



Somerset County Council

Children's Social Care

Fostering Service

Annual Report

April 2019 – March 2020

Owners	Matthew Randles
Authors:	Operations Managers – Fostering, Team Managers and the Fostering Panel Chair
Compiled by:	As above
Version:	4.0
Date:	March 2020

Version Control

Version number	Status	Date amended	Name	Comments – amendments made
1.0				
2.0				
3.0	Final	Jan 2017	Jayne Shelbourn-Barrow	

CONTENTS

1.	Summary and Looking Forward	3
2.	Service Overview	7
3.	Sufficiency of Placements	12
4.	Ofsted Inspection and Improvement Journey	15
5.	Service Performance	16
6.	Fostering Support and Supervision	23
7.	Complaints and Allegations	40
8.	Independent Review Mechanism	42
9.	Fostering Panel	42
10.	Fostering Panel Chair’s Report	43
11.	Foster Carer Retention	49
12.	Child’s Voice	55
13.	Appendices	56

SUMMARY AND SERVICE PLAN OVERVIEW

1. Summary and Looking Forward

1.1 The Fostering Service has continued to adapt and develop to meet the needs of children looked after in Somerset through the 2019-20 period and address 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.

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. 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 2019 – March 2020 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 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.
- 1.6 The Fostering Service has continued to encounter significant challenges throughout the 2019-20 period. The complexity of the needs of looked after children continues to be demanding in terms of providing well matched provisions, and the service's ability to provide support at the right time, in the right areas. The number of children looked after has remained consistent during the period. In March 2019 there were 534 looked after children in Somerset and 529 in March 2020.

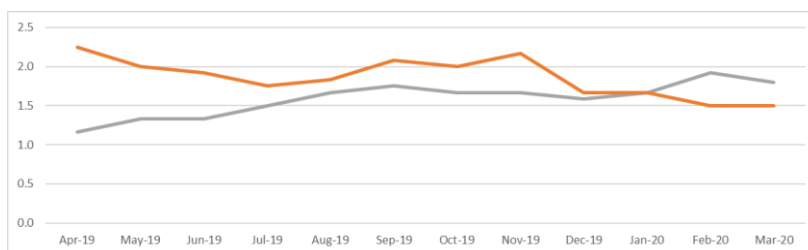
The shortage of fostering families and places for children and young people continues to impact upon the Fostering Services ability to match all our children well. However, during the latter part of the 2019-20 period, the Fostering Service has seen some improvements, with net sufficiency within the service increasing. 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. Poor matching and difficult endings can also impact upon foster carers' emotional resilience, and therefore enthusiasm to continue to foster is 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.

- 1.7 The Somerset Fostering Service has continued to face challenges in respect of our ability to recruit new carers and recognises that this is 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. There are fewer carers, looking after more children.
- 1.8 This continued expansion and development 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 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.
- 1.9 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 has adjusted, and followed an action plan . Resources and processes to identify difficulties early; offer intensive support when this is needed; and a systemic approach to working across teams has been put in place. This has led to improvements in retaining foster carers within the service.
- 1.10 In the 2018-19 period, 28 foster carer(s) left the service. Common patterns identified in the deregistration analysis were: Change in the fostering household - personal circumstances; Foster Carers feeling unsupported or feeling they lacked information; and the complex needs of children – proving to be too difficult for carers to be able to manage. In the 2019-20 period deregistration's

reduced by 35% to 18. 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.

- 1.11 There remains a positive sign 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 has improved. The service in the forthcoming year aims to embed some of our practices we have in place and use our resources effectively to assist in maintaining our sufficiency as well as our overall improvement journey.
- 1.12 It remains positive that the service benefits from stable, committed, conscientious and skilled managers 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 12-18 months will focus on using a systemic service review, working with other Local Authorities to enable cultural and service change were needed.
- 1.13 In the 2019-20 period the service underwent changes in respect of the management structure, which is detailed further in this report.
- 1.14 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.
- 1.15 Following commissioning Coram BAAF in 2018/19, to undertake an external

review of the service which focused on improvements in respect of recruitment and retention of foster carers, the service improvement plan was updated and monitored. Data analysis identifies that during the 2019/20 period the service has experienced a net gain in foster carers within the service. As can be seen by the graph below, the net loss in April 2019 (approvals v's deregistration's) was wide, with a net decline in foster carers being seen. In January 2020, we saw deregistration's reach a level, which was surpassed by approvals.



Deregistration's/approvals directional graph. Key: orange: deregistration's, Grey: Approvals. (Not including FFA and Connected persons)

- 1.16 Throughout the 2019/20 period the Fostering Service has remained committed in strengthening our core offer, developing processes, and used creative resource allocation to improve our ability to support children in foster care. We have further developed our support service, and multi-agency Emotional Health and Well Being Team.

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.

'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'.

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.

2.2 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)

2.3 The Fostering Service significantly contributes to ensure sufficient, safe and well supported foster placements 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'.

Role of the Fostering Service

2.4 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.

2.5 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.

2.6 In meeting Somerset's Fostering Services responsibilities as outlined in section 1.3, 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 by their experience of the service.

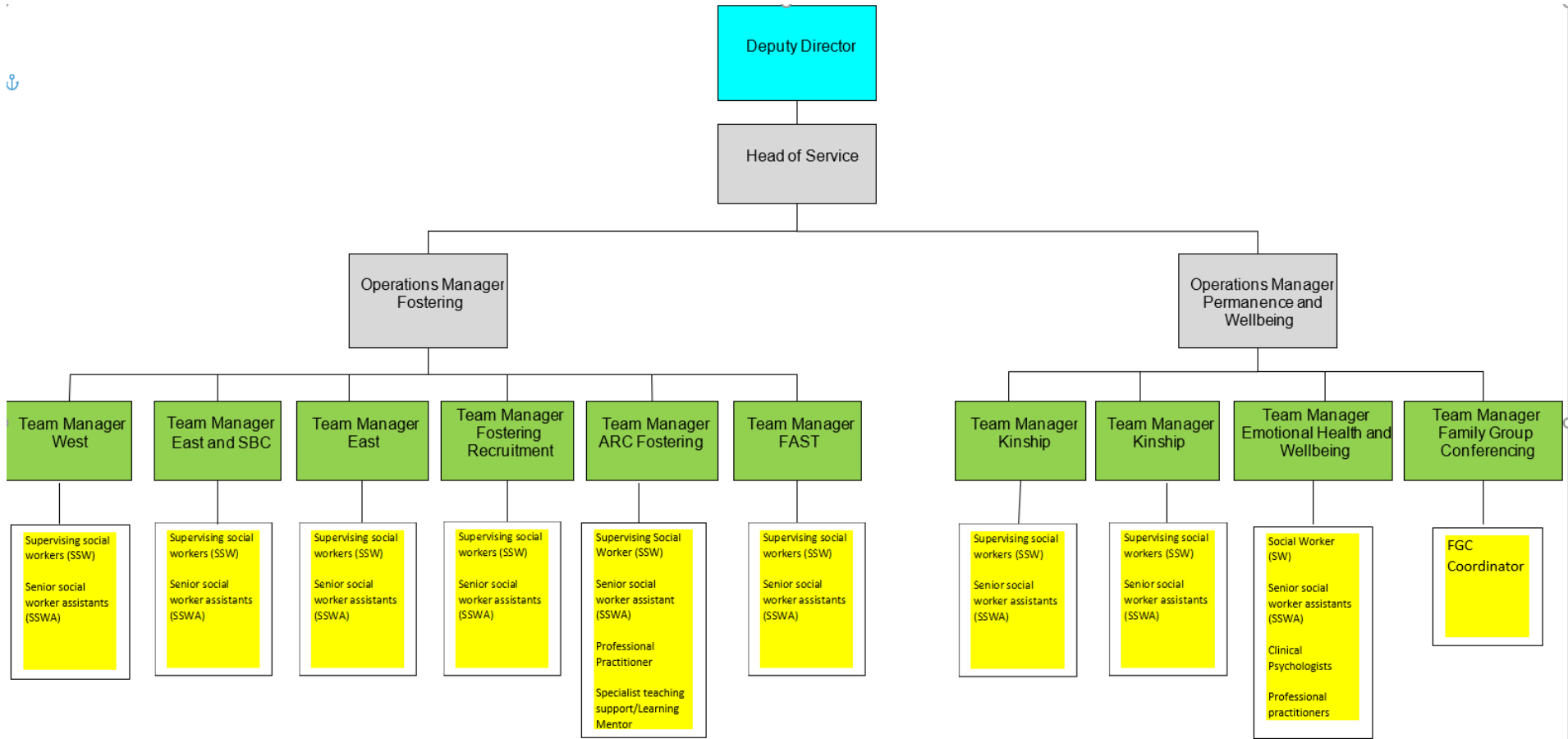
2.7 Somerset County Council's Fostering Service provides a range of temporary and permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience. Foster carers provide family-based care ranging from short breaks for children who have a disability, parent(s) and child foster placements, to short stays and longer-term placements and permanency. We actively work to prepare a child 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 placements, 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.

2.8 Connected persons carers have moved from being supervised and supported in the East and West Fostering Teams, to a more focused Kinship Service, which 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 new Kinship Service has further developed

and support and supervision is delivered to temporary connected persons (those who have children placed under a temporary approval and whom are undergoing an assessment of their suitability to foster) as well as involvement from assessing social workers. Successful kinship placements offer children permanency, often within their own communities.

Service Structure

- 2.9 With the new development of the Kinship service, the Somerset's Fostering Service structure has changed to reflect the needs and complexity of the wider service and to accommodate suitable processes in supporting children and fostering families. The service is overseen by two Strategic Operational Managers who have responsibility for different parts of the service (see service structure below).

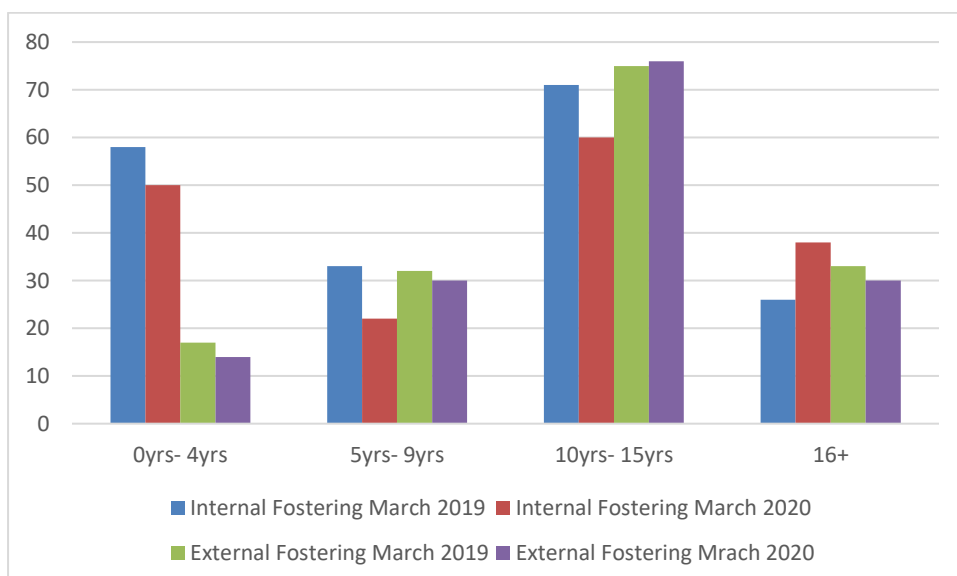


3. Sufficiency of Placements

Children Looked After

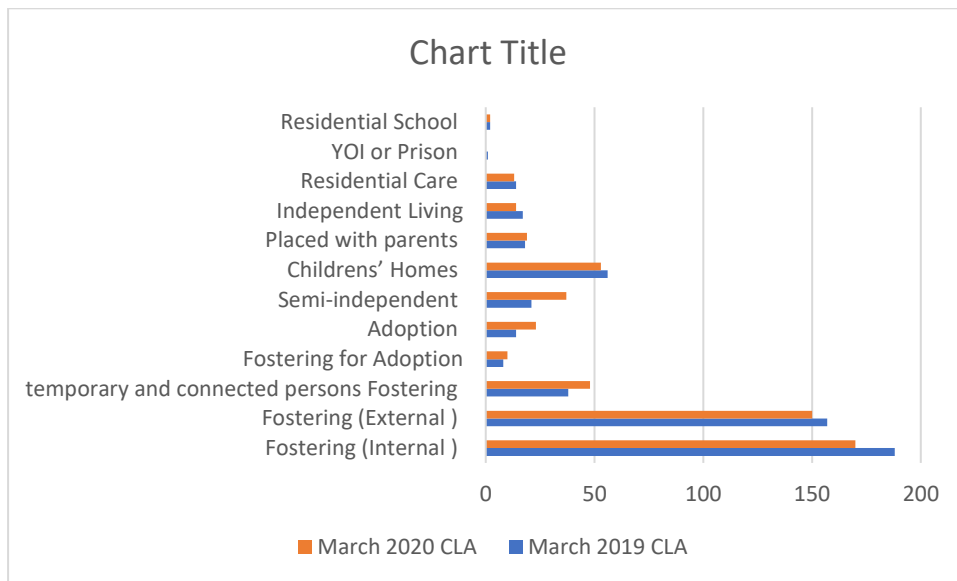
- 3.1 The number of children looked after in March 2020 was 529. 218 of these were cared for by Somerset foster carers (In-house carers 170; temporary connected and connected persons foster carers 48). 150 children were cared for by independent agency carers. 161 children lived in other care arrangements, 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 2019/20 period, with a 12-month average of 532, however the March 2020 number is a slight decrease from 534 in March 2019.
- 3.2 A high proportion of children looked after in Somerset are placed with in-house foster carers (refer to Table 1 below) however, Somerset still has a significant use of agency foster placements and a use of residential care that is higher than the national average.

Children Looked After March 2019 and 2020



The graph above shows that there has been an increase in internally fostered children in the age group 16+. Whilst external provision has reduced slightly in all age groups except for 10-15yrs where there is a very slight increase.

3.3 The Graph below represents all settings (March 2019 / March 2020).



3.4 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. Our Short Break Care Service is managed by specialist fostering social workers within the East Fostering Team.

3.5 Somerset has developed specialist schemes to offer more intense support to children and families:

FA&ST

We have a specialist service for parent(s) and child(ren), FA&ST (Family Assessment and support team), 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.

TFC

The Therapeutic Foster Care programme (previously known as Treatment Foster Care Oregon) was disbanded following staff consultation at the end of the period. The decision was made following a continued decline in foster carers, and a move towards therapeutic and trauma informed practice, and away from a behaviourist approach and model.

ARC Fostering

ARC (Attachment, Relationship, Connection) 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.

Whilst the team remains within the Fostering Service, it will integrate closely with the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team over the next 12 months, 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.

Link Carer Scheme

A new link-carer scheme has been 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 entesis 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

5. Service Performance

Number of Foster carers

- 5.1 We had a total of 241 approved foster carers at the end of the financial year (including temporary approvals for adoption). These are broken down as follows:

	March 2019 (Households)	March 2020 (Households)	Percentage change
Foster Carers	185	190	+2.7%
Kinship (connected and temporary connected)	31	41	+32.3%
FFA (fostering for adoption)	7	10	+42.9%

- 5.2 Over the 2019-20 period, we have seen an increase of 4.8% of children being placed with our internal foster carers compared to the 2018 -19 period:

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%)

5.3 In respect of Connected Person and FFA, we have seen an increase in households as well as children placed in comparison to the 2018-19 period:

31st March 2019

Connected Person / Kinship (Households) – 31

Connected Person / Kinship (Children Placed) – 38

FFA (Households) – 7

FFA (Children Placed) – 7

31st March 2020

Connected Person / Kinship (Households) – 41

Connected Person / Kinship (Children Placed) – 48

FFA (Households) – 10

FFA (Children Placed) – 1

Placement Activity/Placements Team

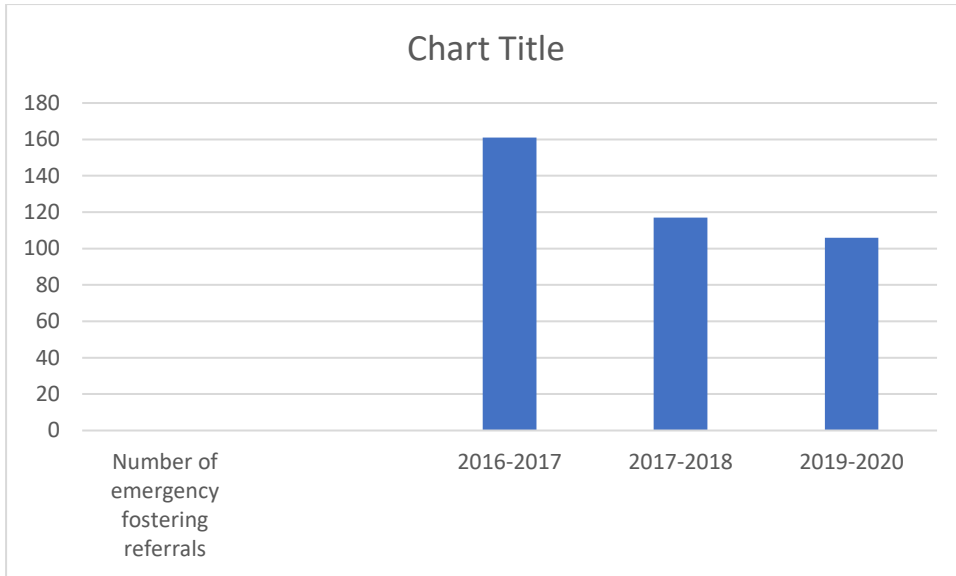
5.4 The Placements Team have continued to work with Fostering Teams and childcare colleagues to maximize the use of our in-house placements this year, in addition to developing improved relationships with independent providers in Somerset. Excluding connected persons foster carers and FFA, on the 31st March 2020 the numbers of children in Foster Care, agency placements were 150 (157 in March 2019). In respect of internal foster carers there were 170 children in March 2020 compared to 188 in March 2019. 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 increased by 46%, while the 5-9yrs, and 10-15

years age groups have decreased:

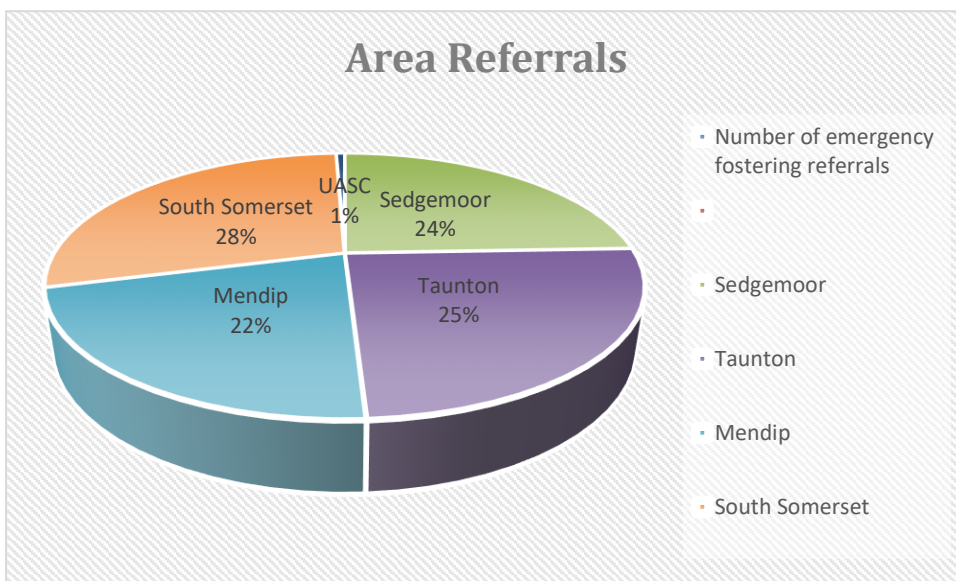
<u>March 2019</u>	Internal Fostering	External Fostering
Age: 0-4	58	17
5-9	33	32
10-15	71	75
16+	26	33

<u>March 2020</u>	Internal Fostering	External Fostering
Age: 0-4	50	14
5-9	22	30
10-15	60	76
16+	38	30

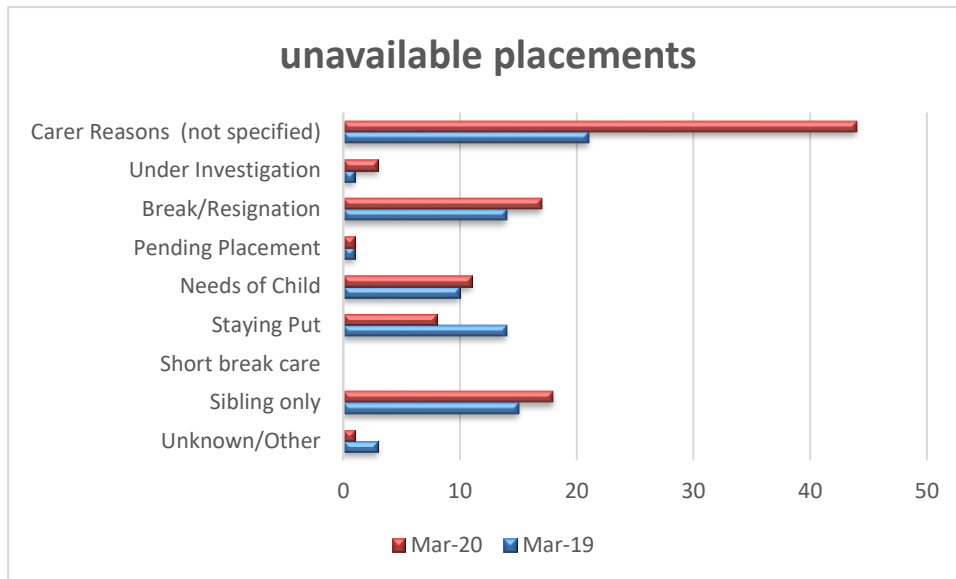
- 5.5 There has been a continuation of a whole service approach to the slowing down of placement decisions and actions in order to maximize opportunities for better matching, information sharing, planning and therefore placement stability. This has been achieved through the introduction and embedding 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 Team 8, as appropriate.
- 5.6 The numbers of emergency referrals (placements required within 72 hrs) have continued to decline. In the 2019-20 period 106 referrals were made. This is in comparison to 161 in 2016/17 and 117 in 2017/18.



5.7 In the 2019-20 period there were 336 referrals made to the placements team. The chart below shows that while Mendip region of Somerset remains as having the lowest referral rate, the area split has become more aligned.



5.8 As of the end of March 2020, we had 39 vacant places for children with internal foster carers, which is a slight decrease from 45 in March 2019 (not including placement blocks/unavailability). However, 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. The graph below provides a breakdown of unavailable placements:



Carer Recruitment

5.9 Somerset County Council (SCC) has a recruitment and assessment team. The Fostering in Somerset (FIS) team's role is to recruit and assess fostering households. The team works closely with the Communications Team and together they develop an annual Recruitment Strategy.

5.10 We have undertaken a wider approach in general to the recruitment of foster carers in marketing materials but have still focused on areas of need when required, using sub campaigns, and particularly directed through an increase in social media.

These have included promoting the need for:

- Short Break Carers for disabled children
- Parent and Child foster care (FAST)
- Care leavers: Staying Put and Stepping Stones

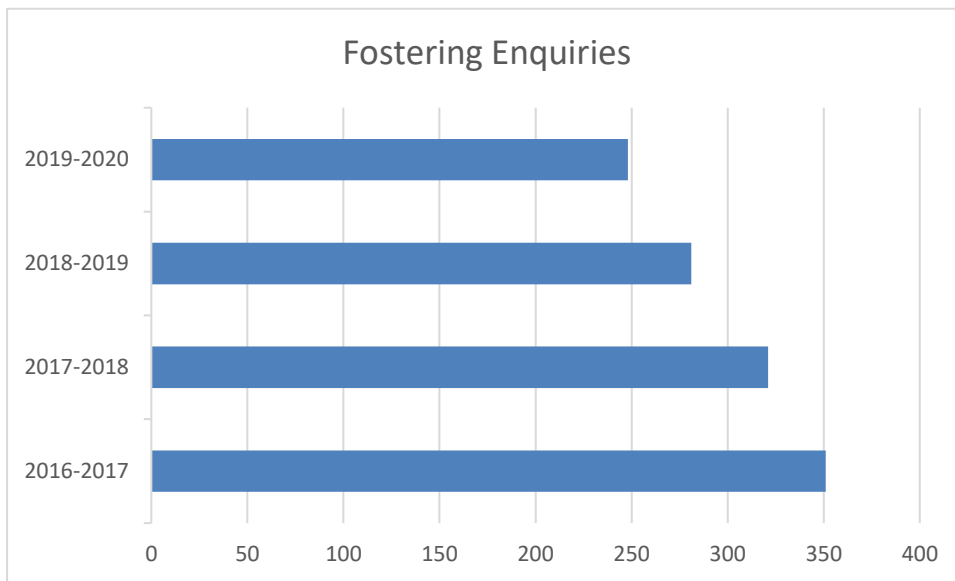
5.11 We have also aimed to:

- Promote awareness within the Somerset LGBT community
- Promote the improved offer from Somerset County Council for foster carers, as well as the benefits of working for our not-for-profit organisation
- Enable more interactive recruitment through social media.

- Engage with community stakeholders and partnerships to help us promote fostering.

5.12 Details of our recruitment activity for this year is set out in Appendix 1

5.13 The number of enquiries received for fostering in 2019/20 has continued to decline in line with the national picture. In 2019-2020 we received 248 enquiries, 281 in the 2018-19 period, as can be seen below:



5.14 In comparison to declining enquiries we have seen a slow down during the period and then an increase as of the end of March 2020 in carer approvals, and our conversion rate has subsequently improved. We have also seen an increase in connected persons as well as temporary approval for adoptive families that offered early permanence to children in care:

2018-19

- Internal Fostering – 16
- Connected Person / Kinship – 38
- FFA – 7

2019-20

- Internal Fostering – 23
- Connected Person / Kinship – 54
- FFA – 16

- 5.15 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.
- 5.16 In order to assess our performance, teams have 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.
- 5.17 The team have continued to receive consistently positive feedback from carers about information sessions and our Skills to Foster course.
- 5.18 Looking to 2020 and beyond, we aim to create a stronger, approachable 'Fostering in Somerset' brand within SCC to help us better compete with Independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and encourage potential foster carers to foster with us or transfer.
- 5.19 As a service we have been able to offer prompt responses to initial enquiries. The team have 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 has been trialled, and received very positive feedback from carers, professionals, and panel. It is currently being rolled out within the service, as an alternative to the Form F assessment.
- 5.20 Advance Practitioners and Team Managers continue to chair foster carers reviews and feed back to the team, of the carers experience of assessment, preparation, and their first years fostering activity.
- 5.21 The FIS team continue 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 83 completed within the 2019-20 period which is the same as in 2018-19. We have seen a decline in IHV's being booked within

the first 10 days of enquiry, and we aim to improve this with a new booking system and tracking sheet within the next 12 months. Further improvement in this area will be made through closer monitoring of record keeping and analysis:

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%)

- 5.22 The FIS team continue to seek to 'fast track' referrals where applicants have demonstrable skills identified that are likely to meet the needs of our priority children. This is very positive, and enables, where appropriate for potential carers who demonstrate skills, ability, and experience to be assessed in a timelier manner, providing children with well-matched placements.
- 5.23 Team managers have improved communication and access to performance data. The Team Action Plan will be discussed and updated at each team meeting.

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.
- 6.2 Placement stability meetings and End of Placement Letters (letters/ cards

written by foster carers to children when they move as part of their life story work) are now embedded in the culture of the service. We need as a service to continue to develop our practice in relation to the quality of plans produced for meeting the needs of children.

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

Placement Stability

- 6.4 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.

- 6.5 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 placement moves in a year, whatever the type of placement they are living in (15.7%). This was a decrease on performance in the previous year (14.8%) This is a concerning figure and is above the national average of 10%.

- 6.6 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 this year has reached 67.1%. This is an encouraging trajectory; however, Somerset's performance remains below the national average of 70%.

- 6.7 These indicators are for all children looked after including children in agency placements, residential care and post 16 accommodation. Analysis of the breakdown of internal foster placements undertaken in March 2020 is encouraging:

Short term stability: 11.01%

Longer term Stability: 72.86%.

Measures in place to support placement stability

- 6.8 When vulnerabilities are identified Placement Support Meeting are consistently arranged to explore and identify worries and to agree a suitable plan of action. Analysis of Placement Support Meetings held during a 3-month period in this year were found to be 75% successful in preventing immediate placement breakdown.
- 6.9 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, however further improvement is needed, which is a part of our improvement journey.
- 6.10 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. It is felt that this is an area that will developed over the next 12 months as it will assist with a systemic approach to stability across the childcare and fostering teams. With the fostering service and childcare teams both RAG rating stability, perspective of the placements can be discussed, and suitable plans put in place.
- 6.11 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 in the placement. 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 have co-ordinated Placement Planning Meetings when children are matched. 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.

- 6.12 The learning and development plan 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.
- 6.13 This year 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.
- 6.14 Courses have received very positive feedback. We have also been able to run some courses with the same group of carers, and carers have benefitted from course content; from peer support; and from ongoing friendships with each other.
- 6.15 In relation to placement breakdowns OFSTED highlighted that we did not as a whole service learn from premature placement endings and 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 proven difficult. In 2020-21 we aim to trial a new system where an individual staff member will become responsible for the coordination and chairing of meetings, as well as a 6 monthly analysis which will be presented to the operational managers group, and be disseminated across services to allow for joint learning.

East Fostering Team

- 6.16 The East Fostering Team consists of: 2 Part Time Team Managers supervising 10 Social Workers, and 4 part-time Senior Social Work Assistants. They

supervise and support in the region of 95-100 fostering households. Social Workers are responsible for meeting statutory requirements, including supporting, monitoring, and reviewing fostering households, ensuring that carers work in partnership to promote the needs of children in placement.

- 6.17 A Full Time Supervising Social Worker currently hold between 13 -16 active carers. A Part Time Supervising Social Workers case load varies depending on their working hours and is adjusted on a pro rata basis. Expectations of Supervising Social Workers continue to increase to meet both the statutory duties of the Fostering service, and in 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 these challenges but are mindful to allow sufficient time for reflection with carers, to attend meetings and to complete report writing.
- 6.18 During the period, the East and West Fostering Teams have maintained wherever possible full capacity in terms of staffing, however adjustments in working hours, (increases and decreases), as well as occasional use of locum workers covering for sickness has been required.
- 6.19 The East Team continues to operate from two offices (Yeovil and Shepton), covering a large geographical area East and South Somerset, including surrounding villages. There are also a small number of carers living across local authority boarders. All registered fostering households have an allocated Supervising Social Worker, providing support, and they monthly supervision visits are conducted. Visits are adjusted in line with need and stability; increased where there are concerns/worries or decreased when there is a long term stability with experienced carers. 10 foster carers provide a short break care service to children with disabilities, with around 5 of these being dual approved as mainstream foster carers.
- 6.20 Supervising Social Workers have continued to work closely with children's Social Workers to improve placement stability and permanence for children.

- 6.21 Performance has remained stable, resulting in statutory checks, supervision visits, and foster care annual reviews being maintained between 90% - 95%. However there has been a dip in unannounced visits and home inspections. The Team have continued to work extremely hard to meet service demand and to implement change to improve service delivery. Bpth 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.
- 6.22 Business support has been invaluable within the Fostering Service and provide specialist support in the administrative tasks of the Fostering Service such as DBS, medical checks, organising carers badges, booking meeting rooms and venues, and information sharing, in addition to more general administrative tasks. They have been a vital resource in promoting carers experience of the service.
- 6.23 Supervising Social Workers have continued to attend professional meetings, such as child looked after team meetings to improve working in partnership, exploring dilemmas or issues that will progress plans to promote the needs of children in placement. Additional support to carers, once identified is acted upon and includes consideration for learning and development and skill building.
- 6.24 Training and support to staff and Foster Carers in the service is considered good, providing a variety of training opportunities. Following staff expressing a need for more specialist PDP training, the service towards the end of the period has implemented specific fostering CPD sessions for staff, these are run monthly and will be rolled out during the 2020-2021 period. Overall, there has been an increase in carers and staff attending various training events, wanting to progress and develop further. 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. The number of carers with a Personal

Development Plan has increased too.

- 6.25 When children are placed, Placement Planning Meetings in the east and West teams are consistently held to support the carer's ability to meet the child's needs. Supervising Social Workers continue to link with children's allocated Social Workers to obtain delegated authority. In cases where placements are pre-planned, information sharing has generally been good and there have been introduction visits 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.
- 6.26 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 their written reports/records. Foster carers 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.
- 6.27 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.
- 6.28 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. Safe Care Policies are now embedded into practice too, 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.

- 6.29 End of Placement Letters to children who leave placements have increased considerably and this 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, 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.
- 6.30 Two Senior Social Work Assistants (SSWA) 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 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. In the period, SSWA's have assisted the assessments team with statutory checks to enable assessments to be completed in a timely manner.
- 6.31 Team Action Plans have been implemented and are regularly reviewed and updated to promote on-going service delivery and improvement to achieve good practice and outcomes.

West Fostering Team

- 6.32 The West Fostering 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.
- 6.33 Between April 2019 and March 2020 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). The team manager changed in August 2019, and for a short period there was a vacancy.

- 6.34 During this period, the average caseload of a full-time social worker in the team was 13- 15 fostering households.
- 6.35 The team performance has been affected by changes in management responsibility this year with the permanent team manager moving to oversee the service as the Operations Manager. The west team over the last 3 years has seen many changes in team management, which has affected its ability to be consistent in terms of oversight, and in respect of compliance.
- 6.36 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 completion of reviews is the lack of reviewing officer availability. This role is currently shared between fostering team managers, advanced practitioners and a part time reviewing officer who sits in the west teams. 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.
- 6.37 Around 50% of unannounced home visits have been completed. This is a reduction in compliance. A possible reason for this is that there has been a lack of regular statistical feedback to the team during the year, which has previously helped the team to keep on top of their compliance.
- 6.38 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.
- 6.39 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.
- 6.40 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.

- 6.41 The experience of children continues to be captured through consultation forms for foster carer reviews. However, the completion of these remains inconsistent.
- 6.42 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.
- 6.43 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.
- 6.44 The experience of foster carers is well recorded throughout LCS, on supervision records, consultation forms and foster carer reviews.
- 6.45 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.
- 6.46 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.
- 6.47 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.

Family Assessment and Support Team

- 6.48 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. The FA&ST consists of 1 fulltime team manager (cover 1.5 teams), 1 full time supervising social worker, 2 senior social work assistants (1 full time, 1-part time) and 2 full time senior assessing social workers.
- 6.49 FA&ST currently have 8 fostering households. 1 fostering household left FA&ST choosing to move to an IFA due to feeling they would have more flexibility for their own family, reduced timescales for families being in placement and an increase in fees.
- 6.50 A second assessing social worker was appointed in January 2019, therefore reducing the use of AISW (Independent social workers) that were commissioned in the previous year, and increased capacity to undertake community parenting assessments.
- 6.51 Performance is monitored through supervision and by using the SSRS (data through our recording systems). Whilst statutory visits and checks have been completed in timescales there has remained to be a gap in the timeliness of recording foster carer visits on LCS in some cases. This could be attributed to management capacity to chair all meetings and the SSW taking on this task. This is due to changes in the manager's role and additional tasks such as jointly managing west fostering, panel advisor role, and chairing additional annual reviews.

- 6.52 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.
- 6.53 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.
- 6.54 FA&ST have had 29 parent and child placements. 22 assessments have been undertaken by FA&ST, 4 by independent assessing social workers (2 PAMS assessments), 1 by the child's social worker and 2 did not have assessments completed. From the 22 assessments that FA&ST undertook 5 recommended return to the community with their child; the remaining 17 were placed with the child's other parent (2), SGO (3) or adoption (9), one moved to a residential placement, and 2 proceedings remained on-going. One parent and child returned to the community against the recommendation of the assessment. Of the 4 IASW assessments completed, 1 recommended return to the community, 1 child was subsequently placed with their other child and 2 were adopted
- 6.55 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 5 community assessments; 1 remained in the community and 4 recommended parents could not safely parent.
- 6.56 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.

- 6.57 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.
- 6.58 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.
- 6.59 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
- 6.60 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.

Therapeutic Foster Care (disbanded)

- 6.61 Therapeutic Foster Care was an intensive fostering programme with largely an evidenced based behavioural and therapeutic approach. The programme was aimed at children in our care whose behaviours had led or may have led to multiple placement breakdowns and consequently poor outcomes for those children.
- 6.62 TFC aimed to enable the child to modify behaviours in order to be able to live permanently with their birth family, in an adoptive family or in a permanent foster placement. The team around the child within TFC included the foster carer, who implements the programme; a clinical team lead; an educational lead; a birth family coach who works with birth families; other permanent family members; skills workers to work directly with the children; a fostering social worker; and business support who contact the foster carer every day in relation to the child's behaviours.
- 6.63 The team worked with children aged between 3-12 years who had experienced complex trauma resulting in their presenting behaviours making them at risk of placement breakdowns, instability and retraumatising experiences. The team was set up to work with children for a period of around 12 months. The team's aim was to support children using behavioural and attachment perspectives to enable children to develop emotional resilience and regulation; develop social skills; improve relationships with adults; and improve educational attainment in order to build attachments leading to positive relationships.
- 6.64 The service was disbanded in March/April 2020, following a review of the service, and consultation with staff members. The reasons for these decisions are outlined below.
- 6.65 The therapeutic model of the team had moved from a purely behaviourist perspective to incorporate trauma informed approaches over a period. These two sometimes conflicting approaches within the service were not conducive to the overall approach of Somerset, which has moved to a parenting approach

and model for practice that uses what we know about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships.

- 6.66 This benefit of the new approach, and moving away from the behaviourist model, is embedded in research and practice examples of successfully working with children who have experienced trauma. The new approach does not support the rationale of providing 12-month placements to children who have experienced a high level of developmental trauma.
- 6.67 The TFC team had undergone significant changes over the last 3 years including a formal consultation process where 2 teams amalgamated into one team.
- 6.68 Foster carer numbers had decreased significantly overtime within the TFC service, and at the time of disbandment there was only 3 fulltime foster carers, and 2 respite carers, with 1 fulltime foster carer being transferred to mainstream fostering.
- 6.69 There had over time, been reductions in the staffing structure including the redundancy of the full-time programme supervisor post. It was not felt that the high level and ratio of the staffing structure was feasible in the long term.
- 6.70 Due to the move in the focus of the fostering service, the low foster carer numbers, and high staffing ratio's, together with other developments within the Somerset fostering service, it was felt that the TFC service could no longer be sustained.

ARC (Attachment, relationship, Connection) Fostering Team

- 6.71 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.

6.72 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.

6.73 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.

Short Break Care

- 6.74 The service has 10 carers who specialise in providing short periods of respite to children who have disabilities and their families, which represents no change 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. 4 of these foster carers are dual approved as mainstream foster carers
- 6.75 Within the 2019/20 period there were 2 short break carer approvals, 1 of these being dual approved as a mainstream foster carer, with 1 other Short Break carer being assessed/pending approval. 2 short break carers were deregistered, whom were both dual approved.
- 6.76 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.
- 6.77 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.
- 6.78 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).

- 6.79 Our Short Break Care service has been involved with recruitment activities, and we regularly run campaigns to recruit these specialist carers.

Staying Put

- 6.80 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.
- 6.81 In March 2020 we had 45 Young People overall in Staying Put Arrangements (LA and Agency carers). This continues to improve year on year. We have 20 young people who have Staying Put arrangements with Somerset foster carers.

7. Complaints and Allegations

- 7.1 During the year the Fostering Service has received and responded to 5 complaints (3 upheld). 2 of these were from foster carers. 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.

Allegations

- 7.2 The number of foster carers subject to allegations this year was 8. Of these 3 were of physical assault, 3 of sexual risk, and 2 of neglect. 4 were made by children directly and 4 were from other sources.
- 7.3 All were investigated by the Fostering service following strategies with the police, and agreements that they met thresholds with The LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer).
- 7.4 The outcomes of the investigation were that 5 were considered to be unsubstantiated (where there is not enough evidence to determine one way or another whether something happened, or an individual committed an act). 3 were substantiated. 2 of those substantiated were subsequently de-registered as foster carers following representation at panel
- 7.5 Of those that were unsubstantiated, no carers were de-registered, or expressed a wish to be deregistered following the completion of the investigation.
- 7.6 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 of placements not possible to use. This year we have improved the time taken to complete straightforward investigations and have updated our policy in this respect, however the more complex investigations continue to be impacted by delay in awaiting outcomes of police investigations; our ability to identify an independent worker; and on some occasions needing to wait for carers to be ready or available.

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 this financial year Somerset had no cases taken to the Independent Review Mechanism.

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 issues such as Child Protection Investigations.
- Reviews of carers where there are concerns regarding their fostering practice and their suitability.
- Proposed change 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

Somerset Fostering Panel: Annual Report (1st June 2019 to 31st May 2020)

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.

Panel Activity

- 10.1 East and West panels have continued to meet over the year in Taunton, Shepton Mallet and Yeovil, although from March 19th these were conducted virtually owing to the Coronavirus. There have been 26 panels in the last twelve months; none were cancelled and two were additional due to the level of work.

Newly approved carers: 22 new approvals have been made which is an increase from last year.

- 10.2 Connected persons approvals: 25 approvals have been made for kinship carers which is again an increase from last year.

- 10.3 Stepping Stones providers: 3 Stepping Stones providers have been agreed which is up from 1 being approved last year. This is very pleasing as there is still a real need for carers to offer this kind of accommodation for the 16/18 age group. Young people are prepared for independent living in a safe and supportive environment and many more carers in this category are needed. Only 1 Stepping Stones provider has been deregistered following resignation.

- 10.4 Unfortunately, no Short Break Care providers have been approved this year. This type of fostering offers support to children with disabilities and their families. Children may visit weekly for tea, stay weekends or for longer during school holidays. The intention is that a relationship is established over many years between the children and their families with the carer to ensure that there is consistency of support.
- 10.5 Out of approvals and exemptions: 33 of these were presented to panel which were noted. This is a welcome reduction from last year due to the introduction and exploration widening the approval age range where possible and agreed. Many Carers are approved for 0-18 years, where it is assessed, and carers can state a preference but there is now far more flexibility resulting in fewer requests when a child or young person is out of the carer's approval age range. Requests still come when carers are looking after more children than their approval stipulates but this is only ever for a short time unless a change of approval is being sought.
- 10.6 Regulation 25 extension requests: 14 of these have come to panel and all but 2 have been agreed. Social workers from the Kinship Team who are assessing connected persons carers are expected to complete assessments within a 16-week period from the point of temporary approval is given by a manager. However, it is often the case that an additional 8 weeks extension is requested so that information can be collected: eg references, medicals, DBS checks etc. In the case of the 2 which were not agreed, grandparents had decided that they no longer wished to be assessed and the extension was requested to give time for the LA to find foster carers for the children or to make other arrangements. This is not in the spirit of the guidance. Indeed, the extension request process is still somewhat blurred, although discussions are being held about the way forward.
- 10.7 Form C brief reports: 5 of these have been presented outlining the reasons why an assessment is not going to continue. All of these have been agreed by panel.
- 10.8 First annual reviews: Panel considered 16 of these – exactly the same number

as last year. They were largely very positive.

- 10.9 Deregistration's: 30 households were deregistered this year – slightly fewer than the previous 12 months. Many were retirements after long and loyal service, and some were resignations. These are due to a range of reasons: carers may adopt the children they are caring for, the young person stays on once they reach 18 into a Staying Put arrangement and, of course, connected persons carers may be granted an SGO by the court. The troubling resignations are those where the carer has only recently been approved and has found that fostering is not what was expected and not what is wanted. Many hours are spent preparing, assessing and supporting people who then find the challenge is too great.
- 10.10 Changes of approval: 17 changes were made in this period predominantly to widen the age range or increase the numbers of children who can be cared for. Older teenagers and sibling groups continue to be hard to place so changing the approval range for carers is proving to be helpful.
- 10.11 Reviews after investigations: 6 reviews after investigations have been presented to panel all of which included positive recommendations that carers continue fostering. Panel agreed all of them.
- 10.12 Contested deregistrations and referrals to the IRM: there have been no examples of this during this period.
- 10.13 Panel recommendations amended by the Agency Decision Maker: there has been one change made by the decision maker to a panel recommendation this year. This was in the case of an existing carer and a slight amendment was made to her change of approval.
- 10.14 Emergency Carer approval (Covid-19): 5 households have been approved on this scheme since April as the result of a vigorous recruitment campaign for people to help during the pandemic. Managers have worked hard to draw up a new slimmed down and concise assessment process to facilitate the speedy

but safe presentation of applicants to panel. All recommendations so far have been supported for a period of 24 weeks with reviews at 8 and 16 weeks to ensure close monitoring, support and oversight. It is hoped that some of these carers may wish to continue after 24 weeks and become mainstream foster carers for the future. As lockdown eases, however, some may need to return to full time work outside the home or may feel that fostering for any length of time is not for them. It is a very positive initiative in which panel has every confidence.

- 10.15 Comments: All teams have worked hard to recruit, assess and support carers. This continues to be the case during lockdown through Microsoft Teams and phone calls. It is particularly impressive that the Skills to Foster training has continued virtually with great success. It is also worth noting that many social workers have worked many hours to ensure that assessments are completed. Homes have been visited to complete household risk assessments; it has not been possible to do everything virtually.
- 10.16 It is also worth noting that panel members adapted to the use of Teams with ease. It was recommended at first that cameras were not used as they disrupted signal but due to applicants/carers' feedback, individual members now use them when questions are being asked.
- 10.17 Panel membership: Three resignations from independent members have been received over the last twelve months and therefore three appointments made. However, diversity is still an issue for panel: there are no members from ethnic minority backgrounds, only a quarter of panel are men and the majority are women over 60 with a background in education. There is still only one foster carer from another local authority and the care leaver invited to join was only able to sit once. Because of the demands of the role recruitment is very difficult. Two panel members are police officers, one of whom was appointed this year, but she hasn't been able to sit as yet, and the other police officer hasn't sat since November due to the unpredictability of shift patterns at the moment.
- 10.18 More positively panel has been fortunate to have 6 social workers from a variety of teams who sit as the mandatory social worker representative. This is on a

rota basis. Their contributions are invaluable, and their attendance very much appreciated.

- 10.19 Administrators: Panel's main administrator is always of assistance to panel but deserves particular mention as she has worked extremely hard during lockdown and the busy period that has been experienced. She ensured that panel members were able to access the necessary technology to take part in virtual panels and has had to manage additional paperwork and panels. Mention must also be made of the other administrator who supports her. Without them both, panel would not function as smoothly as it does.
- 10.20 Feedback from attendees at panel: The brief questionnaire offered to applicants, carers and social workers for completion after panel continue to be reasonably well used. Not all attendees choose to complete them but those who do are largely positive. Answers are invariably brief but still mention the difficulties of car parking, reception and meeting rooms. All feedback forms are discussed at the start of panel so that any improvements can be made. Social workers are also asked to comment on the chair's management on the day and no negative comments have been received. All forms will be collated for the twelve-month period ending in October to establish whether there are any emerging patterns other than those things mentioned above. Any conclusions may be used for discussion at the training day next January.
- 10.21 Practice Standards and Quality Assurance: Panel has continued to give written feedback to social workers which focuses on both the quality of their written work and their verbal presentations. This is led by the chair and the good quality of both deserves mention. However, it has been noted that the Kinship Team's assessments have not always contained all the expected documentation. As a result, the Recruitment Team Manager and the Kinship Team Manager have recently met to ensure a consistency of approach.
- 10.22 There has been a huge improvement in the use of respectful language based on the research document "Language That Cares". Panel has consistently commented on this in feedback to social workers and the fostering manager

has supported this with written guidance to staff. Terms describing young people and children as “placements”, occasional care rather than “respite” and family time rather than “contact” are now being used widely.

- 10.23 In November 2019 the chair met with the ADM for her appraisal and targets were set. In December all panel members met with one of the panel advisers and the panel chair for their annual appraisal and areas for development were identified. This was also an opportunity for strengths and training needs to be highlighted. It was pleasing that panel members are now using the ThinkPad’s without issue, although password changes do sometimes cause problems. The IT desk has, however, been of assistance.
- 10.24 Panel’s training day in January was useful, although feedback indicated that there were too many updates meaning that panel members were required to listen for long periods rather than being actively involved for much of the day. The first hour was spent listening to a member of staff from the health and safety unit. This had been a particular request from panel as several assessments over the last year have been from families with ponds, streams and rivers in their gardens.
- 10.25 The Kinship Team then gave a presentation about carers’ experience of panel attendance and issues raised by social workers. There were plenty of positives as well as some practice which needed amendment. For example, panel’s view about reg 25 extensions being sought and the Kinship Team assessing social workers remaining in the panel room once prospective carers have left. Past practice has been for the social worker to wait with the carers but this has now changed so that the assessing social worker can hear the discussion. This should assist in their future supervision of the carers.
- 10.26 The fostering manager gave an update about initiatives and developments in the service as well as the improvement plan and this was followed by a short activity run by the panel chair.
- 10.27 Arguably the most helpful parts of the day were the Recruitment Team’s very

active exercises drawn from their Skills to Foster training and the input made by a foster carer. However, it was interesting to hear from the staff development officer that panel members are able to attend any training offered to foster carers and to hear from the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team about their work to ensure that the whole service is more trauma informed. Finally, the fostering manager ran an activity around functions of fostering panels.

- 10.28 In order to learn from other fostering panels and develop practice further, the chair attended the Hampshire fostering panel, held in Winchester, in March. She produced a report for managers, panel advisers and panel members and this was discussed at the quarterly meeting in April. It is worth noting that Somerset practice compared very well with Hampshire's and no major changes will be made as a result of the observation.
- 10.29 The chair would like to thank all panel members, administrators and fostering staff for their commitment to the children and young people who are in the care of the local authority. All work hard to ensure that the safety and welfare of children and young people are at the forefront of their thinking. There is still much to do going forward to be certain that fostering panel is the best it can be.

Judy Watson

Independent Panel Chair

Matthew Randles

Operations Manager

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 this financial year we have reviewed our learning and development programme to improve the service for foster carers through a Steering Group involving carers and fostering staff.
- 11.4 The Steering Group began to meet in November 2017. It has consisted of members of the consultative group, and there are representatives from each area of the Fostering services, SSW's from East and West of the County and the FAST programme. This group, although there have been minor changes overtime in respect of changing representatives, has been successful.
- 11.5 The steering 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 a suggestion 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, Equality & Diversity, Supervising Contact, Safer Care, de-escalation, understanding social networks and Emotion Coaching. However, it is noted that these work books are in the process of being expanded.
 - The booking system – 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 carers can phone and/or e-mail the Learning and Development team with requests to be booked onto training; this option was remained available.

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

- 11.6 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. 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.
- 11.7 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.
- 11.8 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.

Evaluation and feedback:

- 11.9 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.
- 11.10 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.

Progression portfolios

- 11.11 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, with some exceptional ones being submitted.

Difficulties

- 11.12 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.
- 11.13 The booking system still appears to be raising some difficulties for some carers, but it is felt that these are now very few, and often relate to IT issues rather than the system itself.

Additional Support

- 11.14 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. These have included: Fish and Chips on the beach day; a Swim and Pizza evening; Easter Egg hunt fun days; and we provide awards and gifts for carers that have reached various milestones. Events are well attended and has enabled 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.
- 11.15 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.
- 11.16 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.

WeCare2

11.17 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. During this year the following activities have been arranged for children.

- Bowling and Pizza in Yeovil
- Canoeing and Kayaking in Goathurst
- First Aid Fun and food in South Petherton
- Graffiti Workshop in South Petherton

11.18 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.

Out of Hours support Line

11.19 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.

11.20 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

FosterTalk

- 11.21 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, 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.
- 11.22 The Fostering Service regularly receives positive feedback from foster carers about this service.

Foster carer Participation

- 11.23 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. Despite ongoing support from staff, the association has experienced difficulties in establishing consistent committee members and a Chair. Although the association has re-written its constitution and has continued to hold regular meetings and support groups, these have sometimes been sporadic. Fostering social workers continue to offer the association support and are working with SFCA towards greater strength and independence of the association.
- 11.24 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 2019/20 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 in Somerset.

11.25 Furthermore, foster carers have been involved in Task and Finish groups on our improvement journey, 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 received, although improvements have been made. Whilst issues raised are pursued, there is no statistical data produced from these documents. We are currently reviewing our feedback mechanism and feedback sheets and exploring how we can use this valuable information 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 and audit activity would indicate improving practice in this area. 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.

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.

13. Appendices

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