

# Fostering Service Annual Report 2019-20

OFSTED Registration: SCO56304

## 1. Executive summary

Priorities for the Fostering Service were set out in the 2018/19 annual report were to:

- Increase the number of carers approved; HIPSS, General and Supported Lodging providers – there has been a reduction in the number of approved general and HIPSS carers and the number of supported lodgings providers has stayed the same.
- Increase the number of available beds with current cohort of carers – the number of beds has increased amongst foster carers and supported lodgings providers.
- Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers – the review of fostering allowances is currently being completed and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet in the autumn.
- Eleven children left care having achieved permanency in special guardianship arrangements – the same number as in 2018/19 and at the end of the year a further 13 applications had been completed.
- Increase placement stability – this has improved from 10% in 2018/19 to 8% in 2019/20 of children with 3 or more moves in the last 12 months and from 71% in 2018/19 to 74% in 2019/20 who have remained in the same placement for over 2 ½ years
- Increase in support for SGO – support group is now meeting regularly and successful applications for funding of therapeutic support made.
- Development of training programme – therapeutic parenting and online resources – additional £11k invested in foster carer training and on-line courses are now available
- Mosaic workflow upgrade completion – completed.
- Update foster carers charter – not yet completed.

Progress in important areas has been made but the Service has not met the target in the sufficiency strategy of reducing reliance on independent fostering agencies with the split between agencies and in-house placements worsening from 64%/36% in 2018/19 to 62%/38% in 2019/20. This is due to the number of children in care having increased during the year.

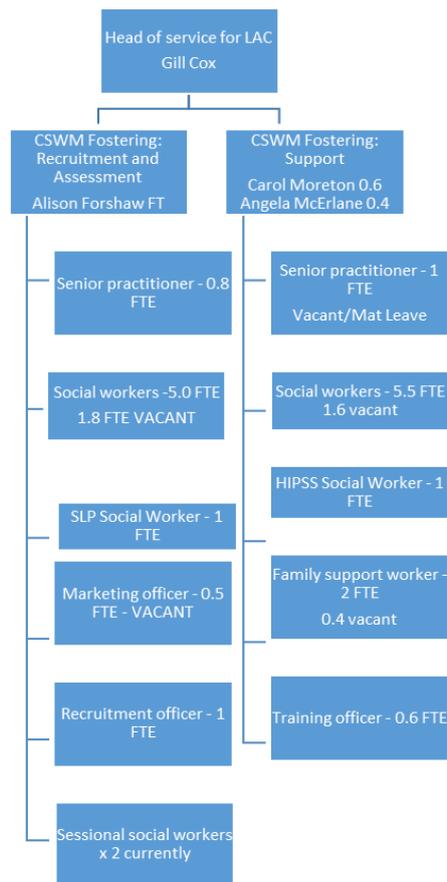
## 2. Introduction

This report complies with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards which sets out the condition that the Fostering Service Manager will monitor and report to board members and management members about the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every three months.

## 3. Establishment

In February 2019 the Fostering Service was structured into an Assessment team and a Support and Supervision team. This was to enable greater focus and reduce the impact of competing priorities. During 2019/20 the team has embedded these changes.

The team structure is set out below.



This year the Fostering team has had a much higher than usual pattern of staff turnover and absence. Three staff members have left the team for career development opportunities which is really positive – including joining Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service (HIPSS) and promotion to other teams within Children’s Social Care. The team has also been affected by some periods of long-term absence of a Social Worker and Marketing officer.

Consequently some foster carers have had several changes of Social Worker during the year. This is a concern for retention of foster carers particularly when this is echoed with changes in children’s social workers.

During the year the Fostering Assessment team took on responsibility for all viability assessments of connected persons and a 0.5 FTE post was transferred from the Child Protection and Court team for this purpose. This has relieved pressure from the Child Protection and Court teams where recruitment is much more challenging than in the Fostering teams.

At the end of March 2020 the team had Social Work vacancies of 1.8 full-time equivalent in the Assessment team and 1.6 in the Support and Supervision team. One Senior Practitioner was on maternity leave and in addition there were vacancies of 0.4 family support worker post and 0.5 marketing officer post. Vacancies within the Assessment team are at least partially compensated for by the use of sessional assessing Social Workers.

#### 4. Recruitment and Assessments of foster carers

The applications received are set out in the table below. Applications for general carers are slightly lower than for last year and are also lower for the specialist services including HIPSS and Sleepover

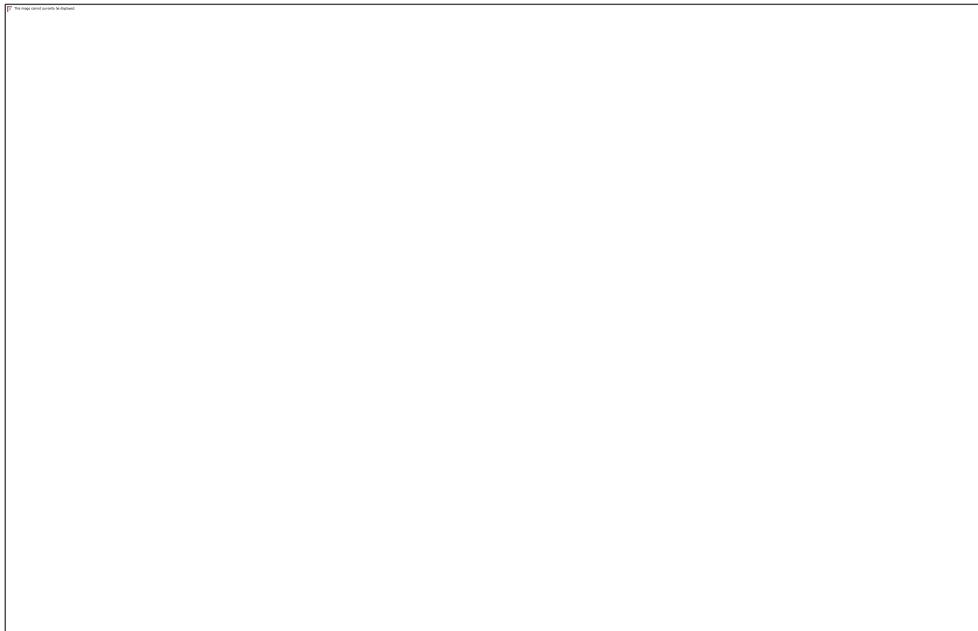
scheme. This is despite the number of fostering enquiries having increased from 191 in 2018/19 to 279 in 2019/20. Applications increased marginally from 21 in 2018/19 to 22 in 2019/20. So although it is positive that more enquiries are being received further work is required to successfully translate these into applications and approvals. Comparative data for 2019/20 is not yet available.

<b>Carer type</b>	<b>New applications 2018/19</b>	<b>New applications 2019/20</b>
General	14	13
HIPSS	2	0
Kinship	18	16
Sleepover scheme	3	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37 approved</b>	<b>29 approved</b>

Recruitment activity has been focussed on developing our social media reach as well as maintaining our face to face events. Analysis shows that most of our enquiries start in response to social media activity or via our website. Development of social media strategy has been particularly important following Covid restrictions on public face to face events.

Our Recruitment Officer successfully set up a Herefordshire Fostering Service Facebook page which went live in January 2020. The aim is to focus on further developing our digital marketing profile and training has been identified to develop the skills of our Recruitment Officer. Of the 279 enquiries during 2019/20 138 came from social media channels.

An example of a recent post is shown below.



Due to the long-term absence of the teams marketing officer during the year business support recruited on a temporary basis to support the marketing and recruitment activity. The post became vacant at the end of March. This post is being reviewed and will be recruited to during 2020/21.

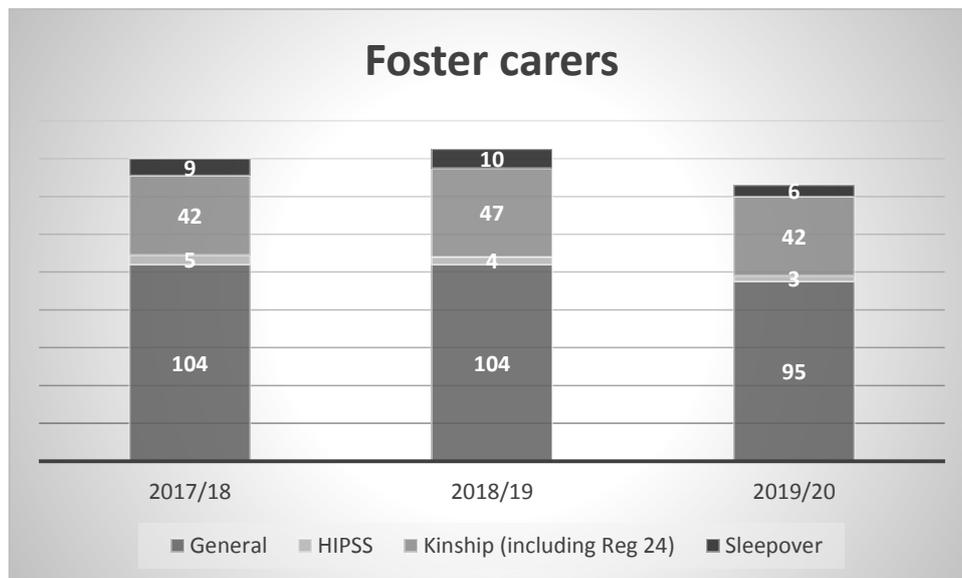
Research from Fostering Network shows that most new carers have values that include “a strong desire for fairness, a keen sense of what is right or wrong and are concerned about society. They are self-assured, have a high level of self-efficacy and will be the first to respond to what they see as a moral call to action.” [Why Foster Carers Care, 2015](#). Our strategy is to make our Fostering Team

more accessible and friendly and to share real stories from young people and foster carers helps attract foster carers with these values.

The team is an active member of the Midlands Recruitment forum where ideas and good practice is shared. During the year the team have advertised in the Herefordshire Times and had a local radio advertising campaign but no direct enquiries resulted from these although they may have helped to raise awareness about fostering.

## 5. Foster Carers

The graph below shows the number of different types of approved foster carers. Details regarding the changes in numbers are in the sections below. Regulation 24 enables friends or family of a child to be temporarily approved as a foster carer whilst a full assessment is completed.



### General Foster carers

General foster carers are approved to look after other people's children where they are unable to be safely cared for by their parents or a family member or friend. General foster carers provide emergency, short-term, long-term and respite care. Respite carers are available to offer planned breaks for foster carers and in some cases emergency breaks. General foster carers usually live within Herefordshire and enable children to remain living locally close to family, friends and enabling continuity of education and social activities.

There is an increasing trend in the number of newly approved foster carers being approved as respite carers initially arising from applicants wishes. This may be in recognition of the complexity of fostering and wishing to try fostering to see what the impact is on family life before committing to full-time placements.

Ofsted data for 2018-19 reports that nationally there has been a 2% growth in recruitment which has reversed previous trends of declining figures. There has been a national increase in Independent Fostering Agencies approving foster carers as short-term, long-term and respite carers instead of the approach taken more often by local authorities, including Herefordshire, of specifying a narrow approval for carers of often only respite, short-term or long-term. Our Fostering service will adopt a

more flexible approach similar to IFA's in 2020/21. Nationally the data set indicates that foster carers are being approved for fewer children.

The impact of Covid-19 is significant in that a lot of foster carers are older and have underlying health conditions that make placements more difficult. Health concerns are affecting approximately 15 fostering households which equates to 16% of general foster carers. As we ease out of lockdown there is significant work needed to reassure and reactivate some, especially respite carers.

### Retention

There have been 13 resignations of general foster carers during the year compared with 30 during 2018/19. Reasons for resignations are:

- Three transferred to IFA's. Reasons provided related to better financial support and support to birth children.
- Eight resigned due to a changes of circumstances which included a range of issues relating to health, moving home, changing employment and impact on carer's own family.
- One carer was de-registered due to concerns about the quality of their practice.
- One carer resigned following a Special Guardianship order being granted.

The fostering service competes with the independent sector. Information from neighbouring authorities shows that fees and allowances within the local authority have gradually become less competitive and so a review is currently being completed which will recommend changes and increases to fees and allowances. It is anticipated that new proposals will be made to Cabinet in the autumn.

Additional investment of £11,000 for training of foster carers was agreed during the year. This has enabled the purchase of an on-line package of training and development of the training programme to offer more advanced and bespoke courses to develop the skills of our foster carers. This responds to the feedback from our foster carers who wanted more flexible training options (including on-line) and a more diverse training offer.

Inevitably changes of staff and vacancies have impacted on the continuity and quality of the support provided by the team. Concerns about the impact of staff changes have featured regularly in feedback from foster carers who have left the service and in annual reviews. The team have reviewed the support provided to newly approved foster carers and all are now allocated a family support worker in addition to a Social Worker to ensure that they are well supported at the start of their fostering career.

### HIPSS carers

Herefordshire Intensive Support Service (HIPSS) is a commissioned service from Action for Children to provide therapeutic support to specialist carers offering young people opportunity to 'step down' from residential care into family based care and wider consultation and wrap around support to placements at risk of disruption and escalating care costs. HIPSS carers are paid an enhanced fee in recognition of the skill, training and commitment required to focus on the needs of our most challenging young people. A social work project co-ordinator provides the link between the HIPSS service and the Fostering Team.

The scheme has a target of having 8-10 designated carers. In the last year the number of approved HIPSS carers has reduced from 4 to 3. The original model for HIPSS was that children and young people moving from residential to HIPSS placements would move on again after a 12-18 month period. To the credit of our HIPSS carers they have not wanted children and young people to have a further move and have committed to providing long-term permanency to young people through long-term matching and providing staying put placements. Consequently the number of approved carers will reduce again during 2020/21 unless new carers are recruited and approved.

It is also acknowledged that all HIPSS carers have experienced varying levels of 'burn out' having been with the scheme since its inception.

Unfortunately no new HIPSS carers have been recruited during the year. Efforts continue to encourage experienced existing foster carers to consider becoming HIPSS carers and to target those in the community who have existing skills and experience of working with young people who have experienced abuse and trauma.

Within the review of allowances a proposal to offer an enhanced fee for HIPSS placements will be considered for foster carers who may not wish to become dedicated HIPSS carers but may consider offering a placement for a specific young person who could step down from residential care.

HIPSS also provides "wrap-around" support to foster carers which mirrors the model of support that they provide to HIPSS carers. This intensive support is targeted towards children and young people who would be at risk of being placed into residential care if their placement broke down. Wrap-around support is made available to in-house and IFA foster carers. This aspect of the service has been very successful with 18 placements supported in this way and of these 3 young people are now in residential care. Feedback from foster carers and social workers is extremely positive about the impact of this support in sustaining placements.

*"HIPSS are a fantastic service not only for foster carers but also for young people, they are always there, for the good and the bad. They get you to really think about things from a different perspective and always listen without judgement." (Foster carer)*

*"Words cannot describe them, they are the loveliest people alive. They are so amazing and caring, rally loving, unreal". (Young person about his HIPSS carers)*

HIPSS provides regular foster carer clinics which have now been extended to support Special Guardianship Order carers. During the year 41 consultations have been provided to carers and the team around the child.

HIPSS have provided training to foster carers as follows:

- PACE and Healing through play x 2
- Mindfulness x 4
- Foundations for attachment training (4 day course) x 2
- Foundations for attachment refresher for foster carers and staff

Since Covid-19 pandemic HIPSS have been providing a weekly virtual café for all staff on topics including attachment theory, harmful sexual behaviour, therapeutic parenting and motivational interviewing.

## Kinship carers

A Connected Person is defined as "A relative, friend or other person connected with a child. The latter is someone who would not fit the term 'relative or friend', but who has a pre-existing relationship with the child. It could be someone who knows the child in a more professional capacity such as (for example) a child-minder, a teacher or a youth worker."

Relative is defined as "a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (whether of the full blood or half blood or by marriage or civil partnership) or step-parent."

In Herefordshire and other local authorities a connected person is often referred to as a Kinship Carer.

As directed by Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 if a decision has been made that a child needs to become looked after and needs to be placed immediately with alternative carers the child can be placed with a 'connected person' and a temporary approval of the connected person can be made following initial safeguarding checks. The temporary approval can last for up to 16 weeks (with an extension of up to 8 weeks to be used in exceptional circumstances). During this 16 week period a full assessment of the carers is made as for any other foster carer. Pressure from court timetables impacts and much shorter periods are assigned to completing these assessments usually 8 – 10 weeks.

During the year, 16 kinship households were approved and on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 there were 3 kinship households temporarily approved under Regulation 24. The number of approved kinship foster carers increased from 44 to 56 during 2019/20 which represents a 27% increase.

During the year 13 kinship households resigned:

- 8 when an SGO was granted
- 2 following successful reunification of children to their parents
- 2 placements ended when carers were unable to meet needs of the child
- 1 converted to a staying put placement when the young person turned 18

So all but 2 of these resignations were for positive reasons.

Prior to completing a full assessment a viability assessment is completed on prospective kinship carers. This enables the service to identify if there are clear reasons why a connected person would not be approved as a foster carer and ensures that the families fully understand and consent to the assessment and the requirements of any approved foster carer. During 2019/20 the team have completed 83 viability assessments and 32 full kinship assessments. Of the 32 the reasons for not approving related to risk identified within the assessment, withdrawal, child being reunified with their parents or placed with an alternative family member where assessments may have been completed on two or more different connected persons for the same child/ren.

## Sleepover scheme carers

The Sleepover Scheme provides family-based overnight short break care to children with disabilities who ordinarily live at home with their parents. These children are not looked after. The Sleepover Scheme is based within the Children with Disabilities team to ensure good communication with the team supporting children who use the scheme. At the end of March there were 6 approved Sleepover Scheme foster carers providing breaks to 5 children under the Sleepover Scheme, 2 looked after children for regular respite and 2 full-time looked after siblings placed in an

emergency. During the year 5 carers resigned and 1 household withdrew having made the decision to offer a long-term full time Shared Lives placement instead. There have been no new Sleepover Scheme Carers approved over the past year. Two assessments were started but one subsequently transferred to the Fostering Team due to carers wishing to pursue full-time caring role, and the other is progressing under the Sleepover Scheme and will be taken to panel during the next financial year. Recruitment to the scheme is a priority for 2020/21.

Where possible carers are dual approved as sleepover and respite carers to meet the needs of children living with their parents and those who are looked after. Complementing the fostering team in identifying respite placements for children with disabilities who are looked-after has always been an important function of the Sleepover Scheme. It has been a challenge to develop and increase capacity within the Sleepover Scheme by increasing the number of placements offered by one caring household. Most Sleepover Scheme Carers want to offer one placement to one child wanting to maintain a balanced lifestyle which incorporates some care for the Sleepover scheme.

The Sleepover Scheme continues provide a Sleepover Scheme Carer’s Group facilitated by the Sleepover Scheme Project Co-ordinator and Family Support Worker. Attendance at the carer’s group is often low due to carers more often than not having other employment and agreeing a time to suit all can be challenging. Carers are encouraged to attend mandatory training and due to some of the medical conditions of our young people, training is provided by colleagues in health usually on a child specific basis. Occupational Therapy assessment services are purchased privately on a case-by-case basis due to a lack of capacity in local NHS provision making all take-up of referrals much delayed and way outside the timeframe for placement planning.

In July the Project Coordinator moved to a different role, initially on a temporary basis, leaving the position unfilled until the end of the year. The post was appointed to but it was several months before the candidate could start. Then, as the year was drawing to a close, the Covid-19 pandemic hit, leaving the UK Government with little option but restrict movement for all. Shielding letters affected some of the young people accessing the scheme and all overnight support was placed on hold. Notwithstanding this the Family Support Worker did a fantastic job in keeping the scheme alive, during times of uncertainty. The Project Coordinator post is now recruited to and so plans to grow the scheme again will be a priority during 2020/21.

	<b>Year 1 (2016-17)</b>	<b>Year 2 (2017-18)</b>	<b>Year 3 (2018-19)</b>	<b>Year 4 (2019-20)</b>
<b>No. of Enquiries</b>	86	17	10	13
<b>No. of Carers Approved</b>	6	6	2	0
<b>Carer withdrawn/resigned (drop-off)</b>	1	2	1	5

**Number of Placed Children: 5 (Sleepover Scheme)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>2016/17</b>				<b>2017/18</b>				<b>2018/19</b>				<b>2019/20</b>			
<b>Quarter</b>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4

<b>No. of Children</b>	1	4	3	3	6	5	6	8	8	9	9	8	8	7	6	5
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Regulatory requirements to complete an annual review of foster carers have not been maintained during the time that the Sleepover scheme co-ordinator post has been vacant and this is a priority during 2020/21. Relationships and management oversight by the Fostering service need to be strengthened to ensure that this situation is not repeated.

Throughout the challenges, feedback on the Sleepover scheme remains positive from children, families and foster carers.

### Special guardianship

The local authority has had increased focus during 2019/20 on supporting children who could be cared for outside of the looked after system to achieve permanency via a Special Guardianship order (SGO) where this is assessed to be in their best interests. An SGO gives parental responsibility to the carers which is shared with the child's parents. It allows them to make all day to day decisions for the child. Where children are settled with carers who are well equipped to meet their needs this is an excellent option for children who are no longer required to have the intrusion of social work visits, health assessments, education meetings and LAC reviews.

During 2019/20 there were 11 looked after children who left care when an SGO was granted which is the same as 2018/19. Assessments of the carers are completed by the Fostering Assessment team.

In the last annual report we identified the emerging impact of a changing focus of permanence via Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) for children this has continued through the last period with 13 further children now cared for under SGO arrangements. At the end of March a further 17 assessments had been completed with applications to Court ready or made to Court. The team had also completed an assessment for a private SGO application. This work will continue as a priority during 2020/21 with plans for at least a further 17 applications planned during quarter 1.

The local authority now offers a generous financial support package that maintains the level of financial support for foster carers if they are granted an SGO following feedback from carers that this was the main reason for not wishing to make an application. This is increasingly encouraging general and IFA foster carers to apply for orders that were traditionally seen as a route for kinship carers. Consequently this does impact upon the number of approved foster carers but will correlate with children leaving care.

New SGO carers have a review every 3 months during the first year and thereafter an annual review. In addition to financial support the service co-ordinates a monthly SGO support group, includes SGO carers in all training available to foster carers and commissions a support service for SGO carers that offers specialist on-line and telephone advice including during evenings and weekends.

The service is in touch with 89 known SGO families and as the number of SGO carers increases capacity to support all of these families is restricted. Opportunities to develop a dedicated Social Work resource to support these family's needs to be explored.

The team have successfully secured over £20k financial support for specialist therapeutic interventions for Special Guardianship families this year from the Adoption Support Fund. During Covid-19 further funding was made available by government and so this has contributed to the cost

of the commissioned SGO support service and enabled 6 Special Guardianship families to attend specialist training provided by Barnados at a cost of £9k.

## 6. Staying Put carers

All young people in foster care are offered the opportunity to remain living with their foster carers when they reach the age of 18 if this is what they and their foster carers want. This is called “staying put” and again these placements are not foster placements but are an important part of supporting children in care to make a successful transition to independence.

Department for Education data reports that 58% of care leavers “stay put” with their carers at the age of 18 with 30% remaining at aged 19.

The service has 4 Staying Put carers who are no longer approved foster carers and 5 Staying Put carers who are also approved foster carers. In total there were 11 young people in Staying Put arrangements at the end of March.

Three young people have remained in Staying Put placements until the age of 21 when their placement has either converted to Adult Shared Lives scheme, they have moved onto supported accommodation or remained with the carers as a private arrangement.

During 2020/21 the financial support available to Staying Put carers will be reviewed to encourage the development of independent living skills of young people and reduce dependence upon carers.

## 7. Supported lodgings

Supported lodgings providers (SLP) are not foster carers but are approved to offer placements for young people aged 16 to 21 to develop their independence skills ready for living independently.

Supported lodgings providers have a shorter assessment than foster carers, but this includes independent references, DBS checks, health and safety checks and all are required to have their own safe care agreement. They are approved by the fostering Agency Decision Maker (ADM) outside of panel processes.

During the year a decision was made to annually review all Supported lodgings providers. The process for this is in line with that undertaken for foster carers – seeking of feedback from providers and workers for the young people placed as well as the young people themselves. Health and safety assessments are reviewed, safe caring plans updated and a review report completed.

Work has been undertaken to review and update the documents used relating to SLP agreements between providers and the Local Authority as well as the documents used when placements are made. This has involved consultation with other Local Authorities, the 16+ Team and SLP providers. The young people and provider agreement have been piloted with young people recently. Currently legal advice is being sought. This process has been challenging in trying to ensure the documents are legally compliant and accessible and understandable to young people. This work will be completed during 2020/21.

A Supported Lodgings provider handbook is been compiled and will be rolled out by September 2020.

In response to the recent Covid-19 pandemic, we have explored the option of a temporary extension to one SLP provider to afford us an additional resource which can be accessed for homeless young people / care leavers in an emergency. Another provider (previously an approved foster carer) has

been willing to renew her fostering approval to offer foster placements for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis if this is needed.

Fortunately, the SLP placements have generally been stable throughout this period with only 3 unplanned breakdowns occurring. However sadly we have lost 2 valued SLP placements in annex accommodation as the provider wished to provide Shared Lives placements instead. The payment for Shared Lives is £450 per week, which is equivalent to the highest level of need in SLP.

The OFSTED checklist is now completed for all new referrals to ensure that young people have no identified care needs requiring a regulated placement before transitioning to SLP placements.

For 2020/21 the focus will be on expanding the SLP provision in Hereford. One assessment for a new SLP placement is currently underway. Recruitment events have been held which current providers have been involved in. They have also written their own 'story' which has been used in online adverts, leaflets and the Sunshine radio voice adverts. Social media presence during Covid-19 has been increased and has included a film that care leavers have put together. In addition Truth Be Told a film collaboration with other Local Authorities includes an older teens story, very relevant to the role of SLP's and supporting care leavers. The film has been shared again recently during Fostering Fortnight.

Capacity compared to last year:-

Data	31.3.19	31.3.20
Number of households approved to offer Supported Lodgings	18	17
Number of full time SLP beds approved	30	31
Number of respite SLP beds	4	2
Number of YP in SLP placements	21	22

Vacancies are due to:

- 2 vacancies due to family bereavement / shielding due to COVID
- 2 beds are being used currently for Shared Lives placements
- 4 being used for foster placements
- 3 with no suitable match

Capacity within the service has increased by 2 beds this year. The target within the sufficiency strategy is to provide 40 SLP beds by 2020 and this target has not been achieved.

The SLP support group continues to develop well and are actively engaged in service development e.g. contributing to the development of a Supported Lodgings Providers Practice Handbook. 16+ team members have an open invitation to join this group and do so as and when possible.

## 8. Fostering panel

Written by Panel chair

Panel membership has remained largely stable during the last 12 months, with the welcome additions of Kirsty Gardiner as the lead for children in care health team and Mel Williams who has returned after a short period of retirement, into the role of independent panel member, bringing her educational experience with her. Panel membership has been boosted by social work representatives to include Bonnie Preece, Nita Saran and Katie Pullin, ensuring that panel remains

quorate at all times. The Panel brings a range of skills and experiences, and has been able to hone and consolidate these skills. Foster panel remains open to future council members whom may wish to take the role of champion for looked after children.

The panel is independent of the Local Authority and as such its remit is to make recommendations on whether applicants are suitable to foster, and if current foster carers should be re-approved. It also has a quality assurance and monitoring role in terms of the work of the fostering service. The majority of cases heard by the panel are either new applications, including from 'connected persons' and first reviews of foster carers, but panel also considers reviews post allegation, brief reports (where a concern has arisen partway through an assessment) and a variety of other matters. Of the 29 new assessments heard 16 were for kinship assessments, so 55% of all new assessments brought to panel were kinship assessments.

During the year the panel has considered some highly complex and contentious situations, two of which resulted in a request by the applicants/foster carers for an independent review by the Independent Review Mechanism. The Local Authority recommendation was upheld in both cases.

It is also noted that with the revised support offer for SGO's, this has proved more popular, and more foster carers have felt confident to take this step, this has resulted in 22.5% of the resignations from the role of Foster Carer being due to moving to special guardianship status, and is a good news story for stability for the child.

Fostering Panel training was held in January, and focused on some of the emerging themes from the previous 12 months. This included:-

- Connected Person Assessments - legal advice from Victoria Gould, and the role of Foster Panel and the interdependencies with the Court.
- Challenging the values and judgement of Panel Members and professional challenge
- Clear rationale for decision making and linkages to the National Minimum standards.

Outcomes of the training included reflections of previous cases and rationale for decision making. Also Panel have introduced a tracker to capture actions required by workers where panel have requested specific tasks be completed.

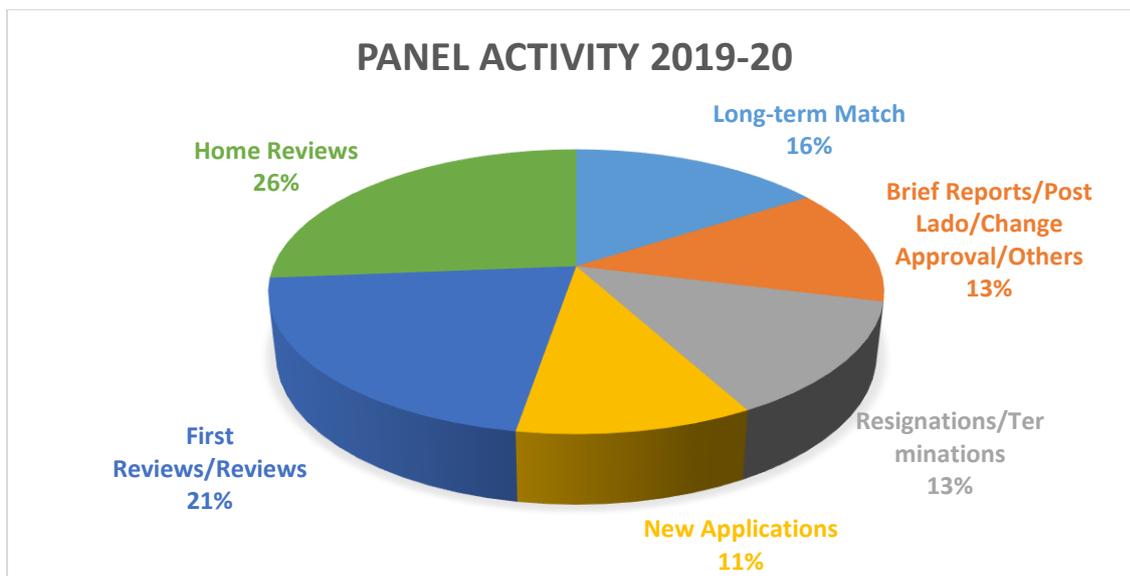
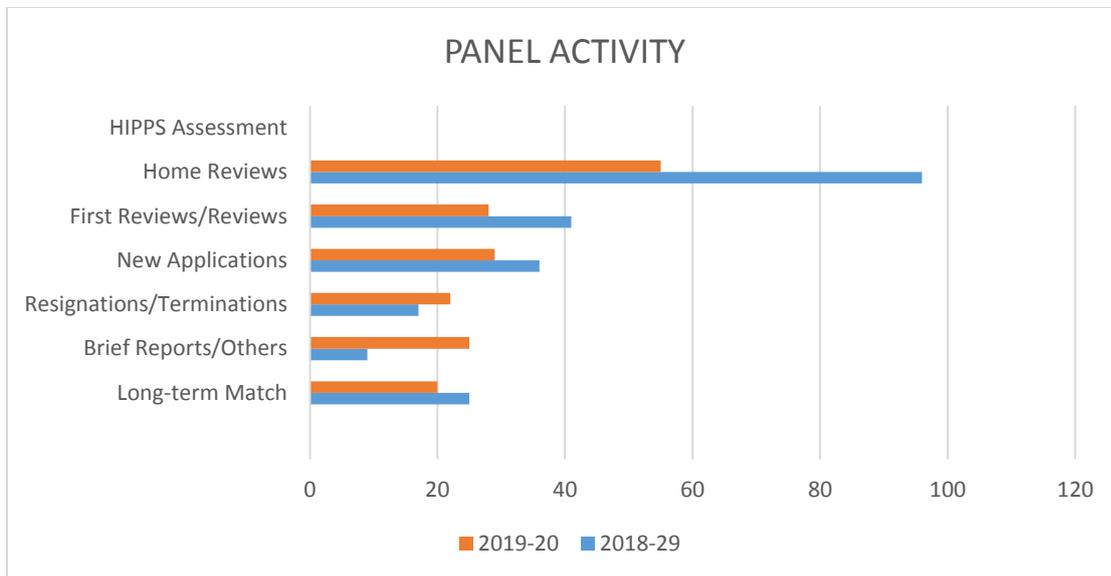
Foster Panel members are eager to make the experience welcoming for Foster Carers, and have had much positive feedback from Foster Carers. It is noted and has been mentioned in feedback the low presence of males (1) on the Foster Panel. Panel is also committed to strengthening its recommendations with clearer references to the National Minimum Standards.

Panel Minutes are now a step in Mosaic, so this part of the pathway is contained within the care management system, where previously it was a word document.

The Foster Panel held its first virtual Panel at the end of March as lockdown commenced, to ensure it could still carry out its role.

<b>Panel Activity 2018/19</b>	<b>Q 1</b>	<b>Q 2</b>	<b>Q 3</b>	<b>Q 4</b>	<b>Total</b>
Long-term Match	6	5	5	4	<b>20</b>
Brief Reports/Post Lado/Change Approval/Others	5	4	8	7	<b>25</b>
Resignations/Terminations	5	6	1	15	<b>27</b>
New Applications	4	9	4	12	<b>29</b>

First Reviews/Reviews	8	12	2	6	<b>28</b>
Home Reviews	10	16	9	20	<b>55</b>
HIPPS Assessment	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>



## 9. Training

The service delivers training to foster carers from a range of providers including the Fostering team, Council partners, some external training and new online training. Some training is delivered at weekends and evenings to reach carers who are working or struggle with child care commitments.

In response to last years identified need/competition from IFAs to expand our training resources to foster carers a further 11k was invested to set up and develop an online package of training and to increase the range of face to face training offered.

The online training offer has been very successful and resulted in a 65% increase in the number of carers who have maintained required mandatory training in Safeguarding, Diversity and First Aid. This has been timely in relation to Covid-19 and the face to face training restrictions that have resulted. First Aid training for new and renewing carers could not be provided on-line at the end of the year but an online paediatric course has now been sourced).

'...the training was really good, there was lots to think about and I felt really prepared for what fostering was going to be like and the things we've got to learn!'

(Feedback from prospective foster carer about Preparation to foster training)

## 10. Performance and quality assurance

### Placement sufficiency

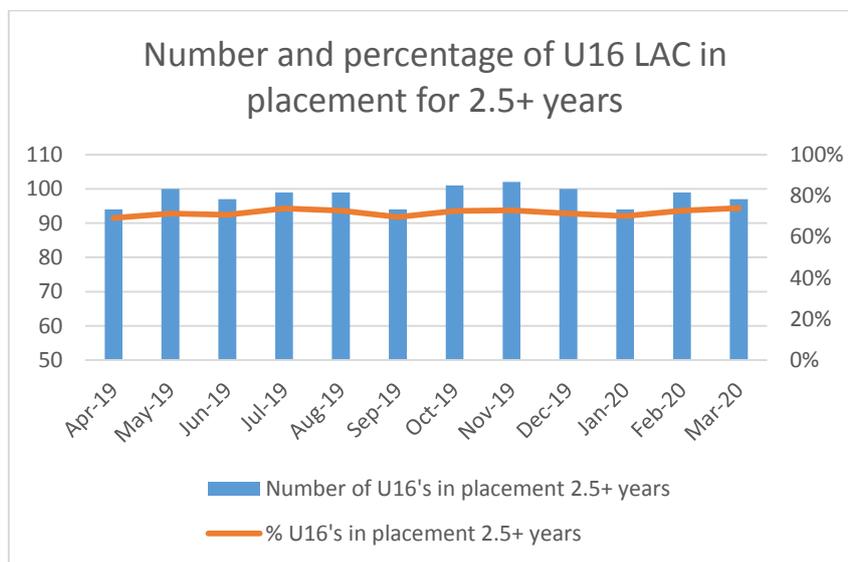
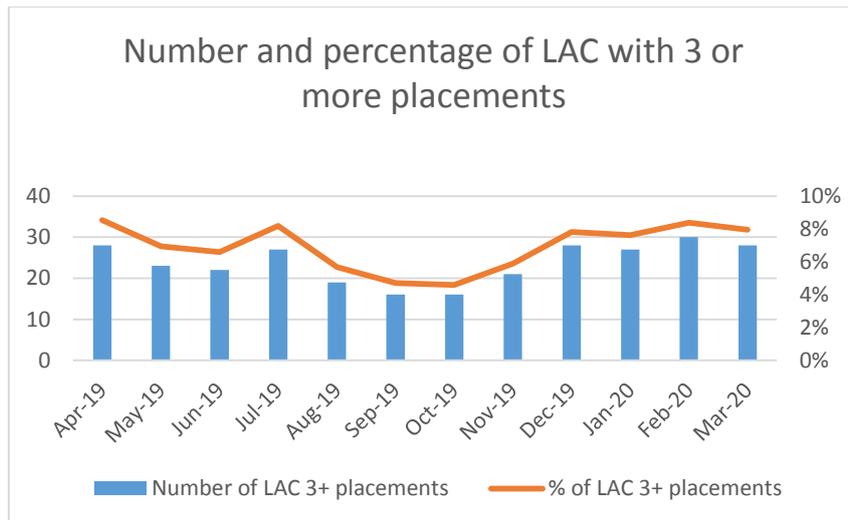
Department for Education (DfE) figures for 2018/19 report an increase in the looked after children population of 3% with an overall 6% increase since March 2015. Herefordshire continues to have a high number of looked after children and has seen numbers increase from 334 in March 2019 to 352 in March 2020. National data is not yet available however regional data shows that rates of looked after children have increased from an average of 82 per 10,000 to 83.1 per 10,000 whilst Herefordshire has increased from 92 to 97.5 per 10,000 in the same period. Nationally the split between local authority and IFA placements is 65%/35%.

Although the numbers of carers has reduced the placements available have slightly increased. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 170 placements were available with 96 filled and 74 vacant (56% filled). This compares with 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 when 182 placements were available, 114 filled and 68 vacant (63% filled). This year is comparable with Ofsted published data that nationally 63% of fostering places were filled. This may seem a very low figure but many approved places will be unavailable as carers are only available part-time for respite placements; are approved for more placements than they have bedrooms for sibling groups or are taking a break for a range of reasons.

### Placement stability

Herefordshire's performance is good for placement stability. This is a key performance indicator nationally and performance is consistently better than the national average.

At the end of March 8% of children in care had 3 or more placements during the year comparing with a national average of 10% and 11% for statistical neighbours. 74% of children in care had been in their placement for at least 2 ½ years compared with a national average of 69% and 67% for statistical neighbours. Both of these measures are impacted by the high numbers of children in care and as increasing numbers of children in stable placements leave care via an SGO it is likely that performance will decrease. Therefore there is no room for complacency and further work to reduce placement moves is required.



#### Long-term matches

There were 20 long term matches approved during 2019/20. A review in March 2020 identified 44 children with a care plan of long-term fostering where there had been delay in progressing the long-term match. This is a priority for improvement within early 2020/21.

#### Practice concerns

There were 16 Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) contacts received regarding general foster carers during 2019/20 compared with 21 in 2018/19. Of these 10 did not meet LADO threshold - 8 contacts were practice related and addressed by the service and for 2 contacts advice was given.

The other 6 (3 households) the LADO threshold was met, allegations were substantiated and reviews were presented to fostering panel. As a result of reviews one fostering household was re-approved with a change in their matching, one household is completing a plan of work and will be further reviewed in 6 months' time and one case is outstanding.

There were 8 LADO (4 households) contacts received regarding kinship foster carers during 2019/20 compared with 4 last year. Of these in 3 cases the threshold was not met, in 3 cases the allegations were unsubstantiated and in 2 cases (1 household) the allegation was substantiated and subsequently reviewed by fostering panel.

## Complaints and compliments

The service has received two complaints from foster carers and two from special guardians during the year.

The foster carers complaints were regarding poor communication and another relating to finance and support for a respite placement. Both were resolved without requiring formal resolution and learning around checking carers understanding of policies explored with the team.

One complaint from a special guardianship related to a financial allowance and for a period of months prior to an award being made – this was upheld and payment was made. The second related to compensation relating to family information shared in court proceedings which was settled by the legal team.

The team have received some really positive compliments during the year. Examples include:

*“I want to take this opportunity to thank yourself Louise Easton and the few other fostering social workers (Katie Straughan and Charlie Dean) we have had the privilege to help us along our journey you have all held all our hands when need and encouraged and guided us to become connected, kind, considerate, empathetic and in tune carers/parents. We thank you with the whole of our hearts and your all be a special piece of our life’s for EVER! So thank you all”*

*“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude for those who have lighted the flame within us”. Special thanks to Georgina Thompson.” (Family support worker)*

## 11. Foster carer representatives

The foster carer representatives have continued to meet on a monthly basis with the Fostering service managers to improve communication and resolve any issues at an early stage. A fostering representative is a member of the Corporate Parenting panel and so is able to communicate issues between the groups.

This foster carer representative organised a summer party, Halloween and Christmas party and established a new carers support group in the community prior to lockdown. There is an active WhatsApp group to keep carers in touch and supporting each other. The foster carers newsletter is sent out bi-monthly although has increased to monthly in response to Covid-19.

## 12. Progress on key priorities during 2019-20

Priorities from last year’s annual report were:

- Increase in number of carers approved; HIPSS, General and Supported Lodging providers – there has been a reduction in the number of approved general and HIPSS carers and the number of supported lodgings providers has stayed the same.
- Increase in number of available beds with current cohort of carers – the number of beds has increased amongst foster carers and supported lodgings providers.
- Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers – the review of fostering allowances is currently being completed and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet in the autumn.

- Increase in children achieving permanency in special guardianship arrangements – eleven children left care having achieved permanency in special guardianship arrangements – the same number as in 2018/19 and at the end of the year a further 13 applications had been completed.
- Increase placement stability – this has improved from 10% in 2018/19 to 8% in 2019/20 of children with 3 or more moves in the last 12 months and from 71% in 2018/19 to 74% in 2019/20 who have remained in the same placement for over 2 ½ years
- Increase in support for SGO – support group is now meeting regularly and successful applications for funding of therapeutic support made.
- Development of training programme – therapeutic parenting and online resources – additional £11k invested in foster carer training and on-line courses are now available
- Mosaic workflow upgrade completion – completed.
- Update foster carers charter – not yet completed.

### 13. Key priorities for development during 2020-21

- Recruitment and retention of foster carers:
  - Reviewing scheme of fees and allowances for all foster carers
  - Recruiting to all vacant posts and reducing turnover of staff
  - Continue to develop recruitment strategy increasing number of approvals reducing reliance on independent fostering agencies and residential placements
  - Review process for completing statutory DBS and medical checks
  - Adapt support and training to meet needs of carers in a “Covid secure” way
- Improve stability for children and young people:
  - Continue work to support children and young people to leave care via an SGO where it is in their best interests
  - Ensure all children are long-term matched without delay
  - Explore options to further develop support for SGO carers
- Prepare children and young people for independence:
  - Implement new savings policy and deduct savings for children and young people “at source” so that all children and young people in care have savings when they leave care to support their move to independence
  - Work with 16+ team to implement independence checklist
- Performance improvement
  - Develop a “fostering scorecard” to enable more effective monitoring and improvement within the Fostering service.