

Bradford Metropolitan District Council.

Fostering Service Annual Report

April 2021 to March 2022

1. Background.

1.1 The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Service provides written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service. This report provides an overview of activity from the last financial year, April 2021 to March 2022, and the plans from the service for the forthcoming year 2022 to 2023.

1.2 The Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Service Statement of Purpose (Appendix A). The Statement of sets out the context under which Bradford Council carries out the functions of the fostering service. The fostering Service is a regulated service and as such subject to inspection by Ofsted under the Care Standards Act 2000. Currently the Fostering Service is inspected by Ofsted as part of Bradford Council Children's Services under the 'Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services' (ILACS) framework.

2. Summary

2.1 This has been another busy and at times challenging year for the fostering service. It has been a period of rapid change in terms of staff and management retention and this has been exacerbated by staff sickness mainly due to the Covid 19 virus.

2.2 The impact of the pandemic and the accompanying social restrictions have continued to present logistical challenges for service delivery but it has also brought out the very best in our foster carers. It is remarkable that members of the public have come forward to enquire about becoming foster carers and many existing fostering families have continued to provide care and open their doors to welcome new children and young people into their homes.

2.3 During the reporting period the service has undertaken an audit against the Fostering National Minimum Standards and has identified areas requiring improvement. As a result, a Service Development Plan is being developed which will ensure that the service is monitored and continuously improved.

2.4 In February 2022 the Fostering Service implemented a monthly file auditing system in order to monitor practice against the Fostering National Minimum Standards.

2.5 Early in 2021 Bradford Fostering Service entered into a 12-month contract with Bright Sparks, an independent company to assist with the recruitment of foster carers by increasing our visibility on social media and therefore increasing the number of enquiries. This contract has recently been extended for a further 6 months.

2.6 Bradford Council's Fostering Service provides foster homes for Bradford children in care. Different sorts of foster families are recruited, trained and supported to provide a range and choice of placement types to meet the differing needs of the children who need them.

- 2.7 In the reporting period 25 new mainstream foster families have been recruited. This includes 18 short term foster families and 7 Short Breaks foster families. In addition, the Family and Friends Assessment Team assessed 98 new family and friend foster carers bringing the total of new foster carers to 123 new foster families for Bradford.
- 2.8 As at the 31st March 2022 there were 16 new mainstream assessments in progress and 4 new applications were anticipated by the service. This work will carry over into 2022/23.
- 2.9 On the 31st March 2022 there were 773 children and young people living with Bradford foster carers. This is an increase of 20 children compared to the same date in 2021.
- 2.10 The 'support offer' to Bradford foster carers is being improved with the return to face to face support groups and the development of closer working relationships with the Bradford Independent Foster Carers Association (BIFCA).
- 2.11 The Service has continued to work closely with The Foster Network to develop the Mockingbird model within Bradford's fostering service. It is planned that 2 constellations will be established in the next reporting period.

3. The role of the Fostering Service

- 3.1 The Fostering Service aims to provide a high quality responsive child-centred service in relation to its core functions and to recruit new foster carers from within our diverse community. We prepare applicants through training to be able to deal with the range of issues that foster carers face when looking after children.
- 3.2 The service recruits and assesses foster care applicants from Bradford's rich and diverse community to provide a range of foster carers, with different skills and experiences to meet the needs of the children who need them. The service undertakes comprehensive assessments and checks to ensure that prospective carers are suitable and able to carry out their role. We supervise, support and develop carer's skills and knowledge in order that they promote and achieve the highest standards of care, safeguarding and outcomes for the children in their care.
- 3.3 The service is responsible for;
- Ensuring the provision of a range and choice of local, high quality foster homes for Bradford's Children.
 - Recruitment, assessment, preparation and training of new applicants wishing to foster.
 - Identifying and matching children and young people depending on the needs of the child and skills and experience of the foster family.
 - Permanence planning
 - Support, supervision and training of foster carers
 - Promoting placement stability by liaising and working in partnership with other interested agencies.
 - Ensuring the service is compliant with the relevant legislation and Fostering National Minimum Standards.

3.4 Types of Foster Care

- Short Term: Time limited foster care from a few days, months or lasting up to 2 years
- Long Term: Planned, matched placements designed to last until a child turns 18 and beyond.
- Family and Friends (Connected Persons): Emergency, Planned and Court approved placements for children and young people within their wider network, including family members or others with whom child has an existing and positive relationship
- Short Breaks: Short Breaks provision for children with disabilities.
- Support Care: Part of a package of support (including day care) where carers provide planned time limited support to maintain children with their current foster placements and to prevent placement breakdown.
- PACE: The Local Authority has duty to provide accommodation to children and young people under the age of 18 who have been arrested and charged in relation to a criminal offence. PACE stands for Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 which placed this duty. PACE transfers take place in order to limit the amount of time children and young people are required to spend in police custody with the young person being transferred to Local Authority accommodation overnight before being presented to court the following morning.

4. Fostering Service Structure

4.1 Bradford's fostering service currently consists of;

- 1 x Mainstream Fostering Assessment Team,
- 1 x Family and Friends Assessment Team,
- 3 x Post Approval Support Teams,
- 1 x Short Breaks Team,
- 1 x Recruitment and Marketing worker and Enquiry Engagement worker,
- Project Support Worker for Mockingbird
- Weekly Fostering Panel and Independent Agency Decision Maker

4.2 Like other areas of Bradford Children's Services, the Fostering Service has over the last 5 years faced a significant increase in demand for services. The number of children in care has increased significantly which in turn has driven demand for foster placements. Since 2017/18 the number of Bradford foster homes has increased from 431 to 566, an increase of 135 households.

4.3 Also like other areas of Bradford Children's Services, the Fostering Service has experienced periods of staffing instability and changes of management. This has been exacerbated by staff sickness, mainly due to covid-19.

4.4 There is currently 1 substantive Service Manager within the fostering service. During the summer of 2021, in recognition of the wide span of control and role stretch, a Fostering Team Manager was seconded to an additional Service Manager post. The responsibility for the day to day operational management of the service is divided between the two Service Managers. One Service Manager manages the pre-approval teams and front door, ie, placement referrals/family finding, foster carer recruitment and

marketing and the mainstream and family and friend assessment Teams. The other is able to focus on the post approval teams, ie foster carer support and supervision and development of the Mockingbird project.

4.5 Additionally, following a period of churn within the senior management of the fostering service a Strategic Lead Manager was appointed to undertake a review of the service and lead a service development and improvement plan. This post holder also provides line management for the two service managers.

4.6 During the reporting period the service has been under pressure. Caseloads have fluctuated considerably as the service has endeavoured to allocate the work. Assessing Social Workers have an agreed caseload of 5 assessments at any one time. Supervising Social Workers would usually be expected to carry a caseload of 20 fostering households. However, the service has struggled throughout the year to allocate all of the work, particularly at times when there have been staff vacancies and sickness. At times Family and Friends Assessing Social Workers have been managing as many as 9 assessments and Supervising Social Workers have held 26 cases. Some foster carers have been supported through the duty system. This situation has improved more recently with the recruitment of permanent staff, the return to work of workers who have been off sick and the use of agency workers to backfill workers on long-term sick leave.

4.7 A review of the staffing needs of the service has been undertaken and proposals have been prepared for consideration at the Work Force Development Group.

4.8 Please see the table below showing the current structure of the fostering service.

Assistant Director - Safeguarding & Review, Commissioning & Provider Services					
Strategic Lead Manager - Fostering					
Service Manager			Service Manager		
Team Manager x1 Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team	Recruitment and Marketing Manager x 1	Family and Friend/SGO Support	Fostering Panel x Weekly	Fostering Support Teams x 3	Short Breaks Team
Recruitment activity	Internal and external comms	Reg 24 Viability Assessments with CSW's	New Applications	Foster Carer Supervision & Support	Recruitment of Short Breaks Carers
Preparation training for potential foster carers (Journey to Foster)	Marketing/ Recruitment activity.	Reg 25 Extensions	Family and Friends Temporary Approval Extensions Reg 25.	Foster Carer Training & Development	Supervision/ support/ development of Short Breaks for children with disabilities
Initial Visits	Maintenance Website	Family and Friend Fostering Assessments	Full Approvals of Family and Friends Foster Carers	Support Groups	
Form F Assessments Approvals	Social Media	Court Reports where required		Foster Carer Annual reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate Link Placements • Annual Reviews • Contribute to training of carers
Presentation to Panel	Retention activity/Events planning	Foster Carer Supervision	Initial Reviews	Fostering Duty	

		and support whilst temporarily approved	3 yearly reviews Reviews following Allegations or Concerns Long term Matching	Kinship Carer Support (post approval) Long term Matching with in house carers Mockingbird	
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4.9 The Mainstream Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team currently consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Enquiry Engagement Officers and 5.7 full-time equivalent (fte) Recruitment and Assessment Workers.

4.10 It is the role of the Enquiry Engagement Officer to respond to all enquiries from members of the public about becoming a foster carer for Bradford. In the first instance he will contact all enquirer by telephone to provide a warm and friendly response and any additional information the enquirer may require. Where possible he will also arrange an initial home visit by an Assessing Social Worker to the enquirers home.

4.11 The Enquiry Engagement Officer also arranges and attends information evenings and day time events to meet people who may be interested in fostering.

4.12 Each Assessing Social Worker has an agreed caseload of 5 ongoing assessments at any one time giving a team capacity of 63 assessments per annum. Not all assessments result in final approval. Sometimes, during assessments, applicants can experience a change in circumstances or may decide that fostering is not for them. At other times the Assessing Social Worker may find that the applicant is not suitable and end the assessment. This being the case, the target of 45 new mainstream fostering households in 2022/23 has been agreed and is achievable.

4.13 The **Family and Friend Assessment and SGO Support Team** Consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Practice Supervisor, 11.8 fte Assessing Social Workers and 2 Special Guardianship Support Workers.

4.14 The Family and Friend Fostering Assessment Team jointly undertakes Regulation 24 viability assessments with children's social work colleagues wherever possible. The team also undertakes all full family and friend fostering assessments (regulation 27) often with short deadlines imposed by the court. Social Work Supervision, training and support is provided by the team to all temporarily approved foster carers. Family and friend foster carers can be located at a distance from Bradford, eg Glasgow, Dorset etc and require monthly supervision.

4.15 Agreed caseloads are 5 ongoing assessments at any one time per Assessing Social Worker. This being the case, the team has capacity to undertake 59 assessments at any one time. Given an average time required to undertake an assessment is 16

weeks, the optimum number of assessments an Assessing Social Worker is able to complete 13.5 assessment per annum (allowing for annual leave and training). This being the case the team has capacity to undertake 159 assessments in the year. During the period 2021-22 the family and friend fostering team began 221 assessments. Of these, 123 were negative and 98 were approved providing 119 beds for Bradford children. At the 31st March 2022 the team were also supporting 37 families who were temporarily approved as family and friend foster carers. The rate of referral continues to grow.

- 4.16 The team also has 2 SGO Support Workers. Once a Special Guardianship Order is made it discharges the Care Order in respect of the child and the child is no longer 'in care, therefore social work involvement is minimal'. Special Guardians acquire Parental Responsibility at the point of the SGO being made. This is shared with the child's parents, however, the Special Guardian has the ability to exercise this responsibility without seeking permissions from the parents.
- 4.17 The role of the SGO worker is to help sustain placement stability at times of need by offering behaviour management advice to SGO carers, arranging therapeutic support where necessary and liaising with other parties involved with the child. At the 31st March 2022 these workers were supporting 50 SGO families.
- 4.18 There are 3 **Post Approval Support and Supervision Teams**. Each team consists of 1 Team Manager and an average of 7.5 fte Supervising Social Workers (SSW's). As at the 31st March 2022 these teams were collectively supervising and supporting 510 approved fostering households with 683 children and young people. Supervising Social Workers offer supervision and support to both mainstream and family and friend foster carers alike.
- 4.19 The Supervising Social Workers main roles and responsibilities are to provide regular supervision and support to foster carers to ensure that children are kept safe and feel wanted, their friendship and family relationships are supported, children and young people are supported in education or employment and their needs are promoted in line with their care plan. The SSW also has responsibility to ensure that the requirements of the Fostering National Minimum Standards are met. It is also the role of the SSW to ensure that foster carers are able to develop their skills and experience through training and development opportunities. SSW's also provide support through support groups.
- 4.20 The **Short Breaks Team** consists of 1 team manager and 3,6 fte SSW's. As at the 31st March 2022 the team were providing supervision and support to 28 fostering households and 57 children. Of these 4 were providing Short Breaks for disabled children,

5. Recruitment and Marketing

- 5.1 To be able to meet the needs of the diverse range of local children that need foster placements, recruiting and retaining our carers has to be one of the main priorities of the fostering service. It is imperative we recruit new local foster carers from the Bradford district in order to provide Bradford homes for Bradford children.
- 5.2 Like most other Local Authorities Bradford faces significant competition from Independent Fostering Agencies due to their constant recruitment marketing activities

and promises of higher levels of payment. 30 such organisations operating in and around our area.

- 5.3 From March 2020 when the country went in to lock down almost all fostering recruitment activity went online. In March 2021 Bradford's in house fostering service entered in to a twelve-month contract with Bright Sparks, an independent digital marketing company to assist with the recruitment of foster carers by raising the service's profile on the internet and increasing our visibility on social media. The contract has the option to extend for a maximum of 1 further year in 2 six month periods and this option has been taken for one six month extension period.
- 5.4 Bright Sparks have worked alongside our Recruitment and Marketing Officer and wider Fostering Recruitment Team to rebrand the service and to update our fostering website. The website is now hosted by Bright Sparks. They have also created adverts and content for our social media pages which link to our website. Visitors to the website are able to download an information pack and our fostering payment rate sheet. Whilst there has been an increase in the number of visitors to the website and the number of people downloading information it is disappointing that this has not translated in to a significant increase in the number of potential foster carers in assessment.
- 5.5 Nationally there has been a downturn in the number of enquiries converting to applications for mainstream fostering. There may many reasons for this including prospective foster carers being unsure about the economic impact of the ending of the furlough scheme in September 2021 and more recently, the war in Ukrainian with the appeal to the public to open their homes to refugees in February 2022. Notably, the number of enquiries have picked up again since May 2022.
- 5.6 The advertising tactics used by Bright Sparks until January 2022 focussed upon the financial rewards of fostering. Adverts were general and featured imagery of younger children. The need within Bradford is to recruit foster families for children aged 8+, sibling groups and children with complex needs. The in-house fostering service has been working with Bright Sparks to refocus the advertising strategy.
- 5.7 The contract with Bright Sparks is due to expire in September 2022 unless it extended for a further six-month period. Bradford Fostering Service has recently appointed a new Team Manager for the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team. This person is an experienced and well regarded Fostering Recruitment Team Manager who was previously employed by Leeds Council. It is the preference of the service not to extend the contract with Bright Sparks Further but to bring this activity back in house. This is contingent on the current budget set aside for the Bright Sparks contract being transferred to the fostering service.
- 5.8 The Fostering Service along with the Recruitment and Marketing Manager are currently developing a new Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy. As well as online activity this will include a broader marketing approach including a return local outdoor advertising (busses, roundabouts etc) and community involvement. For example, presence at the Bradford Dragon Boat Race, Pride etc. The Recruitment and Assessment Team have a target of recruiting 45 new fostering families by March 31st 2023.

5.9 Recruitment Outcomes

- 5.10 During the reporting period 1625 people visited the fostering website and downloaded a copy of the information pack or the foster carer payment rate sheet. In order to do this, they were required to enter their contact information and were made aware that the fostering service would make a follow up call to provide further information. This is completed usually in the next working day.
- 5.11 Of the people who downloaded information from the website 381 people responded to an initial contact from the service. The service will make at least three attempts to call an enquirer by telephone and this is followed up by text and email. If attempts to make contact are unsuccessful the enquirers details are kept on file and attempts are made at a later date to contact the enquirer again. Of the 381 people who responded 320 booked a time convenient to themselves to discuss fostering further.
- 5.12 Of these 118 booked an initial home visit. Initial home visits are undertaken by Assessing Social Workers from the Recruitment and Assessment time. The visits are an opportunity for the prospective foster carers to ask any further questions and for the Social worker to meet them in their home environment.
- 5.13 Of the 118 people who received a home visit 33 submitted an application to foster. 8 of these withdrew during the assessment process. 25 new fostering households were approved following Panel. 18 were approved as mainstream foster carers and can provide 26 fostering beds. 7 were approved as Short Breaks carers and provide 9 new fostering beds.

Outcomes – Enquiry to Approval 2021 -2022	
People who visited the website and downloaded information	1625
Number of initial contacts – initial Enquiry	381
Number of telephone information appointments booked	320
Number of initial home visits completed	118
Total Number of Application Forms Received	33
Total Number of New Foster Carers Approved	25
Conversion rate from initial contact	6.6%

6. Fostering Panel

- 6.1 Under the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 Fostering Services are required to set up and appoint a fostering panel. Under Regulation 25 the fostering panel is required to:
- To make a recommendations as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.

- To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.
- To recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster carer, and whether the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.
- To give advice or make recommendations, on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.
- The fostering panel must also advise, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with Reg. 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitor their effectiveness.

6.2 In addition, the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires that:

- Panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented and the timeliness of assessments and decisions.

6.3 The Bradford Council Fostering Service has fulfilled its Panel functions for many years by the establishment of three fostering Panels, designated A, B and C. However, Panel agendas have become fuller during the last few years and additional panels have been held when necessary. During 2021-22 it became clear that a fourth Panel was required to meet the level of work being undertaken by the Fostering Service. Panel D has been established and now meets monthly. Each Panel meets once a month ie 4 panels each month. 43 Panels were held during the reporting period.

6.4 Panel Membership

6.5 Each Panel has a Chair and Vice-Chair.

6.6 In order for a Panel to be quorate it must have a minimum of 5 members present. This must include;

- The chair or vice chair;
- A social worker with at least 3 years relevant post-qualifying experience;
- 3 other members, of which, in the absence of the independent chair, at least one must be independent of the Fostering Service.

6.7 Panel members are drawn from the 'central list' of 24 members. Panel membership is made up of people who have a variety of personal experiences and perspectives related to children in care. Membership includes people from social work, education and health backgrounds as well as independent members including a County Councillor.

6.8 The role of Panel Advisor is currently shared between three fostering supervision and support team managers. This is not ideal and represents a significant time commitment away from their Team Manager role. Although it is not a statutory requirement to have a

dedicated Panel Advisor most fostering agencies would acknowledge this as a key role to ensure the smooth running of Panel. The role of the Panel Advisor is to;

- Attend Fostering Panel in an advisory capacity.
- Co-ordinate and agree the agenda
- Ensure paperwork has been quality assured
- Read Panel Paperwork before Panel and advise the attending Social Workers of any potential questions or areas requiring clarification.
- Ensure paperwork is sent out in compliance with regulations
- Advising Panel on the regulations, guidance, policy and procedures where required
- Providing updates on matters presented
- Taking feedback from and to panel and the fostering service about practice issues
- Being involved in the recruitment and appointment of panel members
- Arranging and conducting training.

6.9 A proposal for a Panel Advisor post has been included within the staffing review prepared for the Work Force Development Group.

6.10 Panel Activity

6.11 Throughout the year the Panel met 43 times and heard 318 cases.

Panel Activity	2021/2022
Number of New Mainstream Approvals	18
Number of Short Breaks Approvals	7
Number Family and Friend Approvals	98
Number of Regulation 25 Extensions	62
Number of Annual Reviews including Initial reviews	110
Number of Long Term Matches	19
Number of Brief Reports	3
Number of Cases Deferred for additional information	1
Total Cases	318

6.12 Virtual Panels

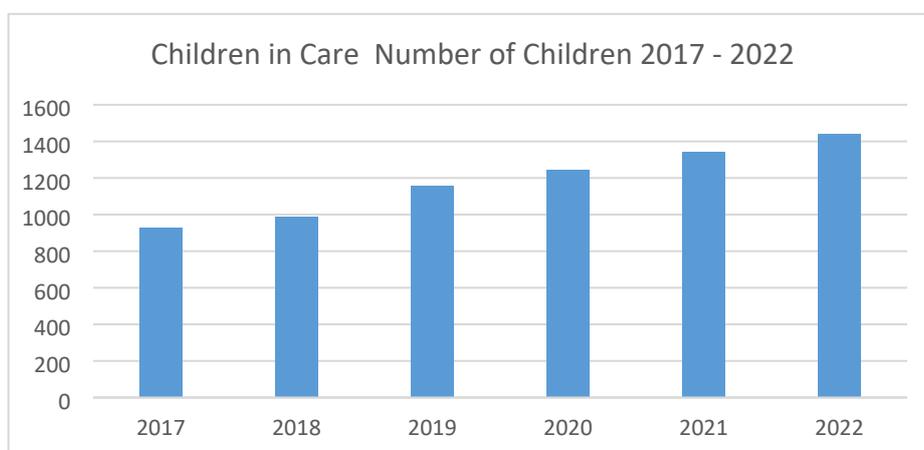
6.13 Since March 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic has meant that throughout the year all Panels have been held virtually, by use of the Zoom. The continuation of virtual Panels has been discussed at each Panel Business Meeting during the year. Panel Chairs and the fostering service is keen to return to face to face meetings. While there have been some advantages to virtual panels, greater attendance by children's social workers being the most striking, it is felt that the experience for applicants and foster carers is not as personal. It can be harder for panel members to pick up nuances and body language via a computer screen.

6.14 While it may be the case that for some attendees being able to remain in their own homes rather than attend at a large office might be less daunting, overall our view is that the negatives outweigh the benefits.

6.15 Plans are being put in place to bring the Panel meetings back together face to face, with some hybrid arrangements.

7. Children in Care

7.1 As at the 31st March 2022 there were 1442 children in the care of Bradford Children's Services. This is an increase of 100 children (7.5%) from 1342 on the 1st April 2021. This has been a continuing trend since 2017. During the 6-year period between 2017 and 2022 the number of children in care has increased by 516 (56%) from 926. This trend appears set continue.



7.2 Of the 1442 children in care on the 31st March 2022 963 (67%) were living with foster carers (including in house, family and friends and Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) foster homes). This percentage has reduced slightly from 69% in March 2021 and is lower than the national average of 70%. The rapid growth in the number of children and young people being cared for by Bradford has significantly increased the demand for foster homes. 53% of all children in care in Bradford are cared for in in-house foster placements.

7.3 Of the 963 children living with foster families on the 31st March 2022 773 (80.5%) were living with Bradford foster carers. Of these, 378 were living within 232 mainstream foster families. This is a utilisation rate of 1.6 foster children per mainstream fostering household. This is good performance.

7.4 Similarly, 395 children were living with 273 Family and Friend foster carers. This is a utilisation rate of 1.4 per Family and Friend Foster Family.

7.5 The number of children in care fluctuates on a daily basis. Overall the service was caring for 20 more children on the 31st March 2022 than on the same date in 2021.

7.6 Under the children act 1989 when the Local Authority is considering the need to provide care for a child it should first consider placing the child with extended family or with friends who are able to keep the child safe. By doing this the child is able to be brought up within the context of their own family/friend network and is able to retain a

sense of identity. Over the year the number of children living with family and friend foster carers has increased by 29 children.

- 7.7 At the 31st March 2022 190 children and young people were living with IFA foster carers. This represents 13% of all children in care. This is up from 11.5% in March 2021.
- 7.8 The remaining 479 children and young people in care who were not living with foster carers at the 31st March 2022 were placed in a mixture of residential, semi-independence, placed with parents or subject to adoption orders.
- 7.9 Over the year the number of children placed within the independent sector has increased. There were 25 more children living with IFA foster Carers and 29 more children living within Children's Homes commissioned through the private sector. These children are likely to have more complex needs than can currently be met within the in-house fostering service.
- 7.10 Many of these children could have their needs met within a foster family if there was sufficient support and training for the foster carers. To this end, the fostering service intends to develop a 'specialist fostering Scheme'. It is planned that the current foster carers payment for skills system is extended to provide a skills level 4 payment set at £479.72 in addition to the age related maintenance allowance.
- 7.11 However, increasing the skills levels payments to foster carers will not in itself improve placement stability and foster carers ability to provide safe, robust and tenacious foster families for those children who desperately need them. Foster carers will need additional training and support and training. The service has previously invested in and implemented a trauma informed practice approach which includes Dyadic Development Practice (DDP - including PACE Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) and relationship based practice as the model of delivery. Although Bradford adopted this systemic practice approach, it is currently not clearly defined or understood. Many staff who have been trained in this approach have left the council. It is the intention of the service to re-establish this model.
- 7.12 Additionally, research evidences the significant benefit of collaboration between partner agencies who provide a range of interlocking services. If support and intervention to foster carers and children is provided in a timely cohesive manner, placement and school stability is greatly improved. It is therefore important to establish a 'Team around the foster carer around the Child' approach. The service will also be working with Bradford Positive Pathways (BPP) in order to access their services to support foster carers.
- 7.13 Adopting this model of practice will provide the opportunity for children and young people to be brought up within a family where they would otherwise be brought up within a children's home. This option is also considerably cheaper for the council. The average cost of an externally purchased residential placement is £4,246.00 per week or £220,792.00 per annum. The cost of providing an in-house level 4 foster placement for a 16-year-old (including the maintenance allowance) would be £670.47 per week or £34,864.44 per year, a potential saving of £185,927.56 per placement per year.

7.14 These proposals have been already presented to Bradford's executive and approved. The specialist fostering scheme will be developed over the coming months.

8. Approved Households

8.1 As at the 31st March 2022 there were 566 approved fostering households registered with Bradford Fostering Service. Of these, 238 were mainstream foster carers providing either short or long-term care, 23 were short breaks foster carers providing shared care for disabled children or other respite care, 268 family and friends foster carers caring for a relative or friend and 37 temporarily approved friends and family foster carers under regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review regulations 2010.

8.2 As at the 31st March 2022 there was a total of 566 fostering families approved by Bradford Fostering Service. This number includes Mainstream Foster Carers, Short Breaks, Family and Friends, Temporarily Approved Family and Friends (Reg 24) and PACE. Overall, this is an increase of 69 households (14%) compared to the same period last year.

8.3 However, there has been a decrease in the number of mainstream fostering households in the same period from 245 to 232. The fostering service has deregistered foster carers who have not actively been fostering for some time.

8.4 The biggest increase in the number of fostering households has been with Family and friend foster carers. As mentioned above (para 7.5), the Local Authority has a duty to first consider whether a child can safely be cared for within their existing family and friend network. Family members and friends will often come forward to be considered as foster carers for the specific children in order to retain them within their known network.

Number of Approved Fostering Households by type.	2020/2021	2021/2022
Mainstream Long Term	245	238
Short Breaks	24	23
Family and Friends (Connected Persons)	196	273
Temporarily Approved Family and Friends Reg 24	32	33
PACE	0	1
Total	497	566

9. Foster Carer Resignations.

9.1 Each year fostering services can expect to lose a number of foster cares. Foster carers leave for a variety of reasons. In the last year a total of 82 foster carers left Bradford's fostering service.

9.2 The vast majority of these (60) were family and friend foster carers. Of these;

- 25 became SGO carers
- 14 resigned because of a change of circumstances
- 7 young people turned 18.
- 6 fostering arrangements disrupted

- 3 resigned following a court decision
- 2 resigned after the child returned home
- 3 resigned

9.3 Over the reporting period 17 mainstream foster carers have resigned. Of these;

- 9 foster carers resigned following a change of personal circumstances
- 4 retired
- 1 retired after a bereavement
- 1 retired when their long-term child turned 18
- 1 adopted the child
- 1 became an SGO carer for their child.

9.4 5 short breaks carers also resigned following a change in personal Circumstances.

10. Foster Carers Annual Reviews

10.1 The foster carer's annual review of approval addresses all relevant aspects of the National Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations 2011. The reviews are initiated by the Fostering Social Worker with a written summary of achievements and significant events within the foster carer's home over the preceding year.

10.2 A Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer convenes and chairs an independent annual review meeting. A report is then either presented to Panel and endorsed by the Fostering Panel Agency Decision Maker or submitted directly to the Agency Decision Maker for non-Panel reviews. All first reviews are required to be presented to the Foster Panel as are Reviews convened following an allegation or standards of care concern against the foster carer. In Bradford every third review is also presented to panel.

10.3 In the reporting period the Fostering Panel considered 110 Foster Carers Reviews, 51 of which were first reviews. Others were sent directly to the Agency Decision maker for their deliberation.

11. Childs Voice.

11.1 The Fostering Service actively seeks to support children and young people to share their views about how they are being cared for and supported by the fostering service and wider directorate.

11.2 Children and young people are invited to comment about the support they are receiving from their foster carers, including support for family time with their birth family and friends and support with education ahead of their statutory child in care reviews.

11.3 Children are consulted with as part of the foster carers annual review.

11.4 The fostering social worker also aims to see children and young people in person when they are undertaking unannounced visits to fostering households. This will usually involve the Fostering Social Worker talking with the child or young person to ensure they are safe and happy within the foster home.

11.5 Children in foster care also have access to a Children's Advocates. This service is provided independently through the National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS). The Advocacy service can help children or young people to explore and express their opinions and be heard.

11.6 A new Participation Worker has recently been appointed by Bradford Children's Services. Early meetings have been held between the two services to establish how we can work in partnership in order to hear the voice of the child and therefore improve fostering services.

12. Foster Carer Support

12.1 Support Groups

12.2 In more usual times the Fostering Service would have provided support groups throughout the Bradford district. At the onset of the pandemic and with the government restrictions regarding social contact these support groups were paused and alternative arrangements were made online using zoom. However, as the restrictions were gradually lifted during the reporting period some face-to-face support groups were added.

12.3 The fostering support groups enable foster carers to meet with their peers and form supportive relationships. This in turn helps foster carers to understand their fostering role and share their experiences. Support groups provide opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills. They also provide foster carers with a safe space where they can discuss issues and challenges relating to their fostering role with other foster carers. Various speakers have been invited in the past to the foster carer support groups to talk about specific topics and offer any information about local activities within the community.

12.4 The following support groups have been offered throughout the reporting period;

- Newly approved foster carers support group – meeting quarterly
- General support group with themed sessions – This group meets monthly alternating between a day time meetings and evening meetings each month. Face-to face meetings were added from September 2021 and the service continue to offer an evening support groups via Zoom for those foster carers who prefer this.
- Men who foster support groups – quarterly, sometimes supported by 1 SSW
- Children who foster – 1 themed session each school holiday (eg family online Halloween quiz / Easter/Spring themed treasure hunt/cooking lesson)
- Short term foster carers group – bi-monthly
- Asian foster carers' group – monthly

12.5 Mockingbird.

12.6 Mockingbird uses an extended family model, in the form of 'constellations' which consist of a 'hub' home and several 'satellite' homes nearby. The scheme, which is supported through the Fostering Network, uses specially recruited and trained hub

home carers offer sleepovers (respite), peer support, regular joint planning and social activities. Because of its structure, Mockingbird helps alleviate the sense of isolation foster carers can feel and offers immediate practical support - similar to that a non-fostering family might receive from friends and relatives. Bradford Fostering Service has on two previous occasions launched Mockingbird constellations. However, these were not fully understood or always supported by the fostering senior managers or wider children's services. As a result, both of these constellations failed.

12.7 The Fostering Service is working closely with The Fostering Network and Bradford Children's Services to ensure that this project is better understood and supported. A new 'constellation' has recently been established and it is planned to establish another in the coming months.

12.8 Bradford Independent Foster Carers Association BIFCA

12.9 The Bradford Independent Foster Carer's Association has been established for a number of years. The association is constituted with a Chair Person, Vice-Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. The fostering service is working alongside the association to form closer working relationships with our foster carers. To this end a new Working Agreement has been drafted for use between Bradford Council Fostering Service and BIFCA.

12.10 The overall aim of the BIFCA is to raise the profile of all Foster Carers and to ensure that they are viewed as professionals by Social Workers and colleagues working with children in the care of Bradford council. BIFCA will;

- Provide strong channels of communication between the Fostering Service and the Association.
- Work in partnership with Corporate Parenting and Fostering Services.
- Seek to improve all aspects of fostering.
- Promote good practice.
- Represent Foster Carers as a group.
- Organise support and social events for Foster Carers
- Provide a number of foster carer ambassadors to assist the fostering service with specific function ie Foster Carer recruitment, training, etc

12.11 Working in this way BIFCA will raise the profile of Bradford foster carers, advance foster carers views and recommendations regarding the Fostering Service and support carers to provide to provide high quality care for the foster children.

12.12 BIFCA has recently set up a website for all Foster Carers to access information regarding various issues and topics and for them to leave their views in relation to any fostering matters. This will ensure that there are robust channels of communication and feedback from foster carers to senior managers.

12.13 Financial Support

12.14 The Fostering National Minimum Standards (28.3) require that the fostering service should annually review its policy regarding allowances and any fee paid to foster carers.

12.15 In line with most other local authority fostering services Bradford Council foster carer payments are made up of two separate elements, the 'maintenance allowance' and a 'professional fee'.

12.16 The maintenance allowance is the amount paid to all foster carers to cover the day-to-day expense of looking after a child in care. The amount paid by fostering agencies for this element of the foster carer's payment package is guided by the DfE who annually publish guidance on what the 'minimum weekly maintenance allowance' should be.

Bradford Council/DfE recommended weekly allowance	Age 0 -4	Age 5 - 10	Age 11 -15	Age 16 -17
	£138	£152	£173	£202

12.17 The second element to make up the foster carer's payment package is the professional fee. This is often referred to as the 'skills payment' and is paid to recognise the foster carers time, skills, training and experience.

12.18 The advantages of such schemes are that foster carers are incentivised to undertake training and develop their experience, which enables the fostering service to match children and young people with differing levels of need with well trained, high quality foster homes. Children and young people with more complex needs are placed with foster carers with the higher skills levels. The emphasis is upon the foster carer's skills and experience rather than on the child, thus avoiding labelling the child.

12.19 In Bradford professional fees are paid in three main 'skills levels'. Unlike the DfE recommended maintenance allowance rates, skills payments are not paid dependent on the age of the child. They are paid across the age bands. The full fee is paid for the first child and an extra 50% is paid for subsequent children. Please see the table below for the current fees paid by Bradford.

Weekly Fostering Carer Fee Rates			
Level	1 Child	2 Children	3 Children
Level 1	£144.16	£216.24	£288.32
Level 2	£204.20	£306.30	£408.40
Level 3	£290.72	£436.08	£581.44
Level 4	£468.47	Complex and Specialist Placements	

12.20 A fourth skill level currently exists and is paid only to a very small number of foster carers, (5). These payments are being paid to Mockingbird Hub carers, a PACE Carer, carers from a previous scheme and to carers where these payments have been negotiated for specific children.

12.21 Although all mainstream foster carers receive a professional fee, these payments have not routinely been made to Bradford's Family and Friend foster carers.

12.22 Additionally, there was no clear process for foster carers to progress through the skills levels.

12.23 As a result, the fostering service produced a paper containing a number of proposals to improve the foster carers payment system and to create a specialist foster care scheme for children and young people who may otherwise be brought up in a children's home (see para 7.8 above).

12.24 The paper contained 5 proposals;

- That Family and Friends should routinely receive the same foster carer payment package as mainstream foster carers.
- That a new Entry level fee of £100.00 per week should be applied to all new foster carers after the implementation date of the policy
- That a new and clear process for foster carers skills progression is accepted and implemented
- The development of a specialist fostering scheme using level 4 payments to remunerate specialist foster carers. Additionally, this proposal contained a further proposal to appoint a Training Officer within the fostering service in order to enhance the skills and knowledge of both foster carers at all skills level and staff.
- That SGO allowances are linked to foster carers payment.

This paper has since been presented to the Executive Committee and the proposals have been agreed. The Fostering Service is currently implementing this policy.

13. Foster Carer Training.

13.1 Under the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011 (NMS20 & 23) the fostering service is required to ensure that a "good quality learning and development programme is available to foster carers and staff". A calendar of training events should be published for foster carers to inform them of training available.

13.2 Fostering National Minimum Standard 20 requires all new foster carers to complete the DfE Training, Support & Development Standards workbook within twelve months of approval (18 months in the case of Family and Friends Foster Carers).

13.3 Foster carers should complete mandatory training courses within the first year of approval, these include;

- First Aid Paediatric Fostering
- GDPR for Foster Carers
- Risk Management and safer caring
- Safeguarding Children
- Recording and Record Keeping
- Allegations against foster carers.
- Equality and Diversity
- Internet Safety

13.4 Foster carers training needs should be considered and a personal development plan created for each foster carer within the foster carers annual review. This should then be constantly monitored by the Supervising Social Worker.

- 13.5 Most of Bradford foster carer training is sourced through an organisation called the Foster Care Training Hub. This organisation provides a range of online training courses. In addition to the range of paid for training modules the organisation also provides foster carers with a number of free to access courses.
- 13.6 The fostering service does not currently have a discrete foster carer training budget. However, Bradford's Executive Committee have recently agreed proposals to appoint a dedicated Training Officer within the fostering service and the setting aside of a training budget in order to invest in the upskilling of our foster carers and staff.
- 13.7 The impact of Covid restrictions and a switch to online training has been cited by carers as a significant factor in them being unable to attend training, this is especially relevant for our older carers and some carers for whom technology is seen as more of a challenge. There are some carers who also state that online training is also more flexible. The balancing of caring for children full time and work commitments is also often cited as reasons for being unable to attend training.
- 13.8 However, the uptake of foster carer training has increased over the last year. Collectively, during the reporting period Bradford foster carers accessed training 995 times from a selection of 77 courses. This is a significant increase over the previous year when training was accessed 428 times over 29 courses.

14. Developments for 2022 to 2023

- 14.1 Earlier in this year (2022) Bradford MDC announced that it will establish Trust to manage Children's Services. The consequence of this for the Fostering Service is that the service will be required to register with Ofsted as an Independent Fostering Agency. This in turn will bring about new working practices and expectations of the Fostering Service in terms of its relationship with Ofsted and working practices including recording, reporting and notifying Ofsted of particular events.
- 14.2 The Fostering Service will no longer be inspected by Ofsted as part of Bradford Children's Services Inspection framework (ILAC). The service will be inspected in its own right under the more rigorous Social Care Common Inspection Framework, (SCCIF):Fostering.
- 14.3 The 'Go Live' date for the Trust is the 1st April 2023. The fostering service is excited by the prospect of this eventuality and has started to plan for it.
- 14.4 The fostering service has begun to develop an ambitious action plan which will help to prioritise work in the following areas:
- 14.5 **Strengthening Business Intelligence and Performance Monitoring Arrangements.**

A range of key performance indicators and business information requirements have been identified in order to more effectively monitor the fostering service. Currently management information and business tracking information are held in a combination of excel spreadsheets and on LCS. The intention is to hold and report as much information as possible through LCS. This will be used to produce a dashboard which will be able to provide quality information at a granular level.

14.6 Ensure the Fostering Service has sufficient staffing to meet current and predicted service demand.

The service will undertake a modelling exercise to understand the staffing needs of the fostering service based on planned targets and caseloads of 18 households per Supervising Social Worker and 5 assessments per Recruitment and Assessment Worker. Work has begun on this area of work and a paper has been produced for consideration by the Workforce Development Group.

14.7 Ensure effective Policies, Procedures and Processes are in place and align with statutory and National Minimum Standards and best practice.

The fostering service will undertake a review of all fostering service policies and procedures to ensure they are fit for purpose and Ofsted ready.

The service has undertaken benchmarking exercise against the National Minimum Standards and this has informed some of this plan. This will be repeated in the coming months. It is good practice for fostering agencies to benchmark themselves in this way at least annually to keep abreast of national and local changes.

This will also include the revision of key documents required by Ofsted under the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards Fostering 2011. These include:

- Statement of Purpose
- Foster Carers Handbook
- Children's Guide
- Foster Cares Training Handbook
- Foster Carer Financial Allowance Guidance
- Foster Carers Register
- Ensure the Fostering Service is Ofsted Ready. An Inspection will be carried out of the fostering service by the senior managers (a mocksted inspection) to ensure that the service is compliant and Ofsted ready.

14.8 Strengthen Foster Carers and Staff opportunities for learning and development.

The fostering service will review and revise the training offer made available to both foster carers and staff to ensure all carers and staff have the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children they care for. Bradford's Executive Committee have agreed proposals contained within the foster carers payments paper that was presented in June 2022. It has been agreed that the Fostering Service should appoint a Training Manager for the service and work with finance to identify funding for a training budget.

14.9 14.4 Ensure the Quality of Practice in Bradford's Fostering Service Meets the Fostering Regulations and Standards.

The Fostering Service will develop and implement practice standards for workers within the service. It will also ensure that regular reflective supervision is taking place across the service and that this is recorded by managers.

14.10 The fostering service has strengthened their foster carer file audit proforma which complies to Bradford Policies and Procedures. These template is being used by the fostering service to undertake monthly file audits and will be further embedded in practice.

14.11 Strengthen fostering duty service arrangements

The fostering service alongside the commissioning team work hard to identify foster placements for children who need them. The fostering service will review the process of placement finding to ensure in-house placement opportunities are maximised.

The fostering team will also consider setting up an out of hours fostering duty system to support foster carers and children in need of advice or support during evenings and weekends. This service is currently provided through the general Bradford Council's Emergency Duty Team (EDT) service. A dedicated out of hours duty system would strengthen the support provided to foster carers by having fostering social workers they are likely to know and who have specialist fostering knowledge. This could lead to increased placement stability.

14.12 Strengthen fostering recruitment.

The Fostering Service is working to develop a coherent Fostering Recruitment Strategy designed to meet the needs of the sufficiency plan. The plan will take in to account placement demand and demography. This work is already underway. The fostering service is keen to maximise recruitment and retention opportunities and to ensure that Bradford fostering service is the provider of choice for foster carers. In order to achieve this the fostering Service will need to identify a meaningful recruit budget. The current budget for Marketing, recruitment and foster carer retention is not sufficient.

14.13 Strengthen Working relationships with the Bradford Independent Foster Carers Association (BIFCA).

The idea of the Foster Carers Association is to have an organisation run by foster carers for foster carers that will work in partnership with the Bradford Council Fostering Service and other senior managers to improve all aspects of the fostering service. By working together in this way we can ensure strong channels of communication, raise issues that affect foster carers, share ideas to improve the service, promote good practice, improve the outcomes for the children we care for and organise events for children and young people to have fun. The Association is funded by Bradford Council. The fostering service will to work with the BIFCA committee and other foster carers to strengthen the Association. A draft working agreement has already been produced and will be finalised shortly.

14.14 Implement the Mockingbird Programme

The fostering Service intends to have 2 Mockingbird fostering communities in established by January 2023. The first of these was established on the 2nd July 2022.

