

Rotherham Fostering Service

Annual Report

2021/2022

1. Introduction

This report is an annual report to brief on the business and activity within Rotherham Borough Council's Fostering Service in 2021/2022.

The report provides performance and activity data on the service, reports on the activity and functioning of the Fostering Panel, and details service developments that have occurred in the year and those that are planned moving into 2022/23.

2. The Fostering Service

Rotherham Borough Council Fostering Service operates within the Fostering National Minimum Standards, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (the "2011 Regulations"), and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, which form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 for the conduct of fostering services.

Prior to September 2013, local authority fostering services were inspected separately by Ofsted. Since then, inspection of local authority fostering services work has been incorporated into the Single Inspection Framework which takes into account the role of fostering in the wider children's services department.

The fostering service in Rotherham comprises of three teams; 'Recruitment Team'; which focuses on the recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers; and two 'Supervisory Teams' which focus on the support and supervision of mainstream foster carers as well as our carers offering more specialist care including carers providing short break care for disabled children, Private Fostering and Connected Carers, and the Mockingbird Project.

In line with the regulations, the service has a Fostering Panel chaired by a skilled, independent and experienced social work professional. The Panel considers and makes recommendations about the suitability of foster carer applicants and existing foster carers' ongoing terms of approval and are advised about foster carers leaving the agency. The service also operates a separate Long-Term Matching Panel which

makes recommendations about the matching of children requiring long term placements. The service also employs a panel advisor who is a suitably experienced social worker with a strong knowledge and background in fostering and who also supports with service development across the whole service.

The Head of Service for Looked After Children, Rebecca Wall, performs the role of Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for the fostering service. The Agency Decision Maker considers and makes decisions (qualifying determinations) on Panel recommendations. The Agency Decision Maker also has responsibility to agree the continued suitability to foster following a foster carer's annual fostering review.

For a period of this year Rebecca Wall stepped up as Acting Assistant Director role within RMBC and then stepped back down to her role as Head of Service for Looked After Children (and therefore the ADM) at the end of the financial year. Further staffing changes will be shared later on in this report.

The service has continued their contract with Brightsparks, a creative communications and business development agency, on the foster carer recruitment programme. Through targeted a specific digital marketing strategy Brightsparks aim to significantly increase the number of enquiries made to the service, thereby increasing the number of suitable prospective foster carers coming through to assessment stage and ultimately being recommended at Panel and approved by the ADM. The continued work of Brightsparks will be discussed in more detail later in this report.

3. Panel Functions

Regulation 23(1) of the 2011 Regulations states that "*the fostering service must maintain a list of persons who are considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering Panel ("the central list"), including one or more social workers who have at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience.*"

Regulation 23(4) states that *“...the fostering service must constitute one or more fostering Panels, as necessary, to perform the functions of a fostering Panel under these Regulations, and must appoint Panel members including:*

- (i) A person to chair the Panel who, in the case of any appointment made after 1st October 2011, must be independent of the fostering service provider, and;*
- (ii) One or two persons who may act as chair if the person appointed to chair the Panel is absent or that office is vacant (“the vice chairs”) from the persons on the central list.*

Rotherham Fostering Panel has the following primary functions (under Regulation 25(1) of the Fostering Regulations 2011).

- To consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent (including “connected persons” under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010).
- Where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given.
- It is to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster carer, and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate - (i) on the first review and (ii) on the occasion of any other review, if requested to do so by the fostering service (e.g. following allegations or complaints against foster carers).

The designated Long-Term Matching Panel makes recommendations about matches for children who have a plan for long-term fostering with suitable foster carers.

4. Panel Process and Administration

Panel Process

The Panel Advisor receives the draft reports for Panel three weeks prior to panel and then gives written feedback on the quality of the reports, where appropriate, as well

as practice advice. The final paperwork submitted to panel is always shared at least seven days before panel meets to comply with National Minimum Standards but in general panel members paperwork two weeks in advance of panel.

When Panel minutes are completed, they go firstly to the panel members and social workers in attendance at panel for any factual amendments and then to the Panel Advisor and the Panel Chair for final amendments or additions. This process usually means that final minutes are available for the Agency Decision Maker in a timely manner by the end of the week following Monday's panel. The ADM then has 7 working days from receipt of the minutes to make a decision.

Following receipt of the ADM decision, the panel administration team will send these onto allocated social workers who will inform the foster carer/ applicant of the decision within 2 working days in line with NMS. Panel Admin will send the decision in writing within 5 working days, again in line with NMS.

Panel Administration

Panel administration has seen a change in 2021/22 with one member of staff moving on to a new role and therefore a new member of staff joining the team of three who facilitate the work of fostering panel in addition the Long Term Matching Panel and Adoption Panel. Panel administration is efficient, with reports circulated in good time. Panel minutes are detailed, and draft minutes are usually available on the second working day following panel. Panels became paperless in at the start of lockdown in March 2019 and have remained so which has resulted in a significant cost and time saving for business support. Information is shared securely using SharePoint which panel members are given access to via their own extranet email address. Anything which is emailed, such a panel preparation sheets, is anonymised in order to prevent any confidentiality breaches.

Virtual Panel

Panels have remained virtual since the lockdown in 2019 and this is next due to be reviewed in Autumn 2022. Feedback from panel members, fostering team staff and business support is that they would prefer panels to remain virtual as this saves a huge amount of time and expense (car parking, fuel etc.). The majority of foster

carers have told us that they also prefer virtual panel as they find the medium to be less intimidating and also find it easier to attend panel around child care and school runs. Some foster carers have commented that they feel the virtual panel does not provide the same sense of celebration of their good practice as the in-person panel did, as, although panel members are just as encouraging and complimentary of foster carers as they were when panel was in-person, there does not feel the same sense of occasion when carers are attending virtually.

The virtual panel process has remained the same with panel members being required to submit written preparation prior to panel detailing the strengths and vulnerabilities they have identified and proposing questions to be asked. These are then reviewed by the Chair and a final list of strengths, vulnerabilities and questions is put forward to the Panel Advisor who agrees to the questions or discusses any concerns with the Chair, before the questions are then sent to the allocated workers to be shared in advance of panel with foster carers and applicants. This has been working very well and has made the panel meeting much more efficient as no time is spent deciding what the questions should be. Foster carers and applicants report that they appreciate receiving the questions in advance, however there have been some concerns that this results in more rehearsed answers which panel members feel gives less of a sense of the foster carer/applicant. This is therefore planned to be reviewed and consideration will be given to not providing the questions in advance now that everyone is used to communicating via a video medium.

5. Panel Composition

The Panel maintained a comfortable number of panel members on a 'Central List'. Each panel member who served for a year had an annual appraisal within the year. The panel membership included members with a range of professional backgrounds and interests including elected members, social workers, foster carers, and members with LAC nursing backgrounds. Throughout the year 2021/22 some panel members left their role and new members were recruited; members that left this role during the year are indicated below with an asterix. The table below provides the details of the 'Central List'.

Name of Panel Member	Type of Member
Maggie Kirwin	Independent Chair
Jenny Hosker	Vice Chair/Social Work Member (Children with Disabilities Team Manager)*
Claire Brennan	Social Work Member (Advanced Practitioner - Locality Team)*
Andrew Bosmans	Independent Member
Paula Bielby	Independent Member (Foster Carer for IFA)*
Ninda Randhawa	Independent Member (Magistrate – Youth Justice Courts)
Sandra Griffin	Independent Member (Foster Carer for neighbouring Local Authority)
Lynda Briggs	Named Nurse for Looked After Children
Robert Bird	Elected Member
Laura McMenamin	Social Work Member (Learning and Development Team – Practice Consultant)
Ellen Holliday	Social Work Member (Therapeutic Team)*
Sarah-Jane Madden	Independent Member (Foster Carer for IFA and previous deputy head-teacher)*
Lauren Bruce	Social Work Member (Advanced Practitioner – Locality Team)*
Steven Hawksworth	Independent Member (Social Worker and Care Experienced)
Alice Kearse	Social Work Member (Therapeutic Team)
David Busby	Independent Member (Retired LAC Nurse)
Jordan Haslam	Independent Member (Care Experienced)

Joanne Kelly	Independent Member (PAUSE Project Team Manager)
Anne Lindsey	Social Work Member (Fostering Team)

As can be seen above, four panel members stepped down in 2021/22, this was due to moving onto new roles/retirement or due to changes in availability for panel following a move to part time hours. Sadly one panel member, Sarah-Jane Madden, unexpectedly passed away in this period. Alice Kearse remains on hold as a panel member as she is currently on maternity leave.

Two new independent members were recruited in the period; Joanne Kelly and Jordan Haslam. Joanne manages the Pause Project and therefore provides excellent insight for Panel into the perspective of birth mothers in particular. Jordan is care experienced and also has a large amount of relevant professional experience. Anne Lindsey was also recruited as a social work member from the fostering team to ensure the number of social work members on the list is sufficient to ensure quorate panels.

As Jenny Hosker stepped down from Panel due to her retirement, this does leave a vacancy for a Vice Panel Chair and this will need to be recruited to in 2022/23.

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The following training has been made available for Panel Members in 2021/22:

- Panel Members training day – training on Shared Lives and Supported Lodgings, Foster Carer Disruptions, Preparation for Panel and Question Formulation, Caring for Harder to Place children, Autism/ADHD and Attachment Disorder.
- Various relevant articles and research papers also sent to Panel Members over the year.

Panel Advisor Abi Hall went on maternity leave in April 2021 and her post was covered by Samantha Jones until she returned to work in May 2022 and therefore for

the period covered by this report, Samantha was managing panel business and the central list.

6. Panel Chair's Report – Maggie Kirwin

The panel has continued to operate efficiently and effectively during the past year. There appears to have been ongoing improvement in the way members scrutinise reports and contribute to the strengths, vulnerabilities and questions which they submit to the panel chair. As has been mentioned elsewhere, we now believe the time is right to ask attendees questions on an impromptu basis; without them receiving the questions ahead of their attendance at panel. This will be closer to the experiences of those who attended panel before the Covid 19 pandemic when all applicants attended in person and did not have sight of any questions in advance. We believe this will enable panel to more effectively see the 'real' responses of attendees rather than a more rehearsed answer.

The virtual panel does require more input from the Chair and the Panel Advisor as all the panel members preparation work must be collated ahead of a virtual panel rather than 'in the room' during the panel day. This extra workload is more than offset by the increased efficiency of the panel which now benefits from a more condensed panel timetable and the ability for presenting social workers to dial in to the panel from anywhere via the internet rather than having to attend Riverside House.

The quality of reports received by panel has improved over the last year as the work of the Team Managers supporting newly recruited staff has paid dividends. Alongside this the work of the Panel advisor has been crucial both in the quality assurance function before panel and ensuring assessing social workers are clear about the information panel requires to enable it to make a recommendation.

Business support continues to provide outstanding support to panel members and the Chair. All documents are uploaded for panel members in a timely manner and the team all keep panel updated if there are any problems relating to this. The minutes are circulated promptly and efficiently.

Working relationships continue to be very positive between the Panel Chair, panel members and the Department. There is clear understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities with professional respect evident. This is supported by the Panel advisor who liaises extremely well to ensure any issues or concerns are dealt with promptly. This in turn influences and underpins the panel training agenda to ensure engaging and relevant training is provided to panel members.

7. Long Term Matching Panel Business 2021/2022

Panel membership this year can be seen below:

Name of Panel Member	Type of Member
Sajel Hira	Panel Chair – Fostering Team Manager
Debbie Willis	Panel Chair – Fostering Team Manager
Kelly Oxer	Panel Chair – Fostering Team Manager (covering Sajel Hira's maternity leave)
Anne Lindsay	Social Work Member – Fostering Team
Sandra Griffin	Independent Member (Foster Carer for neighbouring Local Authority)
Lynda Briggs	Named Nurse for Looked After Children

2021/22 saw 11 LTM Panels take place with a total of 27 long term match cases heard, 22 matches with IFA carers and 5 with in house carers, and 3 Supported Lodgings assessments heard. 1 panel was cancelled due to no items being booked on.

8. Fostering Panel Business - 2021/22

There were 20 Fostering Panels convened in 2021/22 and 2 cancelled due to insufficient panel business. Within these panels 141 agenda items discussed, an average of 7 items per Panel.

For comparison, there were 24 Fostering Panels convened in 2020/21, with 163 agenda items discussed, an average of 7 items per Panel. This demonstrates that the amount of business was similar across the two years with a slight decrease in agenda items which has been reflected in 4 less panels in the year.

Panel business was split as follows in 2021/22:

Skills to Foster Assessments: 9 = **6%**

Brief Reports: 0 = **0%**

Family and Friends Assessments: 5 = **4%**

First Reviews: 14 = **10%**

Three Yearly Reviews: 27 = **19%**

Change of Category: 16 = **11%**

Review following investigation/allegation/unplanned ending: 5 = **4%**

Regulation 25 Extensions: 31 = **22%**

Resignations: 34 = **24%**

De-registrations: 0 = **0%**

Panel capacity has generally been sufficient, and this is partly due to the virtual nature of panel meaning that each item on panel takes less time and also due to the continuation of foster carer reviews only coming to panel every three years rather than every two. Forecasting for the next financial year with regards to assessments of new foster carers suggests that there will be an increase in the number of skills to foster assessments being presented at Panel. In general, it is agreed that no more than two skills to foster assessments of full family and friends assessments should be presented on the same Panel due to the volume of reading required of panel members for these items. Should capacity become an issue in relation to the number of assessments coming through, consideration will be given to holding additional panels.

The Panel are highly motivated to check and challenge by appropriately maintaining the role of 'critical friend' to the department with equal emphasis on both aspects. Where appropriate the Panel will offer flexibility without compromising the fostering

regulations and standards. In 2019/20 it was noted that the service would benefit from an increased role in the quality assurance of the reports that come to panel and whilst work began on a process this, it was put on hold when the covid lockdown was implemented and virtual panel was established. This is something that will now need to be picked up again in the next financial year.

The continued use of a dedicated Panel Advisor gives greater scrutiny and challenge to the service which ensures continued improvement in the quality of reports presented to Panel. The Panel Advisor also produces a Service Feedback Report after every Panel which is shared with the ADM, Service Manager and Team Managers and comments on good practice in addition to any concerns or themes. Quarterly Practice Monitoring Meetings continued to be facilitated by the Panel Advisor, chaired by the Head of Service (ADM) and included the Panel Chair, Panel Advisor and Senior Management. The meetings focused on performance and practice issues with clear actions agreed. This ensures that the service is not operating in a silo and provides an environment for accountable and collaborative practice development. Themes from these meetings and reports are fed into both panel member and fostering service staff training.

Obtaining placement reports from children's social workers for fostering reviews continues to be a problem at times. The report has been moved onto LCS and a task is now triggered into CSWs worktrays to complete the report in advance of the review. This has made the report more visible for CSWs however there continues to be a challenge in getting these reports completed at times. This lack of the child's voice in fostering reviews then follows through into panel and limits the evidence upon which panel can make their recommendation, making the process less holistic. In the next financial year it would be beneficial to look at the data from LCS on how many of these reports were completed and this may provide further insight into how to increase the number of reports returned.

9. Fostering Families – Placements

The Fostering Service is an integral section of Children and Young People's Services, providing fostering opportunities to children in care through a range of fostering placements, which include:

- *Day care*: for foster carers who need to attend meetings or training events.
- *Second Home Care*: placements that offer support to primary foster carers.
- *Task Centred Placements*: which are placements for children entering care.
- *Long term permanence*: placements for children and young people who cannot return to birth family and where adoption is not the plan.
- *Family and friends foster care*: (Connected Carers) enabling children and young people who are unable to live with their parents to be cared for by extended family members, friends or other people who are connected with them.
- *Step Down from Residential Care*: a Rotherham Borough initiative to accommodate Rotherham's most vulnerable children, typically teenagers who are receiving residential care but require a foster placement. Step Down from Residential carers receive a Skills Level 4 allowance per child and high levels of support and therapeutic intervention in managing and sustaining placements and in developing meaningful relationships to enable children in their care to achieve better outcomes. As Step Down from Residential carers, they will receive a higher level of supervision and remuneration rate.
- *Aiming High for Disabled Children Families Together Scheme*: provides short break care for children with disabilities. The aim of this fostering provision is to provide respite for children with a disability to give a break to a family in order to enable the child to live at home.
- *Mockingbird Family Based Model of Fostering*: is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model which provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

10. Enquiries, Approvals, Deregistration and Resignations

10.1 Enquiries

Since the onset of our contract with the Bright Sparks Agency we collect data regarding new enquiries in two ways. We are able to log the number of people that download rate sheets, information packs, sign up to a newsletter or engage in live chats. In the last two years the figures are shown below.

2020 – 2021	Enquiries	347
2021 – 2022	Enquiries	1217

The reason that 2021 – 2022 shows such a large increase is that this is the first full year that we benefitted from the contract with Bright Sparks. We were able then to log all the interactions with our website and also provide much more information through electronic means which meets the needs of the people we are trying to reach.

Within our new processes the first step on the Prospective Foster Carers journey (PFC) is to register interest and then they have the option to book a information call or visit with a fostering adviser. This meeting is to go through the information booklet, share the benefits of fostering with Rotherham and if suitable look to book a further initial assessment visit (now called Follow up Visit)

The number of Information Call/ Visits and Follow Up visits are as follows.

2020 – 2021	Information Visits	226
2021 – 2022	Information Visits	257
2020 – 2021	Follow Up Visits	93
2021 – 2022	Follow up Visits	92

Of all enquiries received in 2021 - 2022, 35.79% progressed to a follow up visit. The figure the year before was almost identical and for the two years back to 2018 the conversion rate was around 28%.

The primary reason for closures at the enquiry stage (ie, people not progressing to an application) was that the PFC self-withdrew (32.2%). However, it is not always known why they have done this. Many will have made an informed decision discussing it with the Fostering Advisers, others simply stop engaging with us. Medical reasons (17%) were the second highest reason for withdrawal, followed by complex family situations (14%) that needed resolving and fourthly people choosing to go to another agency (9.7%). It's worth noting that many of the self – withdrawals are also likely to be the PFC choosing another agency but not telling us about this and can also be people returning to the process as a later date.

10.2 Approvals

In 2020 – 2021 we approved 21 Fostering Households. Due to the change in our model of recording data it is difficult to give a conversion rather that covers the whole of the year. However, from Sept 2020 to March 2021 the conversion rate was approximately 8.5%

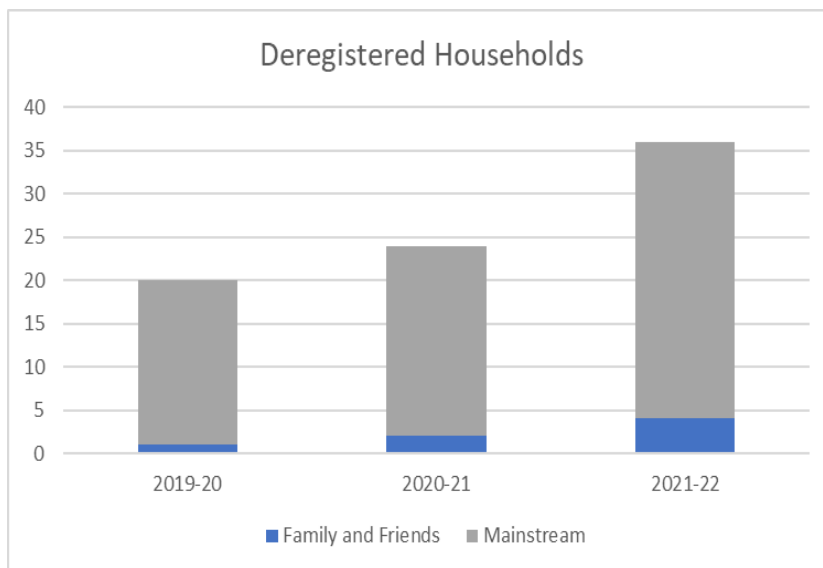
By comparison, in 2021 – 2022 we approved 10 households which gave us a conversion rate of 3.89%. This is a significant drop in our conversion rate and through our strategic and operational meetings which include senior social care management and commissioning managers it is acknowledged that the impact of Covid 19 has had a detrimental affect on our recruitment of carers. Initially when the pandemic hit the UK interest in fostering increased but as the pandemic went on PFC's have been less likely to take financial risks through a new career path and the online marketing costs have increased by between 89 and 108%, meaning we are unable to fund as wide-reaching marketing campaigns across as many platforms. The most recent government statistical release commented that 2020-21 was an outlier in that there were unusually high figures in several areas including enquiries, applications and approvals and this was also reflected in our own data and should be acknowledged when comparing this 2021-22 data to the previous reporting year.

The number of family and friends carers approved as full foster carers has remained stable with 3 being approved in 2021-22 as compared to 2 in 2020-21 and 3 in 2019-20.

Nationally it is noted that there have been reducing numbers of applications for mainstream fostering over the last 5 years and that in both Local Authority and IFAs a large number of enquiries are not translating into applications.

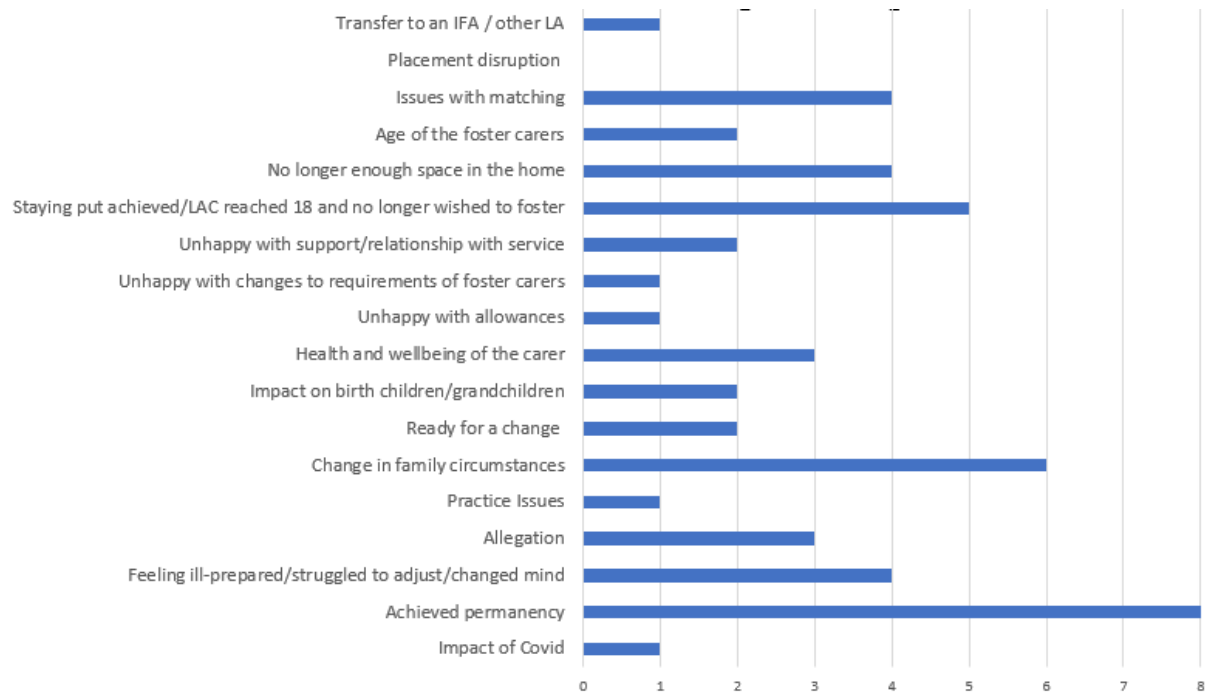
10.3 De-registrations

We had a 33% increase in households deregistering during 2021-22 compared to the previous year. A total of 36 households, including 4 family and friends carer deregistered. 28 households were carer resignations and 1 was deregistered by Fostering Panel/ADM and 3 were carer resignations but were cases where we would likely have deregistered had the carer not resigned.

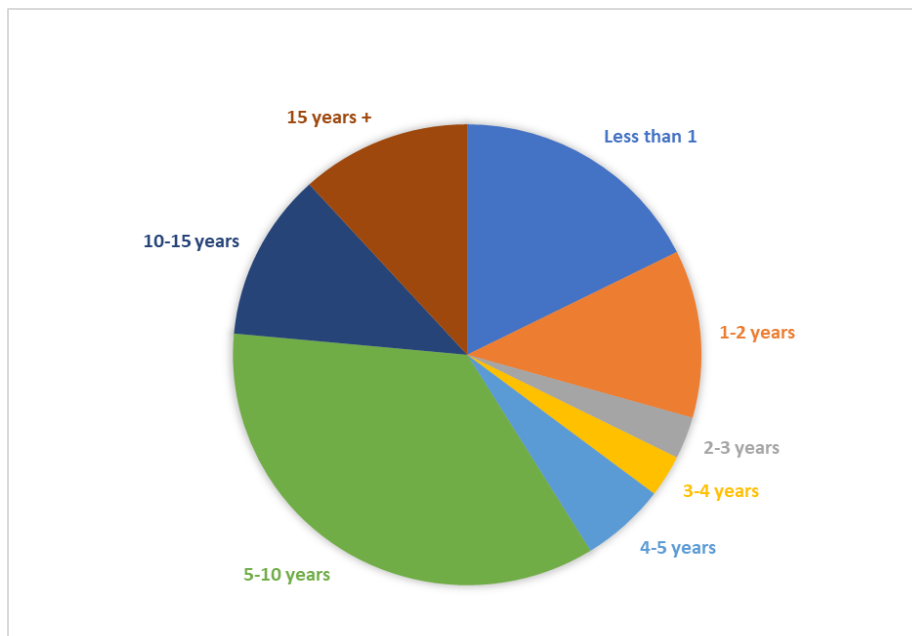


	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Family and Friends	1	2	4
Mainstream	19	22	32

Within the 36 deregistration's in 2021-2022 the following themes were identified as reasons for leaving fostering.

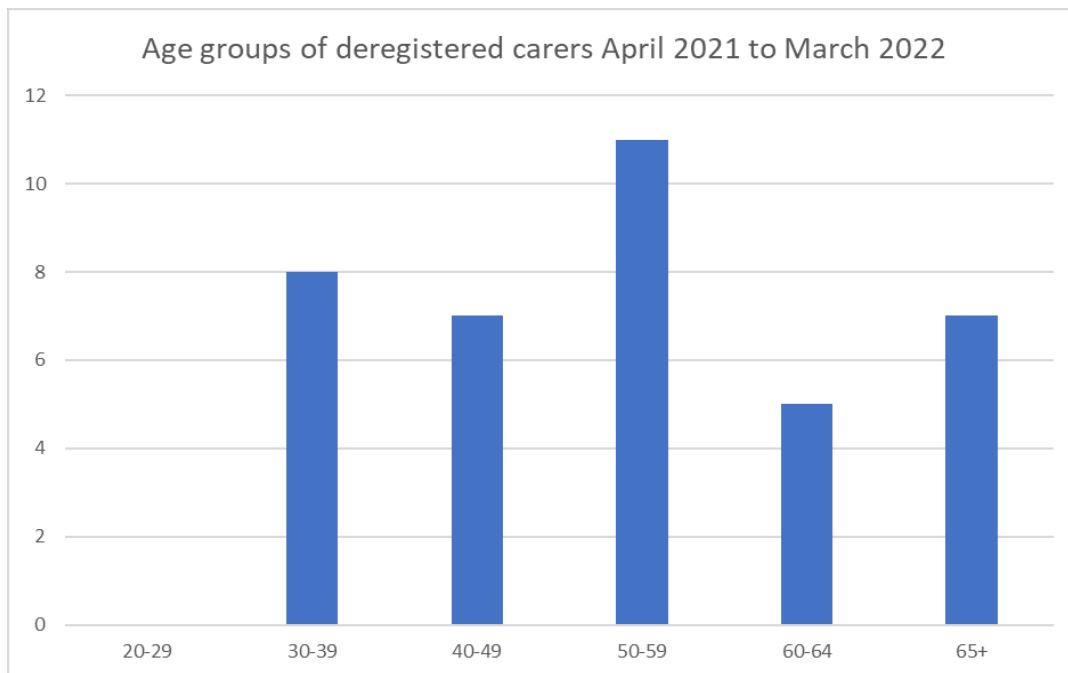


The following chart shows deregistrations broken down by years as a foster carer.



29% of carers who resigned had fostered for less than 2 years. However, the national average for 20-21 (most recent data) was 30%. We also rate similarly to national average for number of carers fostering for over 10 years.

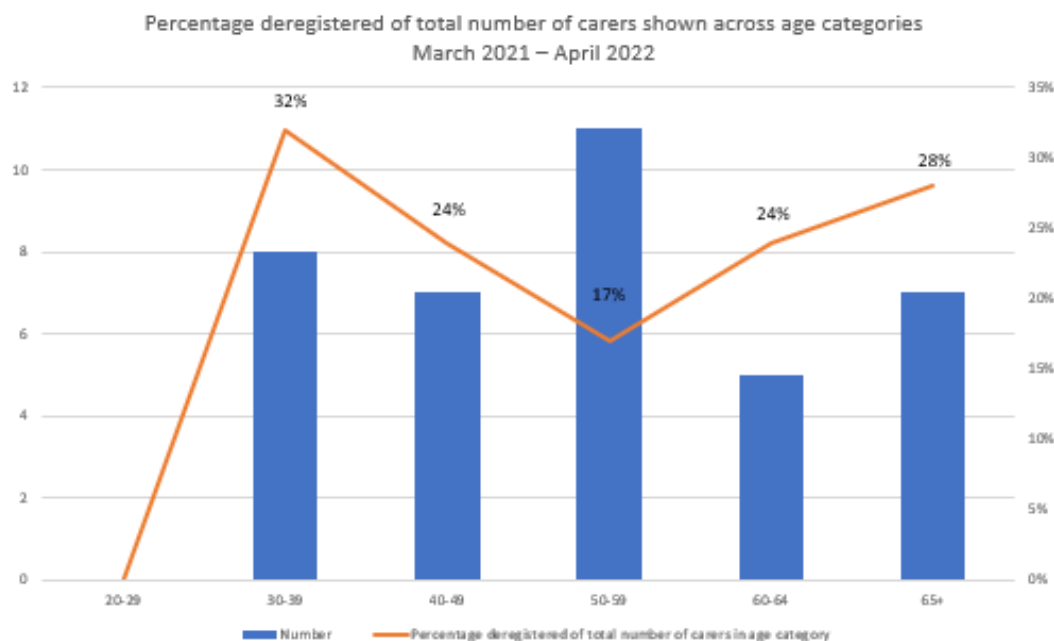
In terms of age at time of deregistration, our data is also similar to national data.



Nationally the largest group of all approved foster carers were in their 50s and almost 60% of those deregistered were over 50 (DofE 21-22). This is also reflected in our resignation data with 68% of carers resigning being over 50 (main carer age at point of deregistration).

As can be seen on the graph below, although the highest number of deregistrations were in the 50-59 age bracket, this is actually the lowest percentage of total number of carers because we have more carers in this age bracket than any other.

The highest losses are in our 30-39 age range which may link to new carers or reg 24 carers who obtain permanence.



Most recent national data (DfE 21-22) reflects the same trend where those carers in their 50s had the highest proportion of deregistrations (32%) and those in their 20s had the lowest (5%). However, when looking at the proportion of carers who deregistered within each age bracket, those in their 50s had the lowest proportion of deregistrations (13%) and those in their 20s the highest (27%). Of those deregistrations of carers in their 20s, 80% were family and friends carers in the LA sector.

We can conclude that the majority of our deregistration's for 2021-2022 were unavoidable and as a result of natural change in circumstances – for the most part this was due to carer's long term commitment to children either through legal permanency or having cared for a child until adulthood and now choosing to retire (38%). Where other issues resulted in a resignation or deregistration, the service had generally done what they could to support the carers.

In a few cases there was evidence to suggest that carers were either not fully prepared for the reality of fostering or that they may not have been adequately protected or supported in the first few months of their fostering journey. Having said this, the pressures on the service to find placements does mean that finding a good match is often not possible, furthermore there is only so much that can be done to

prepare a carer for the reality of fostering and much of learning has to be done 'on the job'.

Our data shows that we are generally in line with national averages in respect of the age that people leave fostering and the length of time that they foster for. We need to continue to carefully assess and then support our new carers to reduce resignations within the first two years post approval. We then need to ensure we think creatively about how we can retain those people who have fostered for several years and are often entering a new time in their lives (retirement/grandchildren etc.).

10.4 Profile Raising

The Fostering Service continues to remain visible in the local community though due to national lock downs this has been more challenging than usual. We have attended Virtual Pride event, the Rotherham Show, made our selves visible in the community through leaflet drops into people's letter boxes, leaflet in with the council tax bill for all residents, a presence in local libraries and shopping centres as well as radio adverts, press releases and marketing in local publications. Please see section 17.4 for more detailed information regarding our internal marketing strategy.

10.5 Retention

The Fostering Service acknowledges that retention of foster carers is equally as important as recruitment of foster carers. The conclusions drawn from our work in understanding the deregistrations that have happened in this year will inform our work in retaining our foster carers. Work is in place to improve the financial offer to our carers and ensuring that we remain competitive with IFAs in terms of support available.

A lot of council investment has gone into the recruitment of new foster carers in the commissioning of Bright Sparks and it is acknowledged that this does now need to follow through into a retention strategy. This will ensure the gains made in recruitment are followed through in order to support foster carers to have a long and fulfilling fostering career. A key target for the next year will therefore be to more fully

understand what our carers need and to consider what work Bright Sparks can do to support the service with a retention strategy going forward.

In addition to this it is acknowledged that the relationship that foster carers have with their supervising social worker is often one of the key factors in retention and therefore a stable fostering staff team is also key to the retention of our carers.

Mockingbird programme

Aims to prevent placement breakdown and increase stability of the fostering households. Rotherham fostering team's first Mockingbird hub in Conisborough was launched on the 14th May 2018. An additional hub was launched in Thurcroft on the 8th November 2018, followed by a third hub in Maltby on 3rd July 2021. The Mockingbird model has resulted in a decrease in disrupted placements, increased stability for children in fostering placements, and improved retention of foster carers. The Conisborough Hub host a weekly term time youth club which all RMBC foster carers can attend even if they are not within the Mockingbird hubs. The Youth club is well attended and is a popular addition to our core offer. The fostering team are looking to launch another hub in 2022, swiftly followed by a fifth hub early 2023.

Foster Carer Association

A Foster Care Association is a formal body set up by and run by foster carers who represent and advocate for the wider fostering community. The key roles of the association is to offer mutual support, promote working in partnership, develop awareness, knowledge and skills and share this across the service. It also aims to create opportunities for fostering families to meet together, and act as a bridge between the fostering community wider service to promote best practice for children in care and their fostering families. The foster carer association was relaunched by Rotherham Fostering Service in the latter part of 2018 and is now fully established. Rotherham Foster carers association (RFCA) applied for charitable status and has since achieved this.

The aim of the foster carer association is to provide support and advocacy to all foster carers. Within the foster carer association it is planned that it will deliver

mentoring/buddying to newly approved carers and training will be sourced to support this. In addition, the Foster Carer Association will coordinate social activities which will help embody a sense of community and social cohesion for our fostering community. The foster carer association will also act as a representative voice of the carers and advocate on their behalf to the Senior Management Team.

11. Children Placed in Foster Care - Information 2021- 2022

At 31st March 2022, there were 125 registered fostering households with 121 children in placement. There were an additional 37 children placed with 25 family and friends carers going through regulation 24 assessments. This takes the total to 158 in house foster placements, 28.1% of the total number of children in care.

Many of the temporary approved family and friends foster carers will go on to secure alternative permanency arrangements for the children that they are caring for, such as Special Guardianship Orders or Child Arrangement Orders, whilst the children in the early permanent placement are likely to be adopted meaning that these children will be no longer looked after children. This is in-line with Rotherham's "Right Child – Right Care" agenda, and the principal of securing permanency outside of care. The impact of this on fostering means that there are fewer foster carers as temporary approved foster carers do not progress to permanent kinship foster carers, and established carers leave the agency by committing to SGO and permanency for the child/children they look after. RMBC fostering recognises that this is the best and right outcome.

One of the significant issues that Rotherham faces is the high number of children and young people that have been placed in Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements. As of March 31st 2022 there were 245 children in IFA placements which equates to 43.6% of the children in care.

Of those 245 children in IFA placements, 181 lived (73.9%) within a 20 mile radius of their home postcode, only 44 children (17.9%) lived within borough. This is a concern as it is well understood that the needs of children and young people can only be met effectively if they live in an environment that provides a high quality of care and support, generally within a family home setting and in a geographical

location that is familiar. Wherever possible, children and young people should be placed within their own community which enables them to continue to have contact with the people and community of the most importance to them, thus promoting identity and strong sense of self, fundamental to resilience in later life. In addition, placing children in the RMBC area ensures a better oversight and control over education provision and other support services such as health and Children's Adolescent Mental Health service, (CAMHS).

Children and Young People's Service has recognised that it will not meet its sufficiency of placement provision for looked after children without attracting additional carers to foster for Rotherham and ensuring existing foster carers are retained and developed. As a result of this, Rotherham Borough Council has continued to significantly invest in the support and allowances offered to foster carers to attract and retain carers.

Rotherham also recognises the benefits of adopting a 'one market' approach by utilising commissioned (IFA) placements who live local to Rotherham Borough when considering matching and placing Rotherham children with Rotherham families. Significant work has been undertaken across the commissioning team and fostering services to secure local IFA provision when making matches in line with the 'Right Child – Right Care' agenda.

12. Placement Stability

Placement stability continues to be a factor in offering an effective Fostering Service and is crucial to ensuring that the Council delivers good outcomes to each looked after child. Stability is measured by 2 indicators, firstly children who experience 3 placement moves within 12 months and secondly children looked after for 2.5 years who have been in the same placement for 2 years.

The percentage of those who have had 3 or more placements in the 12 month period of April 2021 to March 2022 has very slightly increased to 9.3%. The figures from previous reporting years can be seen in the table below for comparison.

Reporting Year	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20
3 or more placements during the year	9.3%	8.9%	11.1

We are performing in line with the latest published (2021-22) national average of 9% (the lower the figure the better).

At the end of the 2021/22 year, 70.2% of placements had been stable for at least 2 years. Data from the previous two reporting years demonstrates a positive upwards trend in placement stability as can be seen in the table below.

Reporting Year	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20
Percentage of placements stable for at least two years	70.2%	69.2%	62.1%

This performance is impacted by the move to support long term foster placements to permanence i.e. Special Guardianship Orders. This is a positive outcome for children but effects performance negatively.

13. Unplanned Endings & Disruptions

In 2021/22 there were 7 disruption meetings held following the unplanned ending of the placements of 11 Looked After Children.

Key themes included:

- Difficulty in obtaining respite when needed
- Increasing challenging/ risky behaviour beyond what was manageable for the carers
- Emergency placement when new into care so information not known / Not enough information provided in initial referral pre placement – changes in

CSW also impacting on information available and case management in general.

- Pressure of school being far from placement in terms of transport, time and social impact on child and local authority not supporting a school move
- Impact of covid 19 pandemic and resulting affect on access to support from other carers as well as additional pressures placed on carers
- Impact on birth children/grandchildren
- Impact of allegations

14. Staffing in the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service has one Service Manager overseeing the service. There are two Supervisory Team Managers, managing 12 supervising Social Workers and one Training Co-Ordinator. One of the Team Managers is currently on maternity leave and her post has been covered. There is one Recruitment Team Manager overseeing a Marketing and Recruitment Officer, two Fostering Advisors, one Advanced Practitioner and three Assessing Social Workers. One of the Assessing Social Workers is currently on maternity leave and her post remains uncovered. There is one Fostering Panel Advisor also managed by the Service Manager. The Fostering Panel Advisor has been on maternity leave since April 2021 and is due to return to her post in May 2022. During this period her post has been covered. There is one Fostering Support Worker who is currently taking maternity leave. Her post remains uncovered and she will be returning to work in November 2022. After a period of instability, the staff team has now been stable for some time which has benefitted foster carers in that they have not had changes in supervisory workers, which in turn benefits the children in their care.

In 2017/18 RMBC introduced the Mockingbird family based model of fostering and the first constellation was launched on the 14th May 2018. On the 8th November 2018 a second constellation was launched and in this reporting year, on the 3rd July 2021 a third constellation was launched where there was the introduction of new hub carers and satellite families. This resulted in another supervising social worker from within the Fostering Service stepping into the role of Mockingbird Liaison Worker.

There are now three supervising social workers, in the role of Mockingbird Liaison Worker overseeing the three well established constellations.

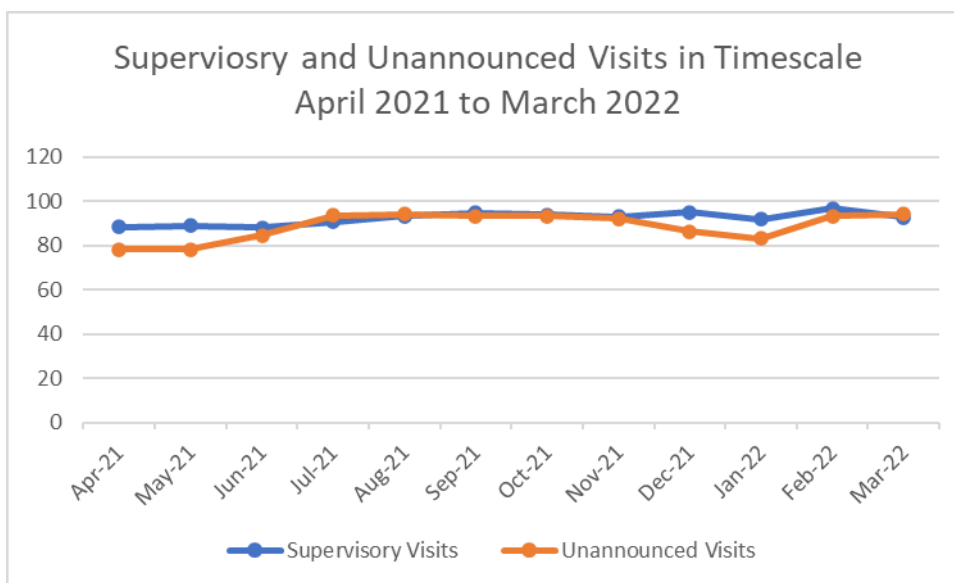
There are plans to continue to expand the Mockingbird Family Model to include two additional constellations. This will require the appointment of two Mockingbird Hub families. Each constellation will comprise of up to ten satellite families, including a maximum of 18 looked after children. It is hoped this will be achieved within the first quarter of 2023.

15. Fostering Supervision and Support

Foster care is a demanding task involving significant responsibilities. Support to foster carers begins at the point they make contact to the service, which includes telephone support, training and assessment from the recruiting team.

From the point of approval, foster carers all have a dedicated supervising social worker. Best practice includes formal handover from recruitment worker to supervising social worker with the foster carer. The recruiting social worker will be consulted around matching, and in some circumstances will undertake joint visits with the supervising social worker to support the first placement where it is appropriate to do so. One of the key performance indicators for the Fostering Service is to provide family based placements for the children, and supervising social workers review with foster carers any of their placements that are “on hold” to manage these breaks and support the carers in taking new placements.

Foster Carers require a level of support and supervision commensurate with the tasks they perform on behalf of the Local Authority. Foster Carers are visited at a minimum every six weeks, with newly approved foster carers visited / supported more frequently at the start of their fostering journey. Both supervisory visits and unannounced visits are monitored and reviewed in RMBC performance clinics and both are evidencing an upward trend from the previous reporting year.



Throughout this review period over 90% of supervisory visits were noted to be completed within timescale. However, approximately 63% of unannounced visits were undertaken in timescale. This is reflective of the lockdown period during the Covid Pandemic. This is monitored through staff supervision and monthly performance meetings.

The supervising social worker continues to support and guide the foster carer on their journey through fostering, by providing guidance, support and opportunities to develop skills and knowledge as foster carer. All foster carers within the fostering service are allocated a supervising social worker prior to attending panel for approval.

16. Activities and Events

The Fostering Service host an annual diary of events for fostering families and this is foster carer led in consultation with the department. 2021/22 was impacted by the Covid Pandemic which led to some activities and events being held virtually. In 2021/22, this included:

- Fostering family Christmas celebration
- Halloween Party
- Easter Party

- Parties in the park run throughout the summer vacation
- Pride of Rotherham – achievement celebration for children in care October 2021
- Son's and Daughter's month – all birth children received a Thank you letter, certificate and keepsake
- Foster carer Christmas hampers/selection boxes for the children
- Foster carers conference
- Fostering Fortnight celebration event
- Quarterly foster carer forums involving carers, team managers, service manager, and head of service.
- Odd sock day in support of anti-bullying week

These events offer an opportunity for foster carers to network, normalise a looked after child's experience by enabling them to spend time with other children in care, provide informal support to foster carers, and be involved in the fostering, children's social care and wider RMBC developments.

17. Support Groups

There are three formal support groups hosted across Rotherham and facilitated by supervising social workers:-

- Dinnington (evening)
- Rockingham (afternoon)
- Listerdale for carers with children aged 0 – 4 years (morning)

The aim of the three support groups is to provide a greater opportunity for foster carers to participate and gain support.

The new carer support group and family and friends support group which was set up in 2020 ended in 2021 due to low attendance at these groups impacted by the Covid Pandemic these groups subsequently ceased.

Peer support: foster carers are routinely buddied up with other carers, who provide coaching and peer support to other foster carers. Whilst outside of this reporting

year, the plan is to further formalise these arrangements by offering peer mentoring training to carers and staff. The Foster Care in England review by Department for Education (2018) emphasised the importance of Peer Support. Recommendation 10 *“All Fostering Services should consider introducing structured peer support for carers”*

Sons and Daughters groups: is run monthly facilitated by the service. The group is open to birth children aged 8 – 16 years. Each meeting incorporates an activity and consultation element to listen to the views of birth children involved in fostering.

Foster Care Association: This committee is now well established. It consists of foster carer members with the support of an identified supervising social worker who acts as a link between the Foster Carer Association and the Fostering Service.

18. Consultations

Foster carers have been consulted in multiple ways throughout the year. 2021-22 saw the introduction of our Working Together Group which is a virtual meeting held quarterly which provides the opportunity for a small group of foster carers to meet with a Team Manager and the Service Manager and to raise any issues or concerns they may have. Actions for the service are then taken from this meeting.

In addition the foster carers forum also continued virtually this year on a quarterly basis. This is primarily an opportunity for staff to come together with the foster carers and share any service updates, provide an opportunity for learning together and can be a place to discuss changes. It is hoped that at some point in the next financial year, some of these forums may be able to return to face to face. Due to COVID-19 it was not possible to run a foster carer conference this year however we hope to reinstate this in the future when it is safe and practical to do so.

Support groups have continued, as mentioned earlier in this report, and during these groups any issues raised by foster carers are taken back to managers by the social workers facilitating the group.

The Rotherham Foster Carers Association is another channel in which feedback can be given to the service and lines of communication can be kept open between carers and staff in order to resolve any issues and support carers in the fostering task. The RFCA will advocate for carers who do not feel confident in sharing their views and this is supportive for those carers who want to give feedback and want to be consulted with but find it difficult to do this personally.

Fostering Panel provides another opportunity for consultation in that carers can share with Panel compliments or criticisms around the fostering service and other professional involvements they have and panel can provide advice to the service on these where appropriate. This is then overseen by the ADM who can follow up on any action required. In the relation to the panel process itself, carers are sent a feedback form following attendance at panel which they are asked to complete and return to provide feedback on the panel process. Although only a small percentage of these are completed, those that are do provide valuable insight into how carers experience panel and how practice can be improved where necessary.

19. Complaints and Compliments

In this financial year there was one official complaint made regarding a decision not to return a child to the care of a couple following a period of carers ill health. This was resolved at stage 1.

There were two official compliments made regarding the fostering service. One in relation to a reg 24 assessing worker and one in relation to an assessing worker from the recruitment team.

20. Training

20.1 Our Training Model

In Rotherham's fostering service, training is viewed as an essential part of the fostering journey. We believe that a growth mindset is crucial for everyone, both staff and carers, as this perspective helps us recognise that there is always more to learn and to be eager to be the best that we can be for the children in our care. We employ a training and development co-ordinator who sits within the fostering team so

understands the unique needs of foster carers and is able to obtain training accordingly. Fostering is an ever changing and complex landscape where we hold in balance the dynamic of the needs of the specific children in a foster carer's home with the needs of the foster carer themselves. This means that a 'one size fits all' approach to training and development would not be good enough. Therefore, we offer a wide range of training courses which enable foster carers to not just meet the National Minimum Standards, but to grow into their potential with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills.

20.2 Training and the Foster Carer's Journey

Training and development begins for our carers at the very start of their fostering journey. We offer prospective carers access to not only our Skills to Foster training course, but also to other courses that the assessing social worker feels would be beneficial during the assessment process. Often this will be our therapeutic parenting courses which we access via the Rotherham Therapeutic Team. This is as we recognise that therapeutic parenting is often new to prospective foster carers, but we feel is an essential skill to begin to develop in readiness for caring for a looked after child.

Our foster carer payment for skills model is heavily linked to training and development with carers being required to complete specific courses as part of their evidence to be able to move to the next level. This supports our growth and development ethos and provides a clear pathway for foster carers to progress. Therapeutic parenting courses are intentionally a significant part of this model as we recognise that all looked after children need trauma informed, therapeutic care and so want to support and enable our carers to provide this. New foster carers enter in a level one but can enter at a higher level if they can evidence that their knowledge and skills are sufficient. This ensures that our approach to development is dynamic rather than prescriptive and that we meet carers where they are on their journey already.

Our supervising social workers know their foster carers well and use supervision sessions as a reflective space to nurture carers' development and reflect on their experiences. This then feeds directly into the personal development plan that every foster carer has, resulting in a bespoke package of training and development

opportunities curated by the supervising social worker in partnership with the foster carer. Although training is a requirement for foster carers, we want it to be a supportive and positive experience, where carers feel in control of their own learning and enabled to reflect on what their learning needs might be. It is vitally important that carers do not feel 'done to' but rather, that we are working together to meet their needs and, therefore, the needs of the children in their care.

Training and development is also considered as a part of the fostering review process giving the FIRO the opportunity to make suggestions about training that may be beneficial or is required. It is also considered within the panel process where PDPs are presented as part of the panel pack for prospective foster carers and when reviews are presented to panel every three years. Panel are given access to the training offer and so can encourage carers to take up certain training where they notice an area for development.

20.3 Training in the 2021-22 period and changes made

Our foster carers have embraced the new online way of accessing learning and development brought about as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. Whilst some courses, such as first aid, have always remained face to face, the majority of what are traditionally considered classroom-based courses have been run virtually over MS Teams. As a service we have continued to work closely with our colleagues in health and education and with our in-house therapeutic team to ensure our training programme reflects the needs of our foster carers and the children and young people in their care.

In the period 1/04/21 to 31/03/22, 1114 learning and development activities have been undertaken by foster carers and prospective carers, in comparison with 780 in the same period pre-pandemic 2019/2020 when the majority of courses were face to face. We are beginning to move back to more face-to-face training but lessons learnt from the uptake of virtual training have meant we will move forward with a mix of face-to-face and virtual training in order to meet all carers learning needs.

We have strengthened the provision of our e-learning package, investing in access to a service where considerably more topics for training are available and the quality of this learning is also superior to previous e-learning services we have used. This

has allowed us to create more bespoke development plans for carers based on task related needs, recognising that each individual carer will have their own areas for development according to their background and skills and specific children in their care. As the e-learning, unlike our directed training courses, is accessible at any point in the year, it also gives us the opportunity to quickly provide high quality information to a carer who may suddenly find themselves in need of training on a specific topic. Another advantage has been our ability to use e-learning to cater to carers who may struggle to attend many courses during usual working hours due to other commitments. For our more established carers who have an extensive training record, the e-learning has provided a fresh, new way to continue their professional development with topics that they may not have covered for some time or that may even be new to them. Our foster carers have told us that they have valued the option to access their learning in this manner and the increased uptake of training opportunities overall supports this.

In addition to the introduction of the improved e-learning offer, we have also introduced several new directed learning courses. New courses are added in every new training programme to ensure the service keeps up with changes in both fostering and in society more generally. In the 2021/22 programme these included:

- Impact of Sibling Separation
- Gambling and Gaming Awareness
- Pause Project and Family Time
- Loss and Grief
- Men in Fostering
- Trauma Informed Practice

Our foster carers told us that they wanted access to more twilight training courses to fit around their daytime commitments and so, in the most recent training programme, the frequency and variety of twilight sessions was also increased. These sessions have been well attended and, in addition to the e-learning offer, provide a highly flexible training programme which can fit into the busy lives of our carers.

Our in-house therapeutic team offer a variety of therapeutic training courses which our carers can access. This includes both in depth therapeutic courses and shorter

introductory courses to ensure that there is something suited to all levels and needs.

For example:

- Introduction to Attachment – one day course
- Bonding through play – one day course
- Foundations for Attachment – 6 week course
- Non-Violent Resistance – 10 week course

Supervising social workers will work with their carers to assess what level of therapeutic training and support they may need according to their skills, experience and the children in their care. Our carers can also access therapeutic consultations from the therapeutic team where the carer, supervising social worker and child's social worker will be provided with advice and support by a worker from the therapeutic team. The supervising social worker will then continue to support the carer with these suggestions through reflective supervision sessions. This close partnership working with the therapeutic team supports our aim to embed therapeutic practice throughout our fostering service.

In the period 01/04/21 – 31/03/22 the following learning and development activities were accessed:

Total number of training instances undertaken in period	1114
Number of courses in period	63
Number of individual carers attended training in period	256

Highlights and most popular courses included:

<i>Course Name</i>	<i>Number of attendees</i>
First Aid	70
CCE – County Lines	53
Pause Project and Family Time	47
Safer Care	47

Recording in Foster care	35
Gaming and Gambling Awareness	29
Attachment	27
Managing Challenging Behaviour	25
LADO	23
Education	22
Life Story Work	21
Equality and Diversity	20
Black Lives Matter	20
Sibling Separation	20
Through the Kids Eyes	20
CWDC Training, Support & Development Standards for Foster Care	18

These figures demonstrate that there is a good balance between practical fostering practice matters such as first aid and recording, and matters related to supporting the emotional and behavioural development of children.

Our foster carer forum continues to be well attended, with a significant increase in attendance now that the forum is virtual. Carers have told us that they find it easier to fit in a virtual forum to their day alongside school drop offs etc and, therefore, we have taken the decision to keep the forum virtual to allow more carers to continue to access. As well as the forum giving carers updates on developments in the fostering and wider service, it gives us the opportunity to share good practice nominations for our carers, as well as to listen to presentations from guest speakers. These have included the Virtual School, DIVERT, FAB Team and foster panel members. These bitesize learning opportunities have been very positively received by foster carers and provide a chance to learn about something that would not be appropriate for a full or half-day of training.

21. Fostering Recruitment Activity and Outcomes

21.1 Bright Sparks Contract Update

In September 2020 RMBC commissioned work with Bright Sparks who are a creative communications and business development agency who have recently completed a significant piece of work exploring regional sufficiency for LAC. They bring a wealth of knowledge and experience in both market management for C&YP service and digital design expertise. The primary goal of the project has been to create an inbound marketing funnel designed to move prospective carers from initial awareness raising, engagement stage, through to the lead prospective carer stage and then into the fostering service assessment and approval process.

Under the name 'FosteringRotherham' a dedicated website was launched to attract prospective foster carers (PFCs). This has been a significant change that means all our advertising and engagement with PFC's had at it's a heart a highly informed understanding of marketing theory that now underpins our approach. This is a level of knowledge that was not available to the service before we commissioned Bright Sparks Agency.

Through our joint work with Bright Sparks a responsive and detailed approach to engaging PFCs has been developed and required wide ranging changes to the way new foster carers are recruited. The recruitment team has embraced these changes and been open to the changes needed and a strong relationship has built up with our partners at Bright Sparks.

Whilst there were high levels of success in 2020 -2021 in terms of increased recruitment the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic severely affected recruitment of new foster carers in 2021 – 2022. With Bright Sparks providing a database to gather and analyse trends in the market place, tracking behaviour of our target audience and through a thorough granular levels of data collection we have been able to adjust and respond quickly to changes in the market. There was initially a national upsurge in recruitment of foster carers in the first year of the pandemic when the national lock down changed people's lifestyles and they considered other employment opportunities. As the second national lock down took affect late in 2021 the

landscape had changed. Online media buying costs increased exponentially, sometimes as much as 100% and the outcomes Bright Sparks had predicted for the amount of money they would spend on advertising was severely cut. Additionally we were unable to hold any community events or have a presence with the RMBC area to offset a reduction in online marketing.

Within the 2021 – 2022 financial year a re-tender process was conducted. Bright Sparks had a 6 month extension to their contract that was due to end in September 2021. By the end of March 2022 they had been offered the contract going forward and were ready to roll out changes to the programme from April 2022.

21.2 Digital Content

This is probably the area of biggest change for Fostering Rotherham as we have a carefully managed programme of PPC advertising across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google, Tiktok and other social media platforms. We are able to target exactly the demographic we want to reach and Bright Sparks and the Recruitment Team work very closely to ensure we are marketing in the right places to increase our sufficiency. We meet weekly and monthly with Bright Sparks to inform their actions and they report back to us at every level of the organisation about every part of their activity. With a bespoke website PFC's can book all their calls and visits electronically and also complete an online application form. There is also a dedicated phone line for PFC's to use. The application form has also been revised this year to improve the customer experience whilst still meeting Fostering Regulations.

One of the biggest strengths has been our ability to track all PFC's and ensure we re contact at the times they request and keep in touch with them through regular newsletters in between personal re contacts.

21.3 Virtual Content

During lock down in 2020 the recruitment team worked closely with foster carers and bright sparks to produce an on line virtual drop in. This was a professionally produced video that is shown as a webinar with workers available to answer all questions that PFC's may have. This has been used since January 2021 as a means to share care stories and information about the process with PFC's. Prior to this drop ins were face to face but poorly attended not leading to any enquiries. The new

Virtual Drop in easily signposts people to book enquiry calls and was effective in leading people further along the recruitment journey. In 2021-2022, 43 people attended Virtual Drop ins with 18 people booking information calls as a result.

21.4 Internal Marketing

This remains a pivotal part of our marketing strategy. Despite the obstacles from the pandemic internal marketing remained a high priority for the service. Work undertaken included radio adverts, print advertising, sourcing digital / electronic marketing within the community (billboards, I van, Library screens), leaflet drops in community venues, mail drop (using Royal Mail) to targeted parts of RMBC, promotion of Word of Mouth reward scheme for foster carers and attendance at events like Rotherham Show and Pride Events. Additionally, a visual presence in the community is achieved through frequent stalls at supermarkets, shopping centres and popular coffee shops (when lock down allowed). Press releases and work with other corporate partners has been ongoing through the year as well.

Both internally and through work with Bright Sparks we are engaging our approved carers into our recruitment. We gain support from foster carers at our skills to foster training, through buddying during assessment and beyond, through gathering care stories some of which are supported with a talking head style video, others being anonymised and available on our website.

Creating a link between foster carers and the recruitment of new foster carers is pivotal in helping to enthuse and motivate PFC's but also to help support them once they are approved giving them a sense of belonging to a community. It also utilises are best resources – real foster carers who can share their experiences.

21.5 Assessments

Assessments were completed through a mix of virtual video sessions and home visits which were risk assessed. We worked hard to complete our assessments within 4 months though this can become slightly longer due to the themes that can arise during an assessment. We have overhauled our statutory checks to ensure we

are getting the best, most up to date and relevant information to protect our foster children.

21. The Fostering Service Recruitment Target Key Areas

Our overriding aim is to provide high quality foster placements to Rotherham children, reduce our reliance on independent fostering agencies and bring down our costs. Whilst marketing campaigns looked initially to swell the numbers within our pool of carers for all children more focus on advertising for carers of teenagers has taken place later in the year.

Key areas for recruitment include the need for foster carers to offer placements to teenagers, children and young people who have multiple placement moves and sibling groups. Our marketing materials reflect the need for these carers, for example using photos of older children with carers, creative content that myth busts and shows the positives of working with this age group.

We have had considerable success in engaging with and recruiting younger foster carers over this year.

22. Key Challenges, Developments, Targets and Actions for the Fostering Service

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is a challenging task, and the Rotherham Fostering Service recognises that importance of this. Over the year lots of work has been undertaken to review the fostering service with proposals to make some changes and improve the Rotherham Fostering offer.

In the next year our key aims will be as follows:

- Increase Mockingbird constellations with a plan to add and fourth and fifth.

- Develop in house 'step down' foster carers.
- Continue to increase the diversity of our foster carers to meet the diverse population of Rotherham LAC.
- Review of foster carer payments to maximise retention and increase placement provision across in-house fostering services whilst encouraging new foster carers into the service.
- Undertake an in-depth analysis of IFA transfers, looking at historical enquiries and what learning we can take from the ones which didn't progress.
- Continue to embed our Readiness to Foster model to recruit new foster carers whilst working alongside Brightsparks.
- Supervisory team to work with Brightsparks to make sure the fostering Rotherham branding is continued through the service. This will also include a well thought out strategy around retention of foster carers.
- Enhance our corporate marketing offer to regain some ownership. Developing community activities to recruit carers.
- Embed exit interviews for foster carers.
- Widening the fostering family activities to include a more diverse range of cultural celebrations.
- Continue to improve the quality of panel reports and specifically consultation with the children's social workers in seeking their views around the experience of the child in placement
- Improve children and young people's input in the carer review process.
- Improve recording of placement disruptions and reasons

23. Summary.

Rotherham Fostering Service acknowledge that in order to reach the sufficiency plans, we need to recruit and retain more foster carers, enabling Rotherham Looked After Children to be placed within the community which they know and where they belong.

The indicators that the service is well placed to achieve this include the successful recruitment and retention of social workers who are skilled and motivated resulting in stable supervisory and recruitment teams who are

passionate about working in fostering. Staff are well supported by a stable management team who are highly knowledgeable and who work together for the continued improvement of the service. Staff are flexible and willing and regularly go above and beyond to support their carers and the needs of the service. Placement stability is in line with national averages and the percentage of children stable for two or more years has been increasing year on year. This, combined with a relatively small number of placement disruptions (7 across the year), demonstrates the impact of the hard work and tenacity of our fostering service in supporting carers, as well as the way in which initiatives such as the Mockingbird constellations are improving carers support for one another.

Our work with Bright Sparks has been innovative and has led to increasing interest in fostering across the board. Fostering assessments are progressed in a timely way for families ready to foster, and for those still thinking about fostering and not ready “yet”, these are held by the service in the “keeping in touch” initiative. There is more to be done to try to recruit more carers, however, it should be acknowledged that this is a national issue and Rotherham are not unique in this struggle.

Whilst we have lost an unusually high number of carers this year, a review of these figures shows that the vast majority of this loss is due to carers commitment to children or a natural end to a fostering career rather than a move away from fostering due to dissatisfaction with the service or the fostering task. This is therefore in line with RMBC’s Right Child Right Care initiative and demonstrates that as a service we are contributing significantly to achieving best outcomes for children.

Foster Carers report that they feel well supported by their supervising social workers and we have multiple mechanisms for feedback and consultation with managers to ensure that foster carers feel listened to. Support groups for foster carers have continued and adapted around the changing restrictions of covid-19 and we hope that the next year will allow for more opportunities to bring carers back together in person to support one another.

Our training and development offer is fluid and adaptive as we ensure that we keep up with changing times and new challenges, as well as listening to what our carers tell us about what they need. Our training co-ordinator provides an excellent service which ensures that we have a comprehensive training package which is responsive to carers needs. We want to give our carers the best training we can, to enable them to provide the best care for our looked after children.

Covid-19 has continued to impact this year, but we have worked flexibly and creatively as a service to continue to meet the needs of our carers despite changing restrictions and general anxiety in our fostering community. As a result, we have found new hybrid ways of working which have improved both efficiency and our ability to support carers which we will be able to take forward into practice as we move beyond the pandemic.

Whilst there are improvements we need to make in the next financial year, it is clear that this year we have remained committed to recruiting and supporting carers to provide the best possible care to our Looked After Children, and we are really proud of the work we have achieved.