hand to discuss any referrals with the placements team, attend professionals' meetings, and be at hand to support foster carers should their supervising social worker not be available.

6.60 Practice Supervisors across the service, will help drive change forward as they gain experiences and confidence in their new role, taking the lead in specific



areas as noted above.

- 6.61 Supervising Social Workers have and continue to attend various professional meetings, carer review meetings, placement planning meetings, placement support and child looked after meetings to promote children's needs and to improve working in partnership. They have similarly attended risk management meetings, training workshops and meetings as required, as part of the fostering development work being undertaken. Colleagues can feel very busy at times, however, have been positive in prioritising tasks, to the best of their ability. Some colleagues have shared how they need the service to understand and allow sufficient time for their own reflection, as part of their own learning and development.
- 6.62 When children are matched to a fostering family, staff regularly visit their carers to help them understand and meet the needs of children in their care. Supervising Social Workers continue to link with the children's allocated Social Worker to obtain delegated authority, and to follow up on any outstanding actions. Where placements are matched and time allows, planned introductory visits have been arranged to help children and young people make a smooth transition. Carers are therefore generally receiving information available to us about children, at that time and prior to agreeing to the move.
- 6.63 Both the East and West fostering teams have similarly remained child focused during a challenging and busy period and there has been a continuing shift in thinking and culture; prioritising and promoting the needs of children in care; securing permanency; identifying potential carers and jointly matching children and carers with skills and experience identified.
- 6.64 Training and support to staff and Foster Carers** in the service has continued

to be good, providing a variety of training opportunities, including virtual training, during lockdowns when training events had to be cancelled. Some Staff and carers have expressed a need for more specialist training and ideas are regularly fed into the learning and development team for consideration in planning for future training sessions.

**6.65 Continued Professional Development** specialist training and development for fostering was developed in the 2020-21 period. These were in addition to the CPD sessions for all social workers across Childrens social care, and have included sessions in the following areas:

- Foster carer reviews
- Permanence and family finders
- Foster carer support
- Evidencing the child's lived experience through placement
- Planning good transitions
- Language that cares
- Safe Uncertainty
- Reconnection – the importance of family
- Foetal Alcohol syndrome
- Exploring rewards and challenges of Special Guardianship
- Health and Safety
- Managing allegations

6.66 Staff have welcomed having the opportunity to attend CPD sessions that have continued to be available and will be regularly reviewed as part of our development. Overall, there has been an increase in carers and staff attending various training events, wanting to progress and develop further.

- 6.67 The development and implementation of the Foster Carer's Progression Scheme has encouraged carers to take up training and development opportunities and is part of evidencing their ability and skills as a requirement for Fostering Plus.
- 6.68 Foster carer personal development plans:** Personal development plans for foster carers were further developed within the period. Development planning was previously recorded in the main body of fostering annual reviews, however a more specific and focused plan alongside the review, is now being implemented. This use of this plan has increased across the service.
- 6.69 Both the West and East Fostering Teams understand the need to keep children and young people at the centre of practice and there is evidence of improved recording of the child's experiences or their observations in written reports/records. Foster carer's ability and suitability to foster are reviewed annually, consultation forms are sent out to professionals and young people to obtain their experiences in placement. Foster carers send in weekly logs regarding the child's experiences, and these are shared with the CLA Social Worker.
- 6.70 There has been a continued increase in the number of placement support meetings being held in both the East and West teams. These have helped support carers struggling to meet the complex needs of children. Supervising Social Workers continue to co-ordinate and minute meetings in a timely manner, exploring difficulties, identifying a plan, and working in partnership with professionals i.e., CLA Social Workers, Foster Carers, Placement Support Team, children and young people, and families of children. The East team saw an increase in carers stepping up this year and offering permanent homes to children, going on to adopt them or changing their approval to provide a long-term foster home.

- 6.71 Life story work in East and West Teams has been embedded into practice with Supervising Social Workers reminding and encouraging foster carers about the importance of writing logs, and capturing experiences about children they care for, as well as exploring the child's journey. Where this is missing, Supervising Social Workers have been advised to link with the CLA SW to explore how best to promote this and to escalate to Team Managers as and where needed.
- 6.72 Safe Care Policies are now embedded into practice, with all Supervising Social Workers monitoring this and encouraging their carers to complete safe care plans for all children in placement, including short term placements.
- 6.73 Wishing you well letters are sent to a majority of children, by the foster carer, when children leave fostering families. This progress is due to Supervising Social Workers reminding carers about the need to write a letter to children after they have left placement. Letters reflect on experiences and capturing positive memories. In addition to this there has been an improvement in carers writing and sending in written logs that provide information to Social Workers and decision making around the child.
- 6.74 Senior Social Work Assistants (SSWA),** SSWA's are very valued within the fostering service, they support birth children of Foster Carers on a one-to-one level, where needed, as well as offering group participation in activities. SSWA's continue to support Supervising Social Workers with some statutory checks to ensure carers have, for example an up-to-date DBS and Annual Household Inspection. In addition to this they have helped to update Foster Care Profiles and have supported some foster carers to complete their Fostering Induction Standards, and access training. In the period, SSWA's have assisted the assessments team with statutory checks to enable assessments are completed in a timely manner. SSWA's have also co-ordinated virtual support meetings for

carers during covid 19 and they organised a meeting in the park after the pizza and swim event was cancelled. Foster carers receive a regular foster care newsletter that was sent out monthly during the epidemic that carers valued.

### **6.75 Family Assessment and Support Team**

6.76 FA&ST is a specialist parent and child fostering scheme that completes independent parenting assessments where cases are subject to PLO or court proceedings. This involves parent/s and their child/ren residing in a FA&ST's foster placement for the purpose of assessment. Where possible, the FA&ST will additionally undertake community parenting assessments in a family's own home or offer community support. As of September 2021, FA&ST will be part of the specialist fostering service with an expansion of the team (page 12).

6.77 FA&ST currently have 9 fostering households.

6.78 The team have continued to promote awareness of the FA&ST and completed various presentations to teams and provide a fact sheet to social workers who have not worked with FA&ST before.

6.79 Positive verbal feedback has been received in relation to the community assessment and support the team have provided to families in the community. This has been from the childcare social workers, managers and from the parents themselves. There have been no allegations or complaints this year in the FA&ST.

6.80 From March 2020 to September 2021, FA&ST had 77 placement requests in respect of 58 children, 5 requests subsequently were withdrawn due to a change in care plan. FA&ST provided 21 parent and child placements. 11 assessments

have been undertaken by FA&ST, the other assessments were completed by ISWs or the child's social worker. From the assessments completed by FA&ST, 4 recommended returning to the community with their child for further assessment, which was undertaken by FA&ST, the remaining 7 did not recommend it was safe for the children to remain in their parent(s) care and were either placed with extended family members or adoption.

- 6.81 The team have a flexible approach to meet the needs of the childcare teams and carers are used creatively between placements or when waiting for a new placement by supporting other carers, community assessments and at times other fostering teams. FA&ST have completed 9 community assessments; Including 4 that transitions from placements to the community for further assessment. Of the 5 that had not initially been in a FA&ST placement, 4 remained in the community and one recommended the parents moved to a parent and child foster placement.
- 6.82 FA&ST foster carers continue to capture the child's experience of being in placement or their home by completing detailed factual logs of their observations which are then filed with court. This not only informs the assessment process but provides an account of a child's experience and supports life story work. Most children in FA&ST placements are non-verbal and documenting the care provided is key to making decisions about their future.
- 6.83 During this year FA&ST carers have continued to be supported to complete end of placement letters for children and these are now embedded in the foster carers practice. The carers see the importance of these, whatever the plan for a child might be, as they are able to provide invaluable information to a child about the time spent with their parent in their home.
- 6.84 There is a wealth of experience within the pool of the FA&ST. All the carers

remain committed to attending the specialist support groups and training plan to expand their knowledge. The carers are supportive of each other and are willing to offer advice and support when needed with the more experienced carers in the team taking a lead on this. The FA&ST fee increase has been completed, and their fees and allowance has been increased to reflect those of other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies.

6.85 During this year parents entering FA&ST placements have continued to be complex particularly around their mental health, emotional and learning needs and as such the carers have had to be even more flexible in their approach and work with the parents in placement. This has also been the case in relation to meeting the changing demands within the court process which has resulted in lengthy holding placements and further periods of assessment. All the carers, whilst at times expressing

6.86 There is a pool of sessional workers who provide additional support when required however this year their availability has been limited at times and as such additional support for the carers is being reviewed. This will be essential in ensuring that the carers are able to continue to provide the high quality and complex placements that are requested.

**6.87 ARC (Attachment, relationship, Connection) Fostering Team**

6.88 At the end of the 2019/20 period the ARC service was developed with the view of providing bespoke support to children and carers, where children were transitioning from residential settings, as well providing support for children returning home.

6.89 ARC's primary focus is to offer a wraparound package of support to our long term and link carers who are caring for children stepping forward from

residential care. This is to help build a positive and robust relationship between both sets of carers and the child in recognition that our foster carers are key individuals in supporting children to recover from developmental trauma. This support to the carers can be bolstered further by the team working directly with the child, the child's birth family where appropriate, and with their school in order to promote consistent approaches in line with therapeutic care.

6.90 The ARC Teams offer:

1. By working hand in hand with the Emotional health and wellbeing team (EHWT) ARC can offer multiagency consultation and psychological formulation for the child or young people they are working with. The purpose of the team consultations is to develop a cohesive therapeutic network around the child.
2. Direct, ongoing support to foster carers which recognises their own current needs and feelings alongside helping them to understand therapeutic parenting and how this supports the needs of the children they are caring for. This can be delivered through working in partnership with the EHWT and through offering a fortnightly foster carer support group. ARC also hope regular support groups will strengthen foster carers links with one another therefore supporting increased placement stability outcomes.
3. Direct work with the child/young person where it is recognised, they would benefit from support which may include building up their social skills, emotional language or linking them in with their local community resources. This work would be undertaken by a Senior Social Worker Assistant (SSWA) who can spend time with the child on a regular basis either within community settings, within school or within the home.
4. Through close partnership working with our learning mentors in the virtual school, ARC can identify support to a child/Young person and/or the teaching professionals surrounding the child within their educational setting.



5. For foster carers who are supervised by the Supervising Social Worker in the ARC team, the service can offer them a higher frequency of supervision/support visits in recognition of the complexities of the child/young person they are caring for. Consideration will always be made for the same frequency of support for children and carers, who are supported by other teams, to meet complex needs of children.
6. Where appropriate, ARC is able to offer direct work with children's birth and other family members which focuses on supporting the relationship between them and their child.

### **6.91 Staying Put**

6.92 Staying Put is where the Local Authority support young people to remain living with their foster family after they are 18, until they are fully able to live independently. This is of great benefit to young people leaving care and enables them to transition to adulthood normally with the safety net other young people often have. Both locally and nationally there is an inevitable impact upon available foster placements as young people remain living within families. The arrangements can also bring different complexities to foster families who effectively have an adult living with them but are still required to meet Fostering Standards for children. There is limited statutory guidance in relation to Staying Put arrangements and as a service we continue to review how we provide a supportive but proportionate service.

6.93 In March 2020 we had 42 Young People overall in Staying Put Arrangements (LA and Agency carers), this has increased to 54 in March 2021, and represents a very positive increase of 25% in a 12-month period. This has continued to improve year on year.

## **7. Complaints and Allegations**

7.1 During the year the Fostering Service has received and responded to 11 complaints across the main fostering service and kinship service. 2 of these were from foster carers. (2 resolved at point of contact; 3 not upheld; 4 partly upheld; 1 upheld). All complaints were resolved and closed at stage 1 with local resolution. Due to the small number of complaints, analysis revealed there were no strong themes, and most were specific to an individual situation or experience. Complaints were dealt with swiftly and closed, with good communication from Team Managers.

### **7.2 Allegations**

7.3 The number of foster carers subject to allegations in the 2020-21 period was 11 (8 in 2019-20). Of these 9 (3 in 2019-20) were of physical assault, 1 (3 in 2019-20) of sexual abuse, 0 (2 in 2019-20) of neglect, and 1 (0 in 2019-20) of emotional abuse. 7 (4 in 2019-20) were made by fostered children and 2 (4 in 2019-20) were from other sources.

7.4 The outcomes of the allegations were as follows:

4 were closed as they did not meet thresholds for a formal investigation. 3 following investigations were unsubstituted (where there is not enough evidence to determine one way or another whether something happened, or an individual committed an act), 1 following investigation was unfounded, 2 substantiated, and 1 had an ongoing investigation due to complexities. 1 of those substantiated were subsequently de-registered as foster carers following representation at panel, and challenge via the IRM (independent review mechanism)

7.5 Being subject to an allegation and subsequent investigation is enormously stressful and distressing for Foster Carers. For some carers it may threaten or impact upon their family life and career in addition to their fostering. Their fostering social worker supports them through supervision and provides them with information that they are able to share about the progress and process of the investigation. Somerset also provides additional independent support for carers in this position through the provision of an independent social worker for them, spot purchased through Foster Talk FISS services. Time taken to resolve allegations is of concern due to the additional stress it places on carers; potential delay and disruption for children in placement; and the financial cost to the department when carers are placed on hold. This year investigations either through a formal independent process, or other, have taken the following time: 7 (between 22-30 days); 3 (between 31-50 working days), and 1 more than 50 days, due to the complexity of the allegation.

## **8. Independent Review Mechanism**

8.1 If carers or prospective carers are unhappy about recommendations made by the Fostering Panel and decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker, they are able to appeal the decision through 2 mechanisms. One is a request for another Fostering Panel to hear the issues again and another is for the case to be referred to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). In the 2020-21 period Somerset had no cases taken to the Independent Review Mechanism, however one application had been received, and the allegation was recorded in the 2020-21 period. Therefore, this has been recorded above as going to the IRM. The ADM (Agency decision Maker) decision was upheld, as part of the process.

## 9. Fostering Panel

- 9.1 The Fostering Panel is established and acts in accordance with the regulatory framework provided by The Fostering Service Regulations 2011, Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011 and the Standards set out in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011). The Fostering Panel takes account of the legislation set out in The Children Act 1989 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015 and Guidance, volume 2.
- 9.2 The Fostering Panel has the responsibility for making recommendations in relation to:
- The approval of Foster Carers.
  - The approval of family members or friends as "Connected Person" carers for children who are looked after by Somerset County Council and connected to the applicant as a family member or friend.
  - The first annual review of all Foster Carers and Connected Persons carers.
  - Reviews of carers where there have been serious concerns such as Child Protection Investigations.
  - Reviews of carers where there are concerns regarding their fostering practice and their suitability.
  - Proposed changes to a Foster Carer's progression level.
  - Significant changes of approval.
- 9.3 The Fostering Panel has a role to oversee and advise on the conduct of assessments and make recommendations to Children's Services about performance standards and quality issues. Decisions are then made by the Agency Decision Maker.

## **10. Fostering Panel Chair's Report**

### **10.1 Somerset Fostering Panel: Annual Report**

**(1st June 2020 to 31st May 2021)**

10.2 It is noted that due to the Panel Chairs report being from June to June, and the way data is recorded and processed on the systems, data from the report will not always mirror data captured within the fostering annual review.

### **10.3 Panel Activity**

10.4 East and West panels have continued to meet on the first and third Thursday of each month. These meetings have been held virtually over Microsoft Teams since 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020 due to the pandemic restrictions. There were initially some technical issues, but these have now been resolved and the virtual meetings have worked well in general. Feedback from social workers, applicants/carers and panel members has been positive and often the virtual panel is preferred to face to face meetings.

10.5 It has been another very busy year for the panel with 27 meetings held between 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021, including 4 additional panels. This is an increase of one panel meeting against the same period last year. One panel was cancelled because there was no assessment ready for presentation.

10.6 There have been 57 new foster carers (fostering households) approved during the period covered in this report, 30 mainstream, an increase of 8 against the previous period and 27 connected persons; an increase of 2. However, 9 of these approvals were made in October 2020, following Ofsted serving notice to an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) under section 20B of the Care Standards Act 2000, that their registration was suspended with immediate effect. The IFA

carers living in Somerset, and those with Somerset children placed with them became the responsibility of Somerset for the duration of the suspension. The 9 were registered and then deregistered when the suspension was lifted in December 2020. There were a further 7 households approved under the emergency Covid legislation. Of the 7, 5 were subsequently deregistered, and 2 continued to be fully assessed as mainstream carers. Therefore, in real terms there has been a decrease of 14 approvals in this period.

- 10.7 There has been 1 short breaks carer approved, which although disappointing, is an increase with none being approved in the last period. Panel has also considered and made a positive recommendation for 1 Stepping-Stones provider. This is a drop on the last period when 3 were approved.
- 10.8 Panel has seen documentation in respect of 21 Out of Approvals and noted this in the minutes. This is a drop from the 33 Out of Approvals in the previous period.
- 10.9 Panel has also considered 15 Regulation 25 requests (extensions for up to 24 weeks on the Form C Assessment). An improved system is now in place where the panel advisor will record the reasons for the extensions as requests have not always been appropriate, i.e., to manage late allocation, carers not engaging, or no panel time available. This recording system will allow panel to notify the department of the themes.
- 10.10 Discontinued assessments are presented to panel where the assessment ceases before completion. There has been 1 discontinued assessment during this period. This related to a connected person's assessment and was ceased because the child returned to his mother's care as part of the care planning.

- 10.11 Currently the Somerset panel only considers carers first reviews, reviews where a change in the terms of approval is recommended and reviews following an investigation or standards of care enquiry. Many Local Authorities now ask their foster panel to look at the first and then every third review.
- 10.12 There have been 28 first reviews. This is a significant increase on the same period last year where there were just 16 first reviews. Most have been very positive.
- 10.13 There have been 20 reviews recommending a change of approval. In most cases these have been to increase the number of children a carer is approved to care for or a change in the age range. When cases come to panel for a change of approval, most now move to the 0 - 18 range, if not already, to allow more flexibility and to prevent the need to return to panel if an upper age limit is reached by way of a child placed becoming older. A preferred age range is generally attached to the recommendation to ensure matching consideration is given. In most cases, the panel have supported the recommended change in terms of approval.
- 10.14 Panel has in this period considered 2 reviews that have taken place following an investigation or standards of care enquiry. The first review followed an investigation into allegations that were in part substantiated. Panel supported the recommendation for continued approval with no change to the terms of approval recognising the concerns but acknowledging the impact of a lack of support provided to the children placed and the carer. The second review related to a standards of care enquiry. Panel supported the recommended change of approval from 3 children to 1 child, two if siblings, recognising the concerns and pressures on the carers.
- 10.15 There have been 52 fostering households deregistered this year. This is significantly more than the 30 in the previous year. However, the deregistration

total includes the 9 IFA carers and 5 of the Covid approved carers. In real terms there has been a less significant increase in carers being deregistered of 3 during this period.

10.16 In one case during this period, a carer has disagreed with the recommendation and subsequent ADM decision to deregister. This was referred by the carer to the IRM, however, the decision to deregister was upheld.

10.17 In all cases, the ADM has agreed with the process and approach of the panel, considered that they had examined the arguments fairly and accepted the panel recommendations.

10.18 In conclusion, the fostering service continues to work hard to recruit, assess and support foster carers. Applicants and carers often comment at panel on the positive support they have received from the assessing social worker or supervising social workers.

10.19 Panel members commitment to their work is evident at each meeting. They are always very well prepared, having read the papers thoroughly, are respectful in their questioning and thoughtful in their recommendations. They are keen to develop their skills further and seek feedback on their performance often.

10.20 The use of Microsoft Teams to conduct meetings has continued. Panel members have become more comfortable with this over the year and do not believe virtual meetings have a negative impact on their work.

10.21 Applicants and carers usually attend panel and feedback through the social workers is that overall, they prefer the virtual nature of the meeting, feeling comfortable in their own homes, and avoiding the pressures of traffic and finding parking.



10.22 Social workers have also adapted well to attending panel virtually and many have commented that virtual meetings suit them better in terms of time management. If a carer is particularly anxious about attending, the social worker will often attend with them at the carers home.

### **10.23 Panel Membership**

10.24 A new Panel Chairperson was appointed in September 2020. She has a background as a senior social care manager for another Local Authority before retiring in August 2020. She has significant experience in safeguarding and was an Agency Decision Maker for a time before her retirement, as well as being the social work representative on a foster panel for 8 years in the past. There are currently no Vicechairs, but it is hoped this will be rectified in the next few months.

10.25 There have been no resignations from panel this year. Diversity of Panel Members has been a long-standing issue with most of the independent members having past professional backgrounds in either social work or education. Progress has been made this year through the recruitment of 6 new panel members from a wider background experience, including a police officer, ex-foster carer, and most significantly a person with care experience as a child. This has provided more diversity across panel.

### **10.26 Panel Administration**

10.27 The effective running of the foster panel is in no small part due to the hard work and excellent organisation skills of the Panel Administrator. She has for much of the year been managing with reduced support but has continued to ensure

papers are available for panel members and take and send minutes to the chair and then ADM in good time. She also supports panel members with any technology issues, has coordinated the recruitment process, undertaken the arrangements for the panel training day and is generally available to complete any tasks necessary to keep panel running smoothly.

### **10.28 Feedback from attendees**

10.29 The brief questionnaire offered to applicants, carers and social workers for completion after panel is not widely completed and it is disappointing that panel receives very little feedback from applicants. Discussions are now taking place about how there can be an improved feedback system developed.

### **10.30 Practice Standards and Quality Assurance**

10.31 Panel has continued to provide written feedback to social workers on the quality of their written reports and their verbal presentations. This has not always been considered as helpful and social workers have said that the comments from the panel are not specific enough. To ensure better quality feedback, the panel advisor now records the feedback and sends this directly to the social worker and their manager, paying attention to the need to highlight the positive aspects of the work as well as making sure the less positive comment is constructive. Themes are identified and shared.

10.32 There has been an improvement in the quality of the assessments presented overall with more concise information and better analysis of the information

gathered. Although there is still work to do to ensure this is consistent, the panel is pleased to note the progress.

10.33 Communication between the panel and social work teams has improved. The panel chair attends team meetings when invited to do so and communicates with social workers and managers regularly to, where possible, resolve queries prior to panel and avoid deferring decisions unnecessarily. Quarterly meetings between the chair, managers, advisers, and ADM are used to discuss updates and any emerging issues.

10.34 In December 2020 all panel members met with the panel chair for their annual review and areas for development were identified. This was also an opportunity for the chair to get to know the panel members better and identify strengths and training needs and informed the agenda for the panel training day held in March 2021.

### **10.35 Panel Training Day**

10.36 The training day was held virtually due to the Covid restrictions. Attendance was excellent with almost all panel members making themselves available for the full day. The day began with an introduction and Fostering Service update from Matthew Randles, Operations Manager Fostering. Trevor Goss, Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager then provided an overview of assessments and current themes, followed by an exercise and Q&A session. Richard Scott, Deputy Operations Manager, Kinship Service, presented a service overview and update, followed by a presentation on the impact of connected person's assessments and outcomes for children placed with extended family and friends.

10.37 Matthew Randles and Maggie Aldwell, Panel Chair, presented a session on the importance of and impact of language and working towards a uniformed

approach. They followed this with a session on the role of panel members and effective questioning, again concluded with an exercise and Q&A session.

10.38 The day concluded with a service overview and update and presentation on the support available for carers, therapeutic parenting, trauma informed practice, and identifying strengths, resilience, and difficulties in assessments by Carley Davies (Team Manager Fostering, ARC Team) and Katharine Griffin (Team Manager, Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team).

10.39 Feedback from attendees was very positive. All found the day informative and enjoyable. However, all hope that next year, the training day will be held face to face as the virtual nature of the day limited the ability to catch up and speak more informally about panel attendance.

#### **10.40 Panel Issues**

10.41 Statutory guidance expects panel minutes to be ratified within 7 days of receipt. Although there has been some improvement in the time it takes for the ADM to ratify panel minutes, this continues to be an issue.

10.42 There has been an issue with reviews being presented to panel where the supervising social worker and/or team manager and reviewing officer has made a different recommendation. This is often because further discussions during the review meeting have led to a change in the recommendation recorded on the Family Placement Officer Report, which is completed in advance of the meeting. This has caused confusion for the panel and discussions are taking

place to ensure that there is a shared recommendation presented at panel in future.

10.43 There continues to be a lack of clarity in respect of the Out of Approvals and Exemptions coming to panel, the majority being retrospectively presented with little information to clarify the circumstances. This needs to be clarified and panel made clear on their role.

10.44 Assessments and reviews do not always clearly present the voice of the child, either the child placed or birth children of carers. The social worker and IRO do not always provide feedback. More consistency in this area would be beneficial.

#### **10.45 Conclusion**

10.46 Despite the challenges, this has been a positive period where we have seen an improvement in the quality of assessments, better communication and more positive feedback from social workers and carers about their attendance at panel. There continues to be work required to improve consistency in the quality of the work presented at panel and to resolve the issues identified above. Panel members will continue to work on effective questioning and welcome constructive feedback from applicants, carers and attending social workers. The chair would like to thank all panel members, administrators and fostering staff for their dedication, hard work and commitment to the children and young people who need the care in Somerset.

## 11. Foster Carer Retention

- 11.1 Please see **Appendix 2** for full training programme
- 11.2 In order to improve our carers skills, knowledge, experience and resilience, Somerset offers a comprehensive learning and development programme for carers. Much of this training is jointly attended with social workers and others working directly with children.
- 11.3 In the 2020-21 period we have reviewed our learning and development programme to improve the service for foster carers through a Steering Group involving carers and fostering staff. However, the steering group due to a reduced number of participants, has been disbanded, and the Learning development officer for the fostering service, attends the fostering consultative group whereby time is set aside to discuss and agree training and development for foster carers. This has worked well, and feedback and ideas around training can be discussed. The wider foster carer group are also contacted to develop the ongoing learning and development plan.
- 11.4 The steering group and consultative group has been helpful in making the decisions about:
- The length of courses – courses reduced in time with pre-course reading being sent out prior to the course.
  - The number of courses to be run
  - The introduction, and expansion of workbooks; this was suggested by the group to support carers who could not make actual taught courses, focusing mainly on second carers but also available if there are any performance issues of carers. Workbooks are available for the following courses, Child Protection (from 2022), Equality & Diversity, Supervising Contact, Safer Care, de-

escalation, understanding social networks and Emotion Coaching. However, it is noted that these workbooks continually expanding.

- The booking system (The learning centre) – has been effectively used by foster carers, and foster carers have support from social workers and Senior social worker assistants if there are any difficulties with this system. Carer's first point of contact with the system is the SSW's, and SSW's are able to assist with bookings during supervision sessions, as well as reflecting on current learning and development undertaken. It has also been agreed that social worker and senior social worker assistants can contact the learning team and team lead, by email and teams calls, and as we move out of the pandemic and return to offices, a phone number will be available for carers.

11.5 In line with the Fostering Minimum Standards, Foster Carers are required to undertake mandatory training during and after assessment. In Somerset the Fostering Management Team in consultation with all approved Foster Carers and the Consultative group agree each year's mandatory and developmental learning and development requirements and the refresher requirements for each course. Annual plans are released at the end March with the opportunities becoming available to book and to attend from April. (Learning and Development plans are organised in line with financial years).

11.6 The Children & Families Learning & Development Team are responsible for implementing the agreed learning and development plans across the whole of CSC and Fostering has a designated Staff Development Officer, SDO, within that Team who is responsible for the learning and development of Foster Carers.

**11.7 Mandatory training for all registered in Carers in the household, for 2021/22;**

Emergency First Aid at Work (refreshed every 3 years)

Introduction to Attachment (no refresher required unless requested by your SSW)

Introduction to Child Protection, FGM and Prevent E-learning completed before attendance at the actual course (refreshed every 2 years with the Child Protection refresher course)

Safer Care and Allegations (refreshed every 3 years)

Raising Awareness of Child Exploitation (refreshed every 2 years)

Life Story (refreshed every 3 years)

Behaviour Management Training (refreshed every 3 years) this can be any of the following courses; De-escalation Skills for Foster Carers, Team Teach or the Behaviours and Emotions Workbook

Supporting the Education of Somerset's CLA (refreshed every 3 years)

Attachment Based Parenting (refreshed every 5 years)

### **11.8 Mandatory E-learning;**

Care Certificate – Equality & Diversity (refreshed every 3 years)

Food Safety – Level 1 (refreshed every 3 years)

GDPR – annual refresher

FGM (refreshed every 2 years)

Prevent (refreshed every 2 years)

### **11.9 Examples of Developmental training for Foster Carers:**

Appropriate Adult

Autism in girls

Autism and Sensory Processing

Behaviour Management & Physical Intervention Policy – Information Sessions

Bereavement and Children Looked After

Body Image

Child Development



Child Exploitation – Supporting Foster Carers  
Cultural and Identity Competence  
Effective Pathway Planning  
Effective Support for Children & Families in Somerset  
The experience of hearing voices, seeing visions and sensing things  
Family Time & Reconnection  
Foster Talk information session  
Gaming & gambling awareness & support for children in the looked after sector'  
Inclusive Communication  
Inclusive Communication – refresher  
Internet Safety  
Introduction to the Learning Centre  
Introduction to SCC & Children's Social Care  
Key legislation  
Leaving Care  
Making Sense of Autism  
Mental health awareness  
Mindfulness – 5 week programme

- 11.10 Foster Carers are required to stay up to date with their mandatory training and should be aiming for additional learning and development on top of the mandatory requirements. Somerset recommends 6 additional for the main carer and 3 for the second carer per year additional learning and development opportunities. Somerset views learning and development broadly and holistically, and this does not have to be through the sole attendance of training for example. Knowledge, skills, and practice can be improved through holistic development, for example through the attendance of workshops, attending events and specialist training, seminars, completing research, completing

reflective records, reading research, as well as accessing more traditional training activities.

11.11 All learning and development undertaken should be discussed between foster carers and supervising social workers in supervision with a written reflective account of learning and how it will/is informing practice and thinking. The fostering personal development plans (PDP) are used as medium for these discussions and reflection and to plan. Learning logs can also be downloaded from each course page on TLC (The learning centre) and used for independent learning and development.

11.12 All learning and development opportunities available to Foster Carers can be accessed via the learning centre, whereby information on each opportunity can be found.

11.13 In the 2020-21 period the Somerset fostering service, evaluated its payments schedule to encourage foster carer attendance and development in training, and to show appreciation for the dedication of our foster carers in caring for children. Payments for attending/completing learning and development are as follows:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Payment</b>
Attendance at face-to-face courses in an external building to your home	£20 per Carer
Attendance at virtual courses – through Teams or other virtual platforms	£10 per Carer
Completion of workbooks	£15 per Carer
E-learning modules	No payment

11.14 Places through the learning and development centre are closed 2 weeks before start dates to allow the course administrator to process the bookings, liaise with the trainer/facilitator and ensure everything is in place for the session. However, to maximise opportunities, Somerset holds a waiting list, and bookings can be made directly, this allows for nonattendance places to be filled by others wishing to undertake the development opportunity.

**11.15 Participation of Foster carers involved with supporting the delivery of training:**

11.16 We maintain a high level of courses being supported in delivery by Foster carers and encouragingly our pool of carers willing and able to deliver training has remained high. However, in the 2020-21 period, this has been difficult due to restrictions, illness, logistics and other barriers that we have faced. Carers delivering training have often worked in a mixture of roles which brings greater knowledge and information to the training; having the carers involved really adds value and content to the courses.

11.17 Delivering training with foster carers, enables carers to engage in real situations, and it has been demonstrated that learning can be more embedded due to the focus being more aligned to each other's position.

11.18 In the wider Learning & Development Team, different areas are further supported by Carers. Foster carers have been involved in staff interviews; panellists for Step Up to social work, the Social Work fast track programme and Advance Practitioner panels. Young people including children in care and care leavers are also involved in these areas.

**11.19 Evaluation and feedback:**

11.20 In line with learning and development policy, all evaluation forms where the attendees have indicated 3 or less in their scoring (out of 5) are followed up, to improve training delivery and course content.

11.21 Notably, positive feedback has been received from the following courses: Attachment based parenting; Child exploitation; Emotions and behaviours; Child Protection, De-escalation and Team Teach. The evaluation forms have been updated to reflect each courses learning outcomes, these are now more specific to the outcomes, and have moved away from a generic evaluation form approach. This has helped identify the true benefits to attendees, and assisted with planning future development.

### **11.22 Progression portfolios**

11.23 The Fostering Service introduced several years ago a progression scheme for Foster carers, this is called Fostering Plus. The number of progression portfolios coming through to be validated has continued to increase. The system for processing, and sign off of portfolio's is much clearer, with monthly set dates established, and guidance provided to Team's. All portfolios looked at are provided with written feedback to the SSW and the Foster Carer. The quality of portfolio's has also been seen to increase this year, however the coronavirus pandemic has brought some delay in foster carers completing these, due to barriers, constraints and having children at home from education.

11.24 As a further developmental opportunity discussed and agreed, with the fostering service and foster carers in the 2020-21 period, from May 2021, the Fostering Service offers Fostering Carers who have reached the Fostering Plus level the opportunity to undertake a nationally recognised qualification - The Level 3 Diploma for the Children & Young People's Workforce.

## **11.25 Difficulties**

11.26 The Fostering Service have been requested on several occasions to support the delivery and development of courses, as well as the expansion of course dates. However, there remains at times some difficulty with attendance. It is worrying that some courses are booked, however they are not attended, nor cancelled. We have worked hard to establish clear cancellation processes, which will be revisited and discussed in consultation with the consultative group.

11.27 Learning and development in the 2020-21 has been particularly difficult due to the pandemic and the changes in social and cultural life. The constraints, restrictions, illness and worry has brought many complexities to the fostering service, and to our foster carers who support and care for children and young people. The fostering service, acted quickly in its response moving courses online to give flexibility, as well expanding its online course base, and the use of workbooks. For some, having children often at home and/or balancing the need to care for loved ones, friends, family and the dramatic change in social movement, has been difficult. In the period, the service first saw a downward trend in attendance of courses, and the accessing of learning and development opportunities. However, this in 2021 has returned to be very encouraging, with carers reporting that they are positive about training and the various formats and opportunities that are available.

## **11.28 Additional Support**

11.29 Foster carers and their families provide a valuable service to Somerset and Somerset's children. Their role impacts enormously on their personal and family lives. In addition to regular supervision, support and access to training, the Fostering Service offers additional support, celebrations and opportunities to

value their role and sometimes just unwind and have some fun together. In the past these have included: Fish and Chips on the beach day; a Swim and Pizza evening; and Easter Egg hunt fun days for example. We also provide awards and gifts for carers that have reached various milestones. Events have always been well attended until this period and they enable fostering families, their own children and children looked after to get together and have fun. It is not uncommon for events to be attended 80-100 people. However, the 2019-period has been particularly difficult to organise these events and face to face events have not been able to take place.

11.30 All of the fostering teams offer regular coffee and support meetings to their carers which are increasingly being used for training and development alongside support, tea and cake. However, due to coronavirus these meetings were moved online, and although many were well attended in the period, with groups meeting at various times of the day, the face-to-face aspect of meeting with foster carers could not be replicated. It is hoped that as we move further into the 2021 period, and where restrictions and confidence allow, groups will return to meeting face to face. However, feedback from foster carers indicates that a mixture of virtual and face-to-face meetings would be the best option in terms of accessibility and flexibility.

11.31 Led by a senior social work assistant, a newsletter goes to carers each quarter (more often when an update is required) which informs them of events, some tips and advice, information from the Fostering Service and training information. During the 2020-21 period, and through very changeable times, the service felt that it was important to stay connected to our foster carers and as such newsletters were being sent to carers monthly, with updates and information.

### **11.32 WeCare2**

11.33 We Care 2 is a group for children in families that foster. We recognise that fostering impacts upon their childhood and experiences, may make them feel different from their friends, and the group is an opportunity for children who foster to be children together. The group is organised by our team of senior social work assistants. The group also meet to explore their experiences and the group experience allows mutual support, and an opportunity to understand, learn and consider individual children in a fostering household. Unfortunately, the much-attended events and gatherings, such as bowling and pizza, canoeing, first aid, and other workshops has not been able to go ahead during the 2020-21 period. However, the service looks to move this forward in 2021 where possible.

### **11.34 Out of Hours support Line**

11.35 The Foster Care Support Line has been active since July 2016. This service has been increasingly used by carers to gain support out of hours from a fostering social worker.

11.36 Although at this time it is difficult to accurately determine the number of calls made to the line, and further analysis is needed over the forthcoming year. It is felt that the line has been used around 50-60 times in the period. Around 50% of calls were general queries or for advice, 25% were concerns about the welfare of a child, and 25% were foster carers in need of emotional support relating to the care of the child. The outcomes from the intervention were that in 90% of the cases reassurance and guidance was provided and 5% of the cases were escalated to the Emergency Duty Team, police and/or senior management. 95-

98% of the calls made were successful in reducing anxiety and instability within placements

### **11.37 FosterTalk**

11.38 Somerset purchases individual membership of Foster Talk for our foster carers. This service provides independent advice and support for our foster carers and their families, including free social work, financial and legal advice. Additionally, and importantly it provides carers with access to free legal support and legal representation should they be in a position of being criminally investigated or charged for an issue resulting from fostering, such as an allegation by a child. FosterTalk also supports foster carers at times in fostering panel and through internal investigations.

11.39 The Fostering Service regularly receives positive feedback from foster carers about this service.

### **11.40 Foster carer Participation**

11.41 Somerset Foster Care Association (SFCA): The purpose of the association is to enable carer's to give collective power to the Carers Voice, in addition to carers developing ways of supporting each other. The association has experienced difficulties in establishing consistent committee members and a Chair throughout 2019-20. The 2020-21 period has increased the difficulties with the group being established, with many members leaving and unfortunately, the association is in the stages of disbandment. Meetings further in 2021 will allow for the association to be looked at closely and if foster carers feel that this is something that is needed, and if the group can be reignited.



11.42 The Foster Carer's Consultative Group meets 4-6 times a year and is an opportunity for the Local Authority to consult with and update representative carers about changes to policy and procedure, in addition to the carers being able to raise general issues to senior managers. We have welcomed some new members onto this group in 2020-21 period and the terms of reference have been reviewed to reflect the focus and purpose of the group. The minutes from these meetings are circulated to all foster carers, fostering staff and senior managers. The consultative group members have been consulted on issues such as the Foster Carer's Handbook, clothing, transport and changes to PEP arrangements, as well as having meaningful discussion regarding coronavirus restrictions, vaccinations for foster carers, and the difficulties families have experienced.

11.43 Rest and reflect groups led by a child psychologist or/and member of the emotional health and wellbeing team have continued during the pandemic, and although these moved to be in a virtual setting, they have been well attended, The groups focus is around supporting carers; a listening place for carers to discuss feelings and emotions associated with careering for vulnerable and complex children.

11.44 As we move further forward in our development, and through 2021, foster carers will not only be consulted in respect of shaping our vision and future, but we will also engage with representatives to be a part of our journey. Furthermore, following our restructure (September 2021) we will engage with children and young people, who are at the heart of our service, to help us understand the changes that need to take place, as seen through their eyes and experiences.

11.45 Foster carers are regularly involved in interviews for fostering social workers and managers and participate regularly in the delivery of training to social workers and other foster carers, mentoring and in our recruitment campaigns for foster carers.

## **12. Child's Voice**

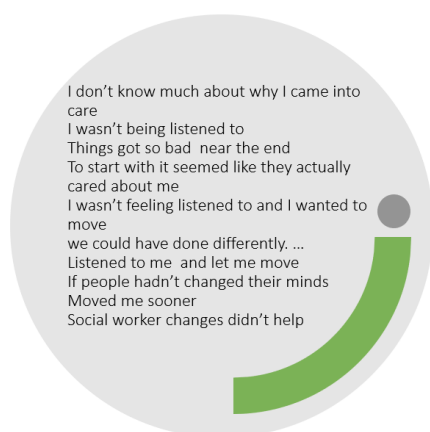
12.1 The fostering review process enables children to give their views about the quality of care they receive from their foster carer. Unfortunately, the returns of this consultation, have not always been high, although improvements have been made. In the 2020-21 period we reviewed our feedback mechanism and feedback sheets, to make them friendlier, more accessible and age appropriate and this information is most valuable to improve service delivery. We also in conjunction with childcare teams use MOMO to improve our understanding of a child's experience and share this information across our services.

12.2 Fostering social workers are expected to seek out the child's experience alongside the childcare social worker as part of the review mechanism, and we have seen positive improvements within the review paperwork with manager's oversight.

12.3 Within our teams there has been an emphasis on practice improvement in recording the child's experience of our care, however in reviewing this service wide, there is inconsistency in practice and the child's voice cannot always be clearly seen. With the implementation of Practice Standards for fostering social workers there is an expectation that they regularly see the child in placement with the foster carer. Further development in this area is required as part of our future development, and the new structure within the service will allow for increased oversight.

12.4 The experience of care leavers and children in our care is valuable in developing services and we very much value young people who have been in our care, to contribution to Fostering Panel as members. We currently have 1 care leaver that sits on our fostering panel and are looking at how we promote and support this to other care leavers. We feel this is very valuable not only for our development, but also from the perspective of a young person that has been in care. (please refer to fostering panel chairs report for further details).

12.5 Through our work with the wider CSC teams and learning through premature placement endings we gained insightful feedback directly from children and young people. Some of the direct quotes from children and young people are below:



### 13. Foster carer feedback

13.1 Although the 2020-21 period has been an exceptional year due to the coronavirus pandemic, the service has gained valuable feedback from foster carer which has assisted the service with its development and improvements. Feedback is gained in a number of ways: Through our auditing and quality assurance practices such as DIP audits and practice evaluations; via information from support groups; by consultative group representatives; by online direct

surveys; as part of the review mechanism; and directly through foster carer support and supervision. In looking at all of these mechanisms for acquiring thoughts, feelings, and ideas for practice and for service development, emerging themes have been seen, which are being developed as part of our service development, but also realised in individual team action plans.

### 13.2 From our most recent fostering survey:

1. Of the foster carers surveyed: only 1 carer felt that they did not '*feel positive about the Somerset Fostering Service*',
2. (56.3% (18) agreed, 18.8% (6) strongly agreed), that '*there are areas for improvement in the Fostering Service*'.
3. 50% of respondents were 'excited about the future of the service' and 43.8% were natural.
4. The largest proportion of respondents felt that they '*receive a good level of support from the SCC Fostering Service*', (50% agree; 33.3% strongly agree), with 16.7% of respondents responded 'neutral'.
5. The largest proportion of respondents are '*satisfied with the communication from SCC fostering service*', with a small proportion of respondents do feeling unsatisfied with the communication from the Fostering Service (10%).
6. The largest proportion of respondents had a positive experience in respect of their '*experience with the SCC Fostering Assessment Process*' (34.5% agree, 37.9% strongly agree, 27.6% of respondents responded 'neutral'.

### 13.3 Positive key themes that have been identified from feedback:

- Foster Carers describe the accessibility of their workers very positively.
- Foster Carers say they have a good relationship with their social worker.

- In many cases, foster carers were provided with sufficient information to support the child coming into their care.
- Evidence of foster carers views being sought, to inform planning processes and decisions made.
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- Evidence of foster carers views being sought, to inform planning processes and decisions made.

#### 13.4 Themes for development:

- Foster Carers require copies of safe care policies, risk assessments and up to date information in a timely manner.
- Ensuring foster carers and children have sufficient access to support, to manage key transition points. e.g., preparing for independence, and carers being considered as adopters.
- Improvements needed with how carer's views are considered throughout the care planning processes.



## 14. Covid 19 Response

- 14.1 The 2020-21 period has been like no other that the service has experienced. The dramatic changes in life, with restrictions, illness, vulnerability, and in social change cannot be underestimated. The families we support, as well as our foster carers, our partners, our teams, and other professionals have had to make very quick and often frequent changes to the way we work and support our children and young people who are at the centre of our practice. The coronavirus has affected everyone, and as such the service, its staff, foster carers, partner colleagues and others that we engage with have experienced many difficulties, barriers, anxieties and worries in their own lives, in their own families whilst trying to support others. It is truly commendable that through these difficult times we have remained focused on the children and young people we support. The service has remained committed, and although at times it has been difficult to implement improvements or have clear direction with the ever-changing guidance and restrictions it has established itself as being incredibly resilient and robust.
- 14.2 Although this report details some of the changes during the 2020-21, and in respect of service delivery through the pandemic, it is important to note key areas through this period, as below:
- 14.3 During the initial stages in the 2020-21 period, the service acted quickly by moving to working remotely and virtually. Staff adjusted above any expectation to this change, and the togetherness felt across the service, with mutual respect and support could be seen. Supervising social workers, and senior social worker assistants kept in regular contact with foster carers, provided supervision by telephone or/and virtually where possible.

- 14.4 Assessments continued, moving to virtual discussions, with face-to-face visits only where needed. Skills to foster initial foster carer training, was quickly moved to the zoom conferencing platform and staff trained in its use.
- 14.5 Staff became accustomed to using precautionary and safety measures as advised by government and local actions plans when visits needed to take place to protect themselves and others.
- 14.6 A Managers update was sent out weekly across Childrens social care as well as regular fostering senior manager updates. Furthermore, weekly service updates was provided from the Operations Manager for all staff, which allowed for everyone to come together to listen and discuss direction of the service, as well as being able to show mutual support across teams and between colleagues. The service also ran a virtual quiz which was well received. Individual teams and colleagues used various communication channels to keep in touch, for mutual support and to bring people closer together in times of difficulty.
- 14.7 Regular updates were sent to foster carers, and the fostering newsletter was updated and sent to foster carers more frequently and monthly. Support groups quickly were established virtually, and the consultative group moved to being conducted via Microsoft teams.
- 14.8 Somerset County Council needed to be able to maintain fostering capacity if foster carers became ill, were to self-isolate or decide they could not be open to placements during this time. The service had the foresight in understanding that it was possible that the demand for foster care might increase as a result of additional difficulties within families that were already under severe pressure. As such the service developed and established an emergency carer approval process (emergency Covid-19 Foster carers), using the Coronavirus Act 2020

and the changes to regulation 24. The recruitment for these emergency carers was unprecedented, and although many enquiries were unable to move forward due to their situation, availability and/or meeting eligible criteria, it showed that there was very good support for fostering in Somerset. The campaign resulted in 10 emergency carer approvals, and although not significant in numbers, this increased our main foster carer base by 7% and allowed for capacity to be temporarily increased, children to be cared for and have overnight stays with other carers in times of difficulty.

14.9 Somerset County Council recognised the importance of our foster carers in caring for our children, and the need as such for Vaccinations (jabs) to be provided to carers as a priority. If foster carers became ill the sufficiency in the service could decrease very quickly causing overall pressure and complexities, and ultimately have a negative impact on providing children with safe and caring homes. Foster carers were prioritised and a phenomenal uptake for the vaccines was seen. This provided some security and protection to our carers, as well as stabilising our ability to provide children and young people with caring homes.

14.10 As detailed in this report, although it was acknowledged that due to lockdowns, restrictions, children being at home, and the many complexities that the pandemic has brought, training and development for foster carers continued. The learning and development service quickly came responsive to change and moved courses and delivery of training sessions online and virtually.

## **15. Supporting carers through agency suspension**

15.1 In the 2020-21 period, the Somerset fostering service was informed by Ofsted of an independent fostering agency which had been suspended from operating. This led to the local Authority having to make quick and robust decisions



regarding the approval of a set of carers whereby they were caring for Somerset children and had no registration due to the agency's immediate suspension. The Somerset fostering service acted quickly, convened meetings, fostering panel, and allocated cases to support foster carers. Somerset fostering service temporary approved 8 foster carers, to allow for compliance to be maintained, and for children and young people to remain in regulated fostering families. This quick adjustment in regard to operations within the service, has shown that the service can adjust to change quickly when required. In December 2020 the suspension with the independent fostering agency was lifted and foster carers were able to transfer back to the agency or be assessed to transfer to the Somerset fostering service if they wished. 2 fostering families expressed a wish to move to the Somerset Local Authority fostering service.

## **16. Fostering Service development**

### **16.1 Step forward carers scheme.**

16.2 In the 2020-21 period, the service developed a step forward scheme for children and young people from residential settings. The scheme is designed to improve the service provided to children and young people ready to leave residential care, while reducing costs throughout the service. While in the early stages within the period it is hoped that the scheme will enable children and young people to transition into being cared for and supported in fostering families.

### **16.3 Restructure and service development**

16.4 The County Plan and the Children and the Somerset Plan for Children and Young People and Families 2019 - 2022 outline the service values that reflect the Council's Vision and Purpose. These values define how we do things

and the principles by which we work together with our service users and partners.

16.5 As detailed in the Children's and Young People's plan; '*Our vision is that Somerset children and young people are safe, healthy, happy, are ambitious for their future and develop skills for life*'. This is set out as aspiring for all children to have:

- *A happy family life*
- *A healthy start to life*
- *A great education*
- *Positive activities*

16.6 The Fostering Service's role is to reflect these values in the provision of high quality, resilient fostering families who can meet the individual needs of the children they care for.

16.7 At the end of the 2020-21 period, the Somerset fostering service started working alongside North Yorkshire under the DfE partners in practice. This work identified areas of development that will help to deliver a refreshed vision for the service – a vision that aims to deliver a progressive and innovative fostering service with children at the very centre of each step of the process. To realise this vision, several development themes and opportunities were identified with support from North Yorkshire:

- Recruitment & Conversions
- Improve data capture
- Increase number and diversity of foster carers to meet children's needs
- Improve conversion rate from initial enquiry to recruitment
- Improve efficiency of recruitment processes
- Reduce silo working between teams

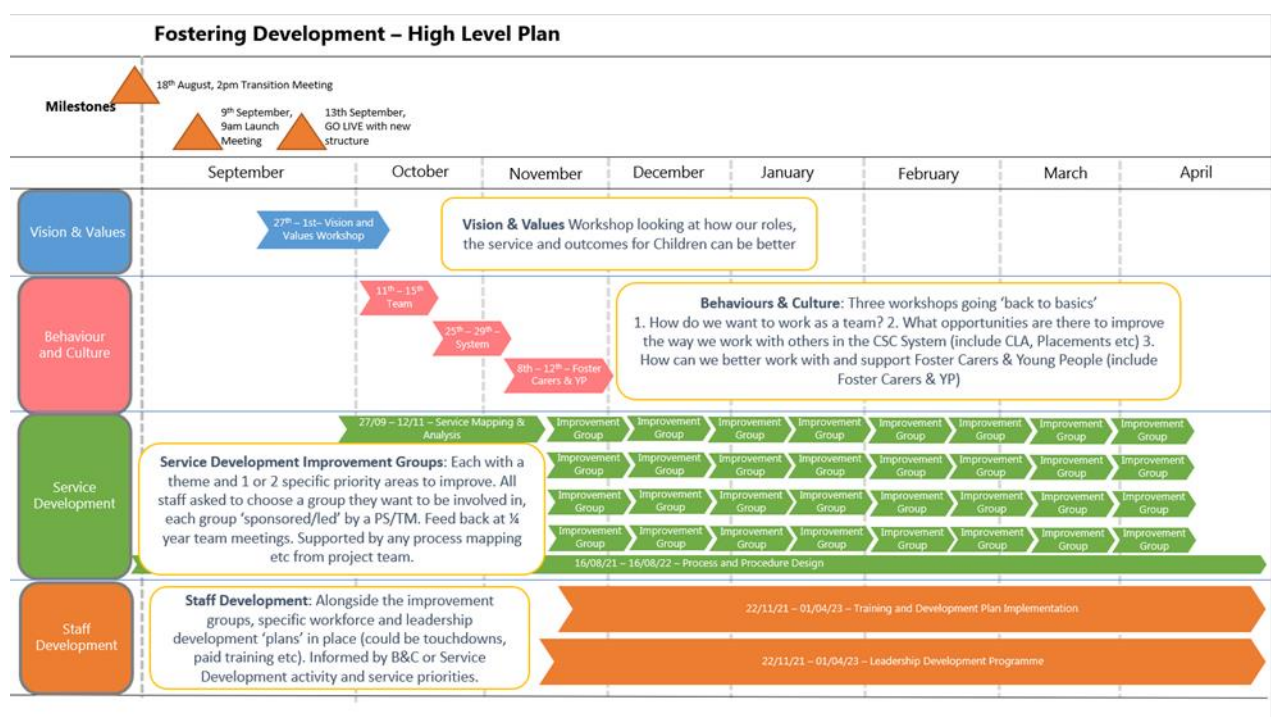
- End to End Process
- Centralise assessment information
- Improve consistency of data sharing
- Improve holistic decision making across the service
- Improve analysis of data and trend information
- Practice
- Improve review process
- Improve connections between assessment and support teams
- Behaviour and Culture
- Create a more holistic focus on the journey of the child
- Structure
- Improve collaborative working across the service at management level
- Reduce the disconnect between recruitment, assessment and support teams and develop systemic thinking to develop a more holistic approach to meeting children's needs across the service
- Address the disparity in the team manager roles between practice supervision and strategic oversight.

16.8 Despite strengths in some individual teams and service areas being seen, the common thread through these development themes was the existing disconnect between different areas of the service and the need to take a more systemic, holistic view of a child's journey through the service. It was recognised that as such a restructure of the service would act as the first step for service development – providing the structural basis to:

- Reduce silo working
- Enhance the different types of management capacity required
- Steer and drive the required behaviour and culture work and the review of systems, processes, and practice in order to move towards a more holistic service offer.

16.9 Following redesign and consultation the service goes live with a new structure in September 2021, as the first step in building a stable and workable foundation to realise the service vision and improve outcomes for children. A full business case for change was established, together with outcome benefits and financial and nonfinancial benefits. Although an evolving plan, following implementation of a new fostering structure further development (stage 2) has been initially developed and will include: Cultural and behavioural workshops; systems and process mapping and implementation; training and development workshops; and leadership programmes.

16.10 The High-level plan can be seen below:



16.11 Although there are a series of benefits, the main outcome and focus of the develop work is as follows:

- Increased management sufficiency across the service to:

- Enable better use of data to inform service development
- Enable improved oversight of recruitment, assessment, and supervision practice
- Enable improved oversight leading to more timely approval of foster carers
- Better support to upskill fostering service staff and in-house foster carers via the introduction of Practice Supervisor role:
  - Promoting resilience and creativity in caring for children with the aim of raising the 'in-house foster carer' to 'Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)' ratio from 63% In-house to 37% IFA, to 70% In-house to 30% IFA (67% to 33% nationally)
  - Increasing number of placements for complex children/young people with in-house foster carers
- Increased utilisation of available approved in-house placements
- Better outcomes for Children and Young People
  - Improved child's journey through the system through keeping them local, therefore maintaining family and education/network links.
  - Children and young people to thrive in fostering families, with increased education attainment, access to experiences, and for them to feel inclusive with the families they live with.
  - Improved outcomes for children by providing stable placements

16.12 Overall, and most importantly the service restructure and development work in 2021, 2022 and beyond, will focus on improving the lives of children in Somerset, by aligning our service to enable children and young people to be at the very heart of all that we do.

## 17. Appendices

1. Recruitment and Communications Strategy
2. Learning and Development Plan

### Appendix 1



Apr 21 - Mar 22  
Fostering Strategy.doc

### Appendix 2



All training Plans  
Combined 2020 2021



Foster Carers  
Learning and Develop