

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT April 2020-March 2021



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

This Fostering Annual Report provides an overview of the function, operation and performance of Herefordshire Council's Fostering Services during the period from April 2020 to March 2021. Content includes information on services provided to children and Foster Carers; data and analysis regarding how our Foster Carers are recruited and supported [including training and development] to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. It also includes details of planned improvements which evidence our commitment to a journey of continuous improvement.

Looked After Children

At the end of March 2021, 312 children and young people were being looked after in Herefordshire. This equates to 87 per 10,000 of which there are 44.22% female and 55.44% male children and young people. The vast majority of children were White British or White Other [283] with 1 being Any Other Mixed Background, 2 being Gypsy/Roma, 1 being Indian, 1 being Chinese and 1 being from Any Other Ethnic Group.

Fostered Children

The total number of children in care includes 105 living with fostering families in Herefordshire and 77 living in homes provided by Independent Fostering Agencies. At this time, we had 370 Foster Carers [including 50 single carers] in 210 households.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

Prospective Foster Carers made 269 Enquiries in total and 130 of these were made via Facebook, and has been demonstrated nationally to have a 50% rate of withdrawal of interest. There were 93 Initial Visits and 35 Applications, resulting in 13 Approvals. Of the 35 Applications submitted, 22 did not complete their Assessment at all or had not completed their journey to becoming a Foster Carer by the end of March 2021 [16 were closed, 2 were on hold and 4 were still in Assessment].

Independent Foster Panel

Foster Panel considered 172 cases during this twelve-month period, including 37 First Reviews/Annual Reviews of Foster Carers, 45 Long Term Matches, 63 Home Reviews and 9 Changes of Approval.

Training and Development

Despite the pandemic, 192 virtual training events, 100 Skills to Foster preparation training events and 20 online courses took place.

Types of Placement

The majority of our care experienced children were living with General Foster Carers [105] and 77 were fostered via Independent Fostering Agencies. There were 42 children and young people who were with family and friends [Connected Carers] and 31 with Special Guardians.

2. INTRODUCTION

As stipulated within The Children Act 1989, the best place for children to be cared for is with their family unless this it is not possible to keep them safe there. The next best option for most children is to be cared for in a similar type of environment where they will receive a high standard of family based care; where they are loved and nurtured, develop a true sense of belonging, and develop meaningful and lasting relationships.

Children in the care of Herefordshire Council who are placed with a Foster Carer [whether internal or external to the authority] or with a Connected Carer [someone from their family and friends network], should have the same or similar positive life experiences and have access to the same or similar opportunities as other children in order to improve their life chances.

Herefordshire's Fostering Service is absolutely committed to keeping children and young people at the centre of all practice and decision-making. We believe that all children and young people have the right to have their individual needs clearly identified and met within family-based care whenever possible. We work with young people, with their families and friendship network, with their Foster Carers or Connected Carers, with Children's Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, Special Guardians and any other relevant professional or person who is important in the child's life in order to achieve this.

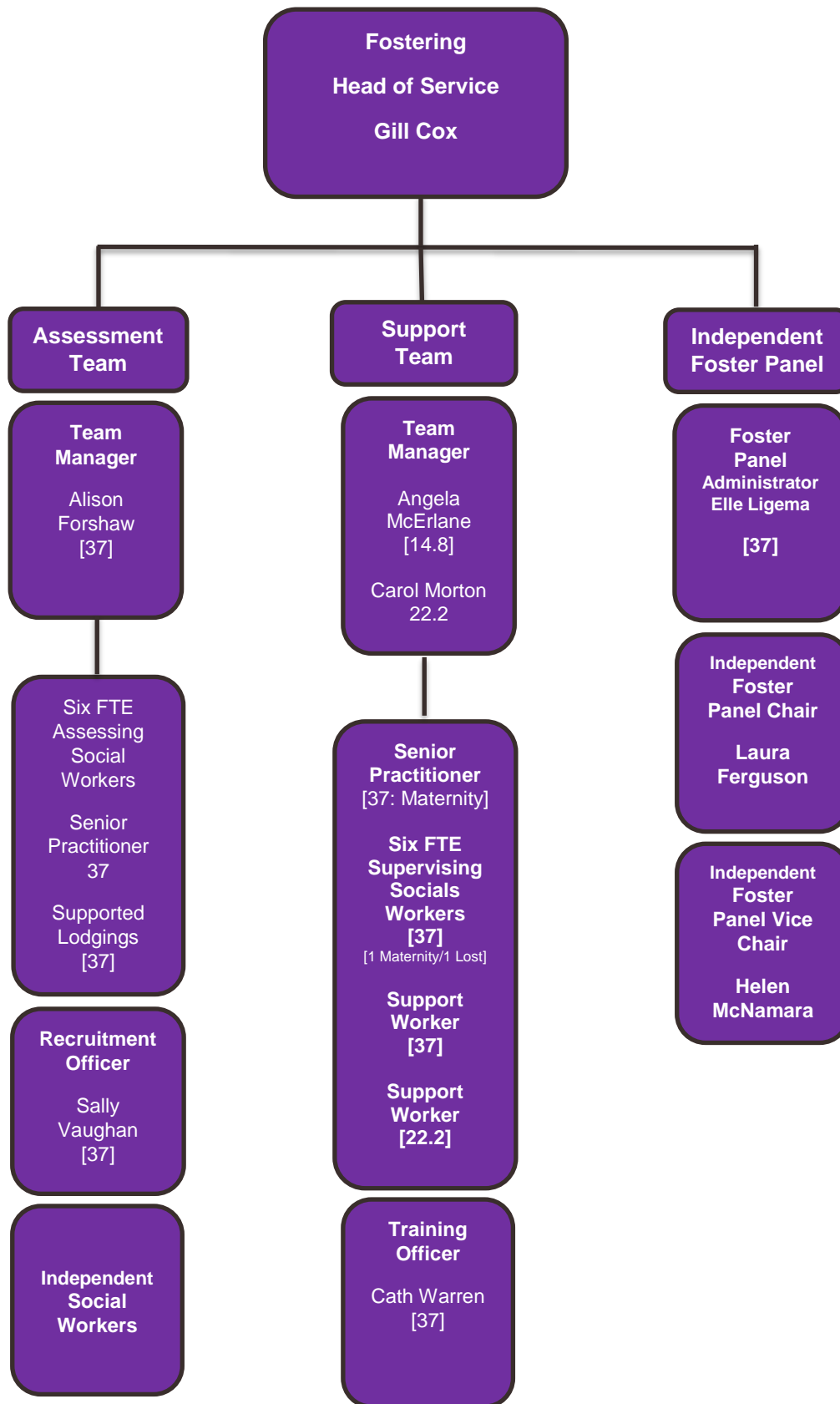
Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards

There definitive legislation in respect of Fostering Services is the Fostering Service Regulations (England). These Regulations came into force in April 2011 and consists of the legal requirements in discharging the functions of Local Authorities in relation to placing children and young people in their care with foster parents.

The Fostering National Minimum Standards (under the Care Standards Act 2000) together with the above Regulations, form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services. Fostering Services are required to demonstrate that they are meeting the Standards, however, they do not have to be followed exactly if the service can demonstrate, and Ofsted is satisfied, that the outcomes are being met in a different way.

Fostering Services are regulated and Inspected by Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills]. It is intended that the Standards will be used, both by fostering service providers and by Ofsted, to focus on securing the positive welfare, health and education outcomes for children, and reducing risk to their welfare and safety.

Staffing Structure



The remainder of this Fostering Annual Report presents further information in relation to the function, operation and performance of Herefordshire Council's Fostering Services during the period from April 2020 to March 2021. Content includes information on services provided to children and Foster Carers; data and analysis regarding how our Foster Carers are recruited and supported [including training and development] to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. It also includes details of planned improvements which evidence our commitment to a journey of continuous improvement.

3. STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

The Fostering Service operates within the statutory framework determined by the Government, which includes the following core legislation:

- The National Minimum Standards (under the Care Standards Act 2000)
- The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (as amended)
- The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended)
- The Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 (as amended)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990
- Children Act 1989

4. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

The number of children in care in Herefordshire at the end of March 2021 was 312. This is a rate of 87 per 10,000, which is considerably higher than the national average of 67 per 10,000 as at the end of March 2021.

By the end of March 2021, the number of children looked after by Local Authorities in England rose to its highest level at 80,850, up 1% on last year and continuing the rise seen in recent years. This increase was driven by there being slightly more children looked after starting during the year than those ceasing. The information above demonstrates that the high number of children in care in Herefordshire, is consistent with this trend; with 27 per 10,000 more than the national average.

The tables below provide demographic information relating to our 312 children in care:

PLACEMENT TYPE	FEMALE	MALE	INDETERMINATE
Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility.	26.92%	73.08%	0.00%
Independent living, e.g. in flat, lodgings, bedsit, Bed and Breakfast or with friends, with or without formal support.	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Family centre or mother and baby unit.	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%
Foster placement with relative or friend [Connected Carer] - long term fostering.	56.25%	43.75%	0.00%
Foster placement with relative or friend [Connected Carer - not long term or Fostering for Adoption/concurrent planning.	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%
Foster placement with other Foster Carer - long term fostering.	47.83%	52.17%	0.00%
Foster placement with other Foster Carer - not long term or Fostering for Adoption/concurrent planning.	45.33%	54.67%	0.00%
Children's Homes.	35.14%	62.16%	2.70%
Residential accommodation not subject to 'Children's Homes Regulations'.	38.89%	61.11%	0.00%
Other placements.	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%
All Residential schools, except where dual-registered as a school and children's home.	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%
Totals	44.22%	55.44%	0.34%

PLACEMENT TYPE	WHITE BRITISH	WHITE IRISH	WHITE AND BLACK AFRICAN	WHITE AND BLACK CARIBBEAN	WHITE IRISH	ANY OTHER WHITE BACKGROUND	INDIAN	GYPSY/ROMA	CHINESE	ANY OTHER MIXED BACKGROUND	ANY OTHER ETHNIC GROUP
Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility.	24					1				1	
Independent living, e.g. in flat, lodgings, bedsit, Bed and Breakfast or with friends, with or without formal support.	2										
Family centre or mother and baby unit.	2										
Foster placement with relative or friend [Connected Carer] - long term fostering.	15									1	
Foster placement with relative or friend [Connected Carer - not long term or Fostering for Adoption/concurrent planning.	21	2	1		2						
Foster placement with other Foster Carer - long term fostering.	77					10		2		3	1
Foster placement with other Foster Carer - not long term or Fostering for Adoption/concurrent planning.	68					3		2			
Children's Homes.	32			1		3			1		
Residential accommodation not subject to 'Children's Homes Regulations'.	16					2					
Other placements.	1										
All Residential schools, except where dual-registered as a school and children's home.											
Totals	258	2	1	1	2	19	1	4	1	1	1

Government statistics state that nationally, children of White ethnicity account for 75% of children, 10% are Mixed or Multiple Heritage, 7% Black/African/Caribbean or Black British, 4% were Asian or Asian British, 3% were Other Ethnicities and 1% were unknown.

At the end of March 2021, 105 of the 312 children looked after lived with fostering families in Herefordshire and 77 were placed with Independent Fostering Agencies, a total of 182 children and young people. There is a close to equal number of males and females, and the vast majority are White British or White Other which is in line with national figures.

5. RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER CARERS

Enquiries, Initial Visits and Approval of Foster Carers

The table below provides the details that relate to the journey of prospective Foster Carers from the point of making an Enquiry through to Agency Decision Maker Approval during the period from April 2020 to March 2021. Data specifically refers to mainstream fostering, which includes Overnight Short Breaks for children with disabilities and Supported Lodgings placements, which provide support for young people in a semi-independent setting:

INITIAL ENQUIRY TO APPROVAL	NUMBER
Number of Initial Enquiries	269
Number of Initial Visits	93 [11 cancelled]
Number of Application Forms Received	35
Number of Approvals	13

The Recruitment Officer attends monthly West Midlands Recruiters Forum where it has been confirmed that Local Authorities across the country find that approximately half of potential carer's who enquire through Facebook do not remain interested in becoming Foster Carer's when their contact is followed up. This is evidenced by 130 of the 269 enquiries made, having been made via Facebook.

Generally, people who enquire on Facebook are often at a very different stage to the majority in terms of their enquiry. Some are curious and just want a bit of information, others are looking at the future, some have just seen the advert and think it's a nice thing to do and some think they were just 'liking' the post without realising it would be followed up with a call back. Then there are others who don't realise they need a spare bedroom and don't actually have one available. Some even say that they haven't seen the advert or clicked on it.

Individuals who are actively looking for information of fostering will most often enquire via our webform, which can be found on the website, or will make a direct phone call or send an enquiry email. It should be said that there are some genuine enquiries made through Facebook and we wouldn't want to lose them.

Eleven Initial Visits were cancelled for the following reasons:

- The Carer decided that it wasn't the right time for them to foster [4]
- Returned to previous vocation [1]
- Cancelled/did not attend virtual Initial Visit and non-responsive to retargeting [4]
- Birth child did not remain interested in being part of a fostering family [1]
- Started a new business [1]

There were 22 prospective carers who either did not complete their Assessment at all or who had not completed their fostering journey by the end of March 2021:

STATUS OF CASE	DETAILS OF PROSPECTIVE CARER CIRCUMSTANCES
Closed	Stage 1: A previous adopter who enquired a couple of times and then went to an Independent Fostering Agency.
Closed	Stage 2: Fell pregnant.
Closed	Stage 2: Applicant withdrew having moved to a new area and wanted to build a support network. Concerns raised by the Social Worker would have led to Assessment being ceased at some point
Closed	Stage 2: Have a son with autism and felt his behaviour had changed during the Assessment so withdrew.
Closed	Stage 2: Safety concerns around the house and issues relating to the lack of availability.
Closed	Stage 2: Ongoing property renovations taking longer than expected.
Closed	Stage 2: A business owner who enquired during lockdown but stopped engaging with the Assessment process.
Closed	Stage 2: Applicants moved house during the Assessment.
Closed	Stage 2: An offence against another person came to the attention of the Council.
Closed	Stage 2: Partner had a previous relationship with underage female and did not disclose alcohol abuse.
Closed	Stage 2: Imitation firearms offence and lack of transparency in relation to a separate DBS caution.
Closed	Stage 2: Initial plans to move bedrooms around not supported by Assessing Social Worker as applicant would be on a different floor to the fostered child.
Closed	Stage 2: Moved to Ireland.
Closed	Stage 2: Data protection concern, father was poorly and the timing wasn't right.
Closed	Stage 2: Decided to move house.

Closed	Stage 2: Applicant had injury to shoulder in August 2021.
On Hold	Stage 2: Moved house. Applicants still wish to foster so maintaining contact.
On Hold	Stage 2: Home improvements. Applicants still wish to foster so maintaining contact.
In Assessment	In Stage 2 of Assessment.
In Assessment	In Stage 2 of Assessment.
In Assessment	In stage 2 of Assessment.
In Assessment	In Stage 2 of Assessment.

The table below provides a more detailed, monthly breakdown of Enquiries across the twelve-month period between April 2020 and March 2021:

[Referrals: the fostering service pay £500 to foster cares who refer family and friends]

2020-2021	NUMBER OF ENQUIRIES	METHOD OF CONTACT	NUMBER OF INITIAL VISITS	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS FROM THESE ENQUIRIES	NUMBER OF CARERS APPROVED
April 2020	21	Social Media 10 Website 11	8 [Virtual Visits]	2	0
May 2020	25	Referrals x 2 Social Media 13 Website 9 Word of Mouth 1	7	4	2
June 2020	30	Referrals x 2 Social Media 13 Website 9 Word of Mouth 1	7	4	0
July 2020	26	Social Media 20 Website 4 Word of Mouth 2	5	0	2
August 2020	27	Referrals x 1 Events 6 Social Media 12 Website 7 Word of Mouth 1	8	2	0
September 2020	30	Referrals x 2 Social Media 15 Website 11 Word of Mouth 2	11	5	0
October 2020	27	Social Media 18 Website 7 Word of Mouth 2	12	1	0
November 2020	25	Referrals x 2 Social Media 18 Website 5	7	3	3
December 2020	12	Social Media 4 Website 8	5	3	1
January 2021	18	Event 1 Social Media 7 Website 8	9	4	2

		Other 2			
February 2021	17	Referral x 1 Social Media 4 Website 10 Word of Mouth 2	7	2	1
March 2021	11	Social Media 3 Website 8	7	2	1

Ofsted found that there continues to be a great interest in enquiries about becoming a Foster Carer and estimate that there were around 137,200 Initial Enquiries from prospective fostering households, which is an increase of around 7%. Despite this, there was a 10% decrease in Applications to become a Foster Carer from March 2019. Although it is difficult to identify the specific reasons for this decrease between April and December 2020; it is reasonable to assume that the pandemic had some impact.

Disclosure and Barring Checks

The process for Statutory Checks [including Enhanced Disclosure and Barring - DBS Checks and Medicals] has been improved to enhance efficiency and timeliness in respect of internal processing. DBS Checks and Medicals are reviewed every three years unless there is specific health need identified.

Additional checks of prospective Foster Carers are undertaken via the Management of Police Information [MoPI] which is considered alongside DBS Checks to maximise the safeguarding and protection of children and young people in our care.

6. INDEPENDENT FOSTER PANEL

Foster Panel Chair's Report [April 2020 – March 2021]

'Foster Panel has maintained its position from March 2020 by continuing to run as a virtual panel. It meets on average fortnightly. It has both an independent Panel Chair and independent Vice Chair. Membership has remained largely stable during the last 12 months with no changes to independent panel members who have retained their commitment to panel. There has been some new additions and changes with internal panel members whom are qualified social workers, seeing some experienced social work staff return onto panel as well. Panel have ensured that with a rolling plan of attendance, panel remains quorate at all times. Panel members continue to demonstrate commitment and a good skill mix with a breadth of experiences, and healthy curiosity and challenge. Panel feedback from attendees often comments on appropriate questioning and that panel experience was welcoming.

The Panel is independent of the Local Authority and its role is to make recommendations for consideration by the ADM on a range of assessments, namely;-

- *Following full assessment applicant's suitability to foster (including kinship/ connected person)*
- *Foster Carers review and consideration for re-approval.*
- *Short Breaks recommendation, following assessment*
- *Consideration for foster carer change in terms*
- *Long Term Matches*
- *Review following a LADO*
- *Recommendations for deregistration*
- *Resignation*
- *A quality assurance and monitoring role, and will provide feedback on the quality of reports.*

There have been a number of changes over the last 12 months including change of personnel to Panel Advisor role. A significant difference is the increased number of new applications, a rise of 30% in the last year. There has been an increased number of kinship assessments, rising from 55% to 71% of all new applications.

Whilst the majority of social worker recommendations made to Panel are recommended for approval, there are occasions where Panel have not agreed with the recommendation and either asked the social worker to explore certain areas with the applicants and bring this back to panel for consideration, or have not approved the social workers recommendation.

Timing and complexity of cases continues to be a challenge, with Panel aiming to hear a maximum of two new applications per Panel sitting.

Coronavirus has continued to have an impact on foster carers, but it has been widely noted at review or long-term match that the lockdown has had a generally positive impact on the looked after children by providing extended opportunity to spend more time in placement and form stronger relationships and bonds with foster carers.

It has also been noted that a large number of resignations have been as a result of the increased uptake of SGO's.'

Laura Ferguson [Independent Chair of Foster Panel]

Foster Panel Cases

During the period April 2020 to March 2021 Foster Panel completed the following types of cases:

FOSTER PANEL ACTIVITY	NUMBER COMPLETED
First Reviews / Annual Reviews	37
Long Term Matches	45
Post Local Authority Designated Officer Involvement [LADO]	4
Short Break Support Assessments	12
Home Reviews	63
Change of Approval	9
End of Stage 2 Assessment Approval	2
Total Number of Cases	172

Foster Panel Advisor

Foster Panel takes place for a full days twice per month. Team Managers share the role of Panel Advisor which has a significant impact on their workload, creating capacity issues. There is a need for a dedicated Panel Advisor to ensure consistency and quality assurance.

7. FOSTER CARER HOUSEHOLDS

The table below provides information about our 370 Foster Carers and their household's as at the end of March 2021. Figures include General Foster Carers, Connected Carers, Short Break Carers and carers who are dual approved as Supported Lodgings providers and either Foster Carers or Staying Put Carers:

FOSTER CARER PROFILE	NUMBER
Number of Foster Carers	370
Number of Fostering Households	210
Number of Households with Two Carers	160
Number of Single Carer Households	50

Of the 210 Foster Carers Households referenced above, 99% are White British and the remaining 1% includes one carer who is 'White-Other', one carer who is Asian/British and one who is Black/Caribbean.

Ofsted estimate that, at the end of March 2021, there were around 44,500 fostering households, in 431 agencies, with around 75,300 approved Foster Carer's looking after approximately 56,500 children. They found that the number of households and the number of Approved Foster Carer's increased very slightly and estimated that there were around 89,200 fostering places, a small increase in approved places. Capacity increased overall, with a 3% estimated increase of filled places, while the number of 'not available places' grew slightly too. The majority of fostering places are still approved by Local Authority Fostering Services. Figures also showed that two-thirds of carers were aged over 50, with a quarter over 60.

It should be noted that at the present time, there is a national shortage of foster care placements. This was acknowledged in November 2020, by Yvette Stanley, Ofsted's National Director for Social Care who commented that fostering placement capacity remains 'not anywhere near enough to meet demand', who further comments that:

'Although today's statistics show a small rise in foster carers and places, there still isn't anywhere near enough to meet demand. The difficulty in recruiting carers with the right skills and experience, along with what is potentially an aging carer population, is a mix that could be storing up trouble for the future.'

8. PLACEMENT TYPES

Short Term Placements

This refers to care that is not currently planned to last until the child ceases to be looked after or until the child reaches eighteen.

Long Term Placements

The legal definition of a long-term foster placement came into effect from 1 April 2015 in The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015 and is defined as:

'An arrangement made by the responsible authority for the child to be placed with a foster carer where the child's plan for permanence is foster care, the foster carer has agreed to act as child's foster parent until the child ceases to be looked after, and the responsible authority has confirmed the nature of the arrangement to the foster carer, parents and the child.'

It is vital that both long-term and short-term placements are made with a long-term view of what the right permanence solution is for the child, providing a high standard of care where their experience, progress and outcomes are tracked and monitored in a meaningful way throughout as part of their Care Plan.

Connected Carer Placements

This refers to a child who is 'looked after' by the Local Authority whilst placed with a family member, a family friend or another known and trusted adult in their network; who the child has a positive and meaningful relationship with, for example, someone who knows the child in a professional capacity. Connected Care arrangements can be short or long-term in nature.

Social Workers must undertake a Viability Assessment under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Care Review (England) Regulations 2010; within 16 weeks of the child being placed. This can be extended by a further 8 weeks in particular circumstances.

Subsequently, the Viability Assessment is presented to the Foster Panel who make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker who will then make a final approval decision. When approved as a Connected Carer, a Supervising Social Worker is allocated and will provide ongoing Supervision and support, visiting the home regularly and undertaking Reviews. Financial support is also provided in line with General Foster Carer fees.

Studies of both unrelated foster care and family and friends care show that permanence can be undermined or inadequately supported when it is not formally recognised. There is a need for clear permanence planning within both unrelated and family and friends foster care, with associated packages of support in place.

Children living with unrelated Foster Carers and those placed with family and friends have similar levels of need but generally, family and friends carers live in significantly more disadvantaged circumstances than unrelated Foster Carers. Family and friends care is not a cheap and easy solution. It requires support and resourcing to work well and to ensure the successful permanence that we want for every care experienced child in Herefordshire.

Looked after children who live with family and friends carers can do at least as well as those children who are placed with unrelated foster carers, in terms of outcomes, including emotional and behavioural development and placement stability.

Special Guardianship Order Placements

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced Special Guardianship Orders which are made by Family Court and determines that a child or young person be placed with someone other than their parents on a long-term basis. On this premise, the person[s] with whom the child lives becomes their 'Special Guardian'; enabling them to have day-to-day control and to exercise their Parental Responsibility. Special Guardianship is a legal form of permanence for children and young people which excludes the intervention of the Local Authority.

It is possible to apply to become a Special Guardian if you are a Local Authority Foster Carer who the child has lived with for a period of at least one year; if the child has lived with you for three of the last five years; if you are the child's Guardian; if the child is in Local Authority care and they consent to your application; you have a Child Arrangements Order or a Residence Order in respect of the child; you are a relative of the child and they have lived with you for at least one year immediately prior to your application; or if you have the permission of the Court to make an application. Joint applications for Special Guardianship can be made.

A means tested Special Guardianship Allowance can be applied for in line with the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005.

Respite Care Placements

Respite care provides the opportunity for Foster Carers and children to have planned breaks or urgent breaks for a specific/limited period of time such as a weekend or perhaps a week or two. The same child may be placed with Respite Carer's at regular intervals, or one-off support may be required. This can prevent disruption and breakdown of placements.

Children may have a high level of complex needs, for example, special educational needs or disabilities. They may have experienced trauma which is impacting their emotions, behaviour's and relationships. Respite care placements are beneficial in supporting carers, minimising disruption, preventing placement breakdown therefore contributing towards placement stability.

Foster to Adopt Placements

Here, a child in care is placed with Foster Carers who have also been approved as adopters whilst birth parents are assessed by the child's Social Worker who then reports to the Court with a recommendation for the child's future care. If the Court decides that adoption is in the best interest of the child, the Foster Carers become adopters [by making an application to the Court to formally adopt] and the placement becomes an adoption placement. In Herefordshire, these placements are managed by our Regional Adoption Agency [RAA] which became a requirement in 2015 and regional Local Authorities were expected to come together and collaborate in order to address inefficiencies, matching, recruitment and adoption support. The RAA for Herefordshire is Adoption Central England [ACE], which brings together Coventry, Herefordshire, Solihull, Warwickshire and Worcestershire to increase the range of services for adoptive families in the region. The Family Finding/Early Permanence part of Herefordshire's Adoption Service remains with the Council as part of the Child Protection and Court Team.

Foster to Adopt placements can facilitate early permanence and stability for the child, minimising the disruption caused by repeated placement moves...enabling them to experience a loving, nurturing and secure home where they feel safe and have a true sense of belonging.

Children who are older when they enter care face particularly distinct and often more arduous needs, with a constraining implications on their opportunities to accomplish permanence.

Research clearly identifies the essential nature of not only legal permanence but additional solutions that meet/match the individual lifetime needs of each child. All pathways to permanence should be considered, planned and supported on an equal basis with personalised best interest decision-making for every child.

Routes to permanence include a permanent return to birth parents; shared care arrangements [including regular short-break care]; permanence within the care system [whether in a residential placement, an unrelated foster care placement *or in the care of* family and friends care]; or legal permanence [through adoption, Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders which determines where a child lives and who they have contact with].

Staying Put Arrangements

Since May 2014, young people who are fostered have had the right to remain with their Foster Family when they reach 18 years of age provided both parties are in agreement. Local Authorities are required to facilitate, monitor and support fostered young people until they reach the age of 21. When in a Staying Put Arrangement, the young person is no longer 'looked after'.

The young person must be a Former Relevant Child [continuing to be helped with education or training by the Local Authority at the aged 18-21] and is entitled to support as a Care Leaver until they are 25; in line with the Leaving Care Act 2020. They will be allocated a Personal Adviser.

When a child or young person enters care, they are allocated a Social Worker. When they reach 16 years of age, they are allocated a Personal Adviser [PA] who will work with them and their Social Worker until they reach the age of 18. After the young person becomes 18, their PA will become their main worker and they will no longer have an allocated Social Worker.

Carers become 'Former Foster Carers' in relation to a young person who is Staying Put. However, they can continue as Foster Carers for other children and young people in care. Although the placement is no longer governed by Fostering Services Regulations, [for the young person that has reached 18 years] the foster Carer will still be subject to Ofsted Inspection while there are children placed with them that are under the age of 18 years and are deemed as a child in care.

Supported Lodgings Placements

This is a resource for children in care and Care Leavers aged 16-21 years [25 years if in education or training]; in line with their Pathway Plan and where they are assessed as being prepared/ready for semi-independence in accommodation where support is available. Having said this, there are some concerns about some children under the age of 18 who are not prepared/ready being moved to Supported Lodgings. It is imperative that young people are able to cope within this setting both emotionally and practically.

The table below details the number of Supported Lodging households, the number of placements available and the number of young people placed:

MONTH	NUMBER OF SUPPORTED LODGINGS HOUSEHOLDS	NUMBER OF FULL TIME PLACEMENTS	NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN PLACEMENTS
April 2020	17	30	19
May 2020	18	31	20
June 2020	19	34	21
July 2020	20	35	21
August 2020	20	35	20
September 2020	20	35	22
October 2020	20	35	25
November 2020	19	34	24
December 2020	19	34	23
January 2021	19	33	22
February 2021	19	33	22
March 2021	18	33	22
TOTALS	229	402	261

Short Break Placements [Overnight/Sleepover]

This service provides family-based overnight short-break care to children with disabilities who ordinarily live at home with their parents. The table below provides details of Short Break placements activity from April 2020 to March 2021:

SHORT BREAK PLACEMENT ACTIVITY	NUMBER
Number of Enquiries	11
Number of Carers Approved	2
Number of Carers who Withdrew or Resigned	2
Number of Children Placed	2

There are currently an insufficient number of Overnight Short Break Carers. Efforts to increase capacity by securing additional placements with existing carers has been difficult as the majority prefer to offer one placement to one child from one family. Thus this will be a priority in our Marketing and Recruitment Strategy.

Where feasible, carers are dual approved to help meet the needs of children living with their parents and those who are looked after, in order to support general Foster Carers and to prevent placement disruption/breakdown.

Complementing the Fostering Service in identifying respite placements for children with disabilities who are care experienced is an important function of the Short Breaks provision. The Marketing and Recruitment Strategy referenced earlier will consider various options of recruiting Short Break Carers to increase capacity.

Private Fostering Arrangements

Private Fostering is an arrangement whereby a child under the age of 16 [or 18 if the child has a disability], under Section 66 of the Children Act 1989; and is placed for 28 days or more in the care of someone who is not the child's parent[s] or a Connected Carer.

The law regarding Private Fostering changed greatly following the death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 who was privately fostered by her Great Aunt. Legislation introduced after Victoria's death requires Local Authorities to be proactive in investigating potential private fostering arrangements.

The Government ceased publishing statistics on notifications of Private Fostering Arrangements and closed the Private Fostering data collection for Local Authorities in 2016. This means that it is not possible to make any comparison relating to our statistical or regional neighbours.

Types of Placement

Below is a breakdown of the types of placement where our 312 children in care were accommodated at the end of March 2021:

TYPE OF PLACEMENT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
General Foster Carers	105	<u>34%</u>
Independent Foster Agencies	77	<u>25%</u>
Connected Carers	42	<u>13%</u>
Residential Care	43	14%

Adoption Related Placements	14	4%
Supported Accommodation	7	2%
Hospital	1	0.3%
Placed with Parents	20	6%
Supported Lodgings	2	0.6%
Not Recorded	1	0.3%

Nationally, the majority of children in care are in foster placements [71%]. The proportion placed with Connected Carers [relatives or friends] has increased slightly at 15% compared to 14% last year. This correlates with the data in the above table which illustrates that 72% are in foster care and of these, 13% are with Connected Carers.

It is notable that 31 children and young people are not shown here as a consequence of achieving permanence via Special Guardianship Order.

As referenced earlier, the Fostering Service Marketing and Recruitment Strategy is focused on increasing the number of in-house placements which will reduce reliance on the use of more expensive placements with Independent Fostering Agencies that are often outside of the Authority.

9. RESIGNATIONS

The table below provides information relating to the number of Foster Carer Resignations and confirms the reason for leaving where available. Where the reason for resignation is stated as 'other', carers will often have come to a natural end in their fostering career or have decided to resign for other personal reasons such as ill health or changes in their circumstances:

DATE OF FOSTER PANEL		REASON FOR RESIGNATION
1	22.4.20	Special Guardianship Order
2	22.4.20	Other
3	6.5.20	Other
4	6.5.20	Other
5	27.5.20	Other
6	27.5.20	Other
7	10.6.20	Special Guardianship Order
8	22.6.20	Other
9	12.8.20	Other
10	12.8.20	Other
11	12.8.20	Reunification
12	2.9.20	Special Guardianship Order
13	2.9.20	Special Guardianship Order
14	2.9.20	Reunification
15	16.9.20	Other
16	16.9.20	Other
17	14.10.20	Special Guardianship Order
18	14.10.20	Special Guardianship Order
19	14.10.20	Special Guardianship Order

20	4.11.20	Placement Ended
21	4.11.20	Transferred to Independent Fostering Agency
22	4.11.20	Special Guardianship Order
23	2.12.20	Other
24	6.1.21	Supported Lodgings
25	6.1.21	Supported Lodging Placement
26	6.1.21	Other
27	6.1.21	Other [New Partner]
28	3.2.21	Staying Put
29	3.2.21	Other
30	17.2.21	Special Guardianship Order
31	17.2.21	Other
32	17.2.21	Special Guardianship Order
33	17.2.21	Special Guardianship Order
34	17.2.21	Other
35	10.3.21	Other
36	10.3.21	Other
37	24.3.21	Special Guardianship Order

There was a total of 37 Foster Carer Resignations and 11 of these became Special Guardians [29.72%], securing the child or young person's long-term placement; giving carers Parental Responsibility with the obligation to maintain links with birth parents.

Ofsted's 'Fostering in England 2019-2020' recognized that the majority of Foster Carer's in England are over the age of 50. As at 31 March 2020, Carer's aged 20 to 39 had 67% of available places with children in them, while those aged 55 plus had 62%. The older the carer is, the more likely that there was a greater proportion of 'not available' places and likely, resignations.

10. PERFORMANCE DATA

KEY
Target
Target Not Met
Within 10% of Target
Target Met

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	TARGET	Apr 20	May 20	Jun 20	Jul 20	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21
Number of Newly Approved General Foster Carers	None	1	1	2	2	1	1	0	3	1	0	2	0
Number of Newly Approved Connected Carers	None	1	4	0	3	4	2	2	4	1	4	1	2
Number of De-Registered Carers	None	7	4	4	3	4	5	2	3	2	0	0	0
% of Children with 3+ Placements in the Last 12 Months [lower is better].	10%	7%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%	9%	10%	9%	9%	9%	10%
% of Children in Placement for Over 2.5 Years	70%	74%	72%	70%	69%	67%	69%	66%	62%	61%	62%	63%	67%

% of Foster Carers with Up to Date DBS Checks	None	79%	76%	71%	68%	68%	68%	65%	21%	58%	56%	45%	41%
% of Foster Carers with Annual Reviews Within Timescale	None	94%	94%	93%	93%	93%	93%	93%	73%	92%	90%	67%	68%
% of Foster Carer Visits Within Timescale	None	91%	91%	92%	91%	91%	90%	88%	27%	85%	78%	23%	32%
% of Social Workers with Monthly Supervision		100%	93%	94%	89%	95%	89%	94%	26%	84%	83%	94%	21%

The information in the table above shows our performance is significantly below the expected standards. Performance has been hampered by capacity issues within the teams, resulting in high caseloads. It also needs to be noted that our Mosaic data is not accurately reflecting our performance; data is not always up to date and accurate and is therefore unreliable.

The capacity of analysts to make the service related changes on Mosaic has been very limited and progress has been fragmented and slow. In the next few months we will concentrate on a data cleansing exercise to ensure that our data accurately reflects our performance. There will also be a focus on supporting Social Workers to improve their performance by ensuring that our Foster Carers are visited within the expected timescales; and that DBS Checks and Annual Reviews are undertaken in a timely manner. Work will also be undertaken to support Team Managers to ensure that Supervising Social Workers are supervised monthly.

We acknowledge that we need targets to measure our performance against. We will work with the Performance Team to ensure that we put targets in place. These will be determined within the next 3 months and will be based on national and regional guidance.

11. FOSTER CARER SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT

Supervision and Support

The caseloads of Supervising Social Workers are high and this has negatively impacted on their ability to undertake three monthly Visits.

The Fostering Network

Our Foster Carers have access to the Fostering Network, which provides support, advice and information to prospective and approved Foster Carers on a range of issues that affect them in their role; including Allegations, Approvals, Delegated Authority, safer caring, education, finance, legislation, and relationships with the Fostering Service. A Helpline is accessible from Monday to Friday, 10am until 3pm, providing information and guidance on all matters affecting foster carer's and fostering services including those mentioned above.

Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service [HIPSS]

Herefordshire Intensive Support Service is commissioned from Action for Children, to provide therapeutic support to specialist carers and offering young people the opportunity to 'step down' from residential care into family based care. Wrap around support reduces the risk of placement 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.

Training and Development

In response to the safety restrictions related to the Covid 19 Pandemic, all Foster Carer training has been delivered either virtually or online in order to ensure that prospective and approved Foster Carers have been able to complete all required training. This includes Skills to Foster Training preparatory training, all mandatory training and specialist training.

During the period April 2020 to March 2021 our carers have accessed 20 online courses. Additionally, there have been 192 virtual training events. One hundred prospective carers completed the 'Skills to Foster' preparation training:

DATE	VIRTUAL TRAINING DELIVERED	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
April 20	None [Emphasis on registering carers for online training via the Training Hub. Face to face training was all cancelled and virtual training had not been developed at this stage.	None
May 20	None	None
June 20	None	None
2nd/ 9th July 20	EcPact UK Safe Accommodation and Child Victims of Trafficking Missing from Care.	9 Foster Carers and 8 staff
9.9.20	Self-Care and Wellbeing	6
25.9.20	An Introduction to Special Educational Needs	3
25.9.20	Foster Carer Finances: Tax, National Insurance and Self- Assessment	11
29.9.20	Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder	4
6.10.20	Looking After Gypsy and Traveller Children	7
9.10.20	Staying Safe: Protective Behaviour	6
14.10.20	Promoting Positive Family Time	26
4.11.20	Promoting Effective Communication with Children	6
8.12.20	Managing Challenging Behaviour, De-Escalation and Emotion Coaching	16
9.11.20	Talking about Sex and Healthy Relationships with Children and Young People [Two Part Course]	6
13.11.20	Understanding the Teenage Brain	20
16.11.20	Understanding Home Point and Universal Credit	8
1.12.20	Supporting Literacy in Primary Aged Children	4
19.1.21	Allegations	17
10.02.21	Caring for Children with Disabilities	14
3.3.21	Caring for Gypsy and Traveller Children	7
9.3.21	Talking to Young People about Drugs [Part 1]	8
16.03.21	Drugs Awareness and What to do if it all goes Wrong [Part 2]	
31.3.21	Internet Safety with Fastershire	14

Total Number		192
DATE	ONLINE TRAINING COMPLETED	NUMBER OF CARERS
From	Foundations of Attachment	12
1.4.20-11.2.20	March 2020 – of which only two sessions happened until lockdown started. They were all offered online sessions to complete the training	
8.6.20-13.7.20	Three six session courses were run by Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service [HIPSS]	Cancelled
3.11.20-to 31.3.21		8
Total Number		20
DATE	SKILLS TO FOSTER TRAINING	NUMBER OF ATTENDEES
April 2020	Skills to Foster Training [Preparation Course for Prospective Foster Carers]	13
May 2020		13
June 2020		17
Jul 2020		Cancelled
Aug 2020		Cancelled
Sep 2020		10
Oct 2020		8
Nov 2020		7
Dec 2020		10
Jan 2021		4
Feb 2021		10
Mar 2021		8
Total Number		100
FINAL TOTAL		312

Training is advertised via E-Bulletins and the Annual Training Programme. A number of online training courses were also completed by our carers using the Training Hub Package available. These include mandatory courses and elective training courses. This training can be accessed by Foster Carers, Short Break Carers [Sleepovers] and Connected Carers, Supported Lodging Provider's, Staying Put providers and Special Guardianship Order carers.

12. PERMANENCE FOR OUR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

PERMANENCE/STABILITY CRITERIA	END OF MARCH 2021	END OF MARCH 2020
Number of Children Who Left Care Having Achieved Permanency Via Special Guardianship Order Arrangements	31/312 [9.9%]	12/351 [3.5%]
Number of Children With 3 or More Moves in the Last 12 Months	30/312 [10%]	28/351 [8%]
Number of Children Under 16 Years, in Care for 2.5+ Years and in the Same Placement for 2+ Years	87/128 [68%]	112/144 [78%]
Number of Connected Carer Approvals	25	17
Staying Put Arrangements	4	1

The figures above are a clear indication that permanence is being achieved for many of our care experienced children and young people. There has been an increase this year in the number of children and young people who have achieved permanence through Special Guardianship Orders [which secures their long-term home until the age of eighteen] compared to last year. This increase is directly affected by the emphasis on Special Guardianship Orders being considered for all carers with regular meetings to progress this as part of the Looked After Children Reduction Strategy. Carers share Parental Responsibility with parents and are expected to maintain links with them but Special Guardians are able to make day to day decisions independently of them without any involvement from Social Services.

The number for children with three or more moves is relatively low and when considered alongside the number who have remained in the same placement for longer than two and a half years; demonstrates a good level of placement stability. However, work will continue to improve these further.

The placement of children with Connected Carers [family and friends] and young people in Staying Put Arrangements with their Foster Carers up to the age of twenty-one [but no longer remain looked after]; provides further evidence of achieving permanence. We will continue to strive to achieve not just permanence but early permanence.

Early Permanence

Early permanence, stability and a true sense of belonging in a warm, loving and nurturing environment is critical in meeting the needs of our looked after children; to support them through childhood, into adulthood and beyond; giving them a strong sense of identity, security, mutual connectedness, continuity, and commitment.

Permanence is a framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, stability, commitment and identity. Children require consistency and continuity of care in order to provide them with a foundation from which their physical, emotional and developmental needs can be fully met, allowing them to reach their full potential.

A child's need for permanence will best be met by being raised within a secure, stable and loving/nurturing family environment where they feel a true sense of belonging; with carers who can

support them through childhood, into adulthood, and beyond. The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure that this is achieved for every looked after child as early as possible [referred to as early permanence]. Various options exist, all potentially able to meet the needs of and achieve improved outcomes for children; taking their wishes and feelings into account. These include:

- Returning to birth parents.
- Care within the child's wider family and friends network [Connected Care].
- Adoption.
- Long-term Fostering.
- Residential placement until independence.
- Fostering for Adoption / Early Permanence Placements.

Early and effective long-term planning is crucial in preventing looked after children from indefinite 'drift and delay' within the care system. This is damaging to children, as it leads to placement instability and disruption, and ultimately causes significant emotional harm. A clearly articulated plan to achieve permanence for the child must be prepared by their second Statutory Looked After Child Review, which is held within four months of them entering care. The plan to achieve early permanence should form part of the Care Plan for the child.

Early and effective long-term planning is crucial in preventing looked after children from indefinite 'drift and delay' within the care system. This is damaging to children, as it leads to placement instability and disruption, and ultimately causes significant emotional harm

13. SAVINGS FOR FOSTERED CHILDREN

The Fostering Service has implemented a Savings Policy where money is regularly deducted from Foster Carers' allowances by the Finance Team. This will form part of the financial support that our Care Leavers receive.

14. LEAVING CARE

By the age of sixteen, young people should have a Pathway Plan, which should help them to deal with the next stage in their life journey. This may or may not be about leaving care, which must be well planned when young people are prepared and ready to move into semi-independence or full independence. At the age of eighteen, the young person is no longer considered to be in care but the Council must still provide them with support, including the allocation of a Personal Advisor. Care Leavers are entitled to continued help and advice until they reach the age of twenty-five.

With ongoing support, all carers are responsible for promoting independence in a generic sense, and for preparing young people for semi-independence or independence.

15. INDEPENDENT REVIEW MECHANISM [IRM]

The Independent Review Mechanism is a review process which prospective or existing Foster Carer's can use when they do not agree with the qualifying determination given to them by their Fostering Service provider. The review process is conducted by a review panel managed by BAAF [British Association for Adoption and Fostering] on behalf of the Secretary of State for Education, and is independent of the Fostering Service provider.

In line with Regulation 28, the Fostering Service must and will ensure that all Foster Carer's are informed about the process and their right to make representations to the Fostering Service or to

refer to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) within 28 days of any qualifying determination issued by us.

Review Panels are for anyone who has received a Qualifying Determination Letter and wants to challenge a decision made by a Fostering Service provider about their suitability to foster or adopt; or foster parent terms of approval relating to Applications that have been submitted within the right timescales, and accessing protected information about adoptees' birth records.

16. INDEPENDENT FOSTERING AGENCIES

Ofsted's 'Fostering in England 2019-2020' evidences that overall, net capacity increased in both number of households and places available. However, net capacity increased in Independent Fostering Agencies but decreased in Local Authorities.

As at 31 March 2021, Independent Fostering Agencies saw a net increase in capacity with 330 additional households and 560 additional places. In contrast, Local Authorities saw a slight decrease in capacity of 230 households and 490 places.

Local Authorities reported to Ofsted that 59% of approved places were in-house whilst 41% were with Independent Fostering Agencies.

17. SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The table below summarises core service improvement needs identified:

IMPROVEMENT AREA	IMPROVEMENT PLAN	PLANNED DATE OF COMPLETION
Recruitment	Recruit to the vacant posts. Secure funding and recruit a Foster Panel Advisor. Secure funding and recruit to recruit a Marketing Officer,	September 2021
Practice Development	Support Team Managers in relation to Supervision of Social Workers Support Social Workers to improve performance in relation to Visits, DBS Checks and Annual Reviews.	September 2021
Marketing and Recruitment Strategy	The Recruitment Officer and new Marketing Officer [if successfully recruited] to write a new Marketing and Recruitment Strategy.	February 2022
Foster Carer Register	Fostering Regulation 31 requires Local Authorities to maintain a Register of Foster Carers and Connected Carers [Regulation 24 of the Care Planning Regulations], which includes name, address, date of birth, sex, date/review and terms of approval. Herefordshire's Foster Carer Register needs to be revised to ensure that each of the requirements detailed above have been met.	December 2021
Key Performance Indicator [KPI] Target Setting and Improvements	Review current targets, define targets where they have not yet been put in place and improve performance particularly in relation to DBS Checks and Visits to Foster Carers.	July 2021

Improve Mosaic to Fit Service Needs	Work jointly with performance team to secure resources to update Mosaic	December 2021
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