



SCF Independent Fostering Agency

(SCF IFA)

Annual Report 2022-23

Report Summary

This report details our activity throughout the year to provide safe and secure foster care placements to our children looked after, as well as measures taken to increase the recruitment and retention of our in-house foster carers.

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Registered Company: England and Wales:
9487106

Table of Contents

Purpose of the Report	3
Our Commitment.....	3
Promoting Equality and Diversity	5
Inspection	5
Fostering Placement statistics and analysis	9
Recruitment of carers for SCF Independent Fostering Agency	16
Fostering Households	21
Communications.....	22
Foster Carers Feedback	22
Retention of Foster Carers.....	23
Annual Reviews.....	23
Foster Carer Agreements.....	24
Termination / De- registration of foster carers.....	24
Complaints/Allegations	25
Placement Requests	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Placement Stability Meeting/Disruption Meetings.....	26
Fostering Network	27
Supporting and recognising foster carers own children	27
Financial report.....	27
Charms	28
The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM)	28
Family, Friends and Connected Persons (Regulation 24/SGO)	30
Disruption:	32
Support to SGO carers:	32
Support to Family and Friends Reg 24 carers:.....	32
Home from Home family based care	32
Non-Agency Adoption assessments	33
Conclusion	33
References:	33

Purpose of the Report

This report informs Slough Children First (SCF) Board Members, Elected Members, Senior Managers, and the Fostering Panel about the crucial role that our foster carers play in providing high quality care for children who are looked after. Following on from reports in previous years, it provides further details of trends regarding the number and characteristics of children looked after by foster carers as well as a profile of our foster care resource which is managed and provided by the Slough Children First (SCF) as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The report includes an update regarding ongoing developments in the IFA which recruits, assesses and supports foster carers. The report provides information about the activity and outcomes achieved in 2022 by the service and plans for the year 2023/24.

The Fostering service remains child-focused, and the vision aligns with SCF emerging corporate parenting priorities. The strategic priorities for our children in care are shaped and influenced by local and national priorities and we will focus our sufficiency approach through the lens of:

1. Supporting engagement and achievement in education, training, and employment.
2. Ensuring that our children in care and care leavers have stable homes and the right help.
3. We will listen and respond to the voice of our children, young people, and care leavers. They will help to develop and shape our strategic plans and delivery of services.
4. Ensuring that our children, young people, and care leavers are healthy. We will help our children and care leavers to have access to help for their physical needs and emotional wellbeing.
5. Developing a highly effective Care Leavers partnership to provide ongoing help in a variety of ways for them.
6. Supporting children, young people and care leavers to have fun and have new experiences to develop their own interests.

The Annual Fostering Service Report meets the requirements of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (Regulation 35) and Fostering Services: National Minimum standard 25.7.

Our Commitment

The Independent Fostering Agency within the Company is committed to:

- Providing a range of safe and secure foster placements to meet the assessed needs of children and young people in care and to promote and safeguard their welfare.

- Providing placements that promote stability and positive outcomes for children and young people by working in partnership with children and young people, carers, birth families, other professionals and the community.
- Ensuring Foster Carers and their families receive professional guidance, support and training as appropriate to help them fulfil their roles as effectively as possible.

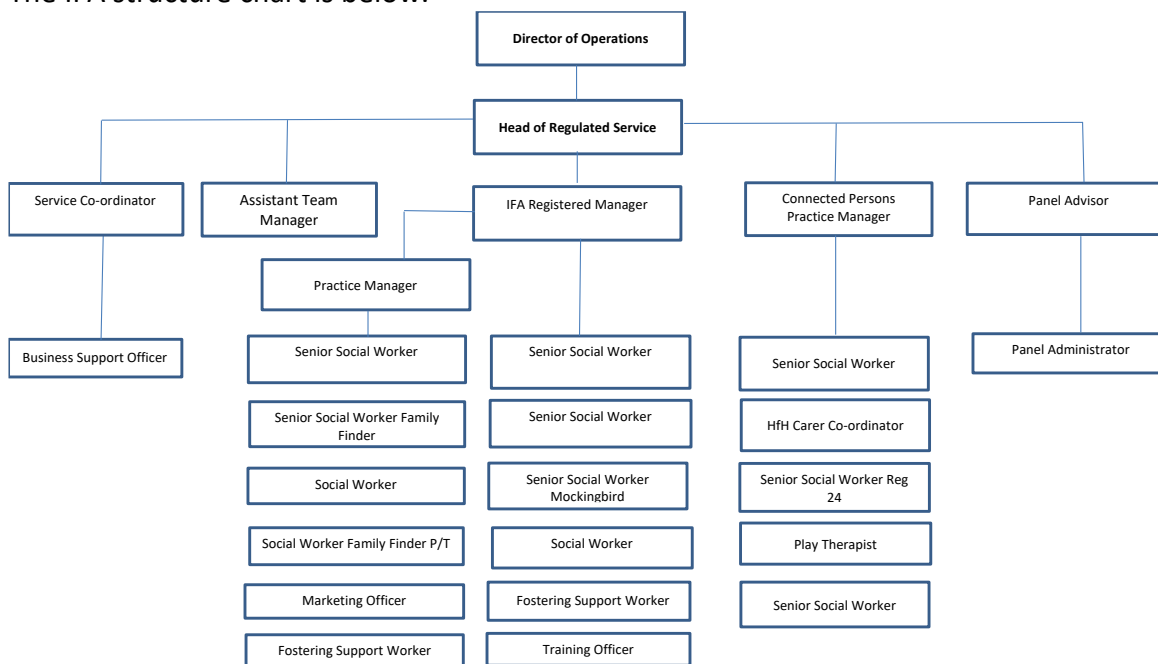
The IFA delivers the following services to meet the needs of children:

- The recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision, support, training, and development of prospective and approved foster carers, including approved family and friends' carers.
- A duty referral service for identifying suitable placement matches with in-house fostering families for short breaks, respite, short term, and long-term placements.
- Family finding and matching for children permanently with carers internally and with external providers if there is no in-house resource available.
- A Fostering Panel, with an Independent Chair make recommendations on the suitability of foster carers. The panel is supported by a Panel Advisor and a Panel Administrator.
- A comprehensive learning and development programme for foster carers with a range of topics.
- A dedicated Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to undertake annual and three yearly independent reviews of foster carers.
- Out of Hours support to our fostering families.

The day-to-day management of the work of the Independent Fostering Agency is undertaken by the Registered Manager and Fostering Practice Manager in consultation with the Head of Service for the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The responsibility for fostering approvals and permanent match decisions rests with the Director of Operations who is the Agency's Decision Maker. The IFA Head of Service who is also the Responsible Individual is the Agency Decision Maker for all foster carer reviews. The SCF Strategic Leadership Team receives regular information on the management and outcomes of the service to update them about carrying out their responsibilities as corporate parents.

Service Structure

The IFA structure chart is below.



Promoting Equality and Diversity

SCF has an Equal Opportunity Policy which outlines the general position on the protected characteristics as defined within the Equality Act 2020. These policies apply to the recruitment and retention of foster carers and to the care of looked after children. In April 2023, Slough Borough Council (SBC) and SCF approved Care Leaver's (care experienced young people) as a Protected Characteristic. The IFA wholeheartedly supports the principle of equality of opportunity and opposes all forms of discrimination on the grounds of race, creed, nationality, ethnicity or national origin, religion, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, medical condition, disability and age. It is in both the service's best interest and those who work with the service to ensure that the attributes, talents, and skills available throughout the community are recognised and utilised in the interests of children looked after. To this end, the overriding principle is that the foster carers recruited and approved are those best able to provide a stable and safe home for children in care.

Inspection

The Fostering Service is independently inspected and was graded as **'Good'** in the July 2021 Ofsted inspection. The Ofsted grading of 'Good' is a positive demonstration of the progress the service has made over the years and the improved service we offer children, young people, and families in Slough. The IFA continues to strive for excellence and working towards continuous improvement, alongside SCF's Improvement and Business Plan ambitions, as we move to the next stage of our improvement journey.

Our Foster Carers Profile and Fostering Placement statistics and analysis.

- On 31st March 2023 we had:



45 mainstream Fostering Households



81 individual foster carers

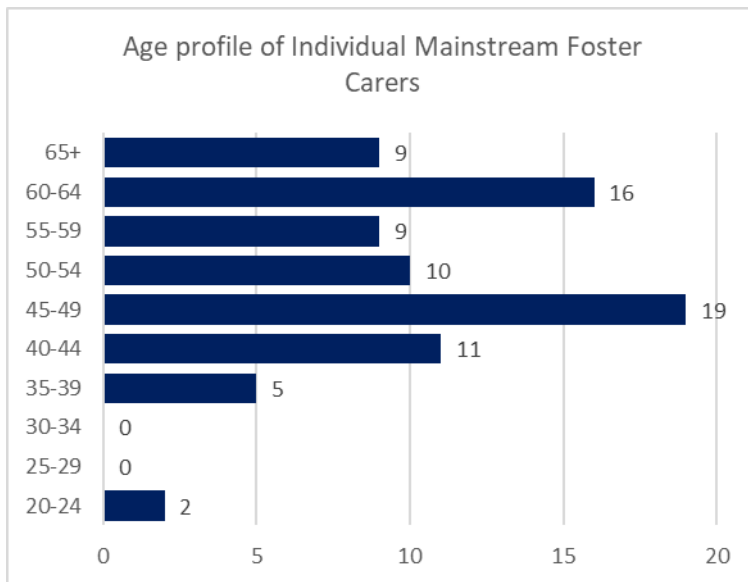


36 Male foster carers

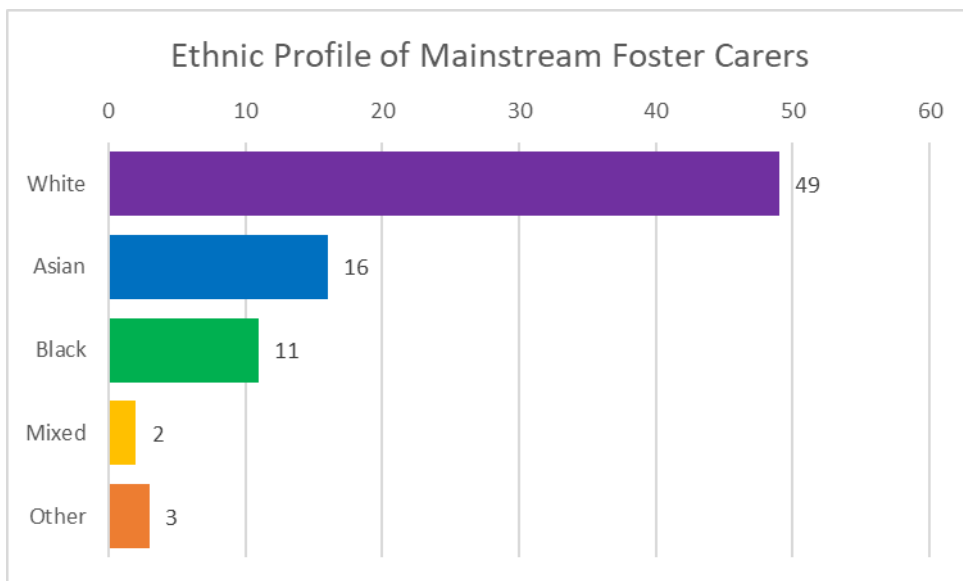


45 Female foster carers

Our foster carers are representative of wide range of age groups, with our youngest carers aged between 20-24 and our oldest carers aged between 60 – 65. Most carers are aged between 40 and 49.

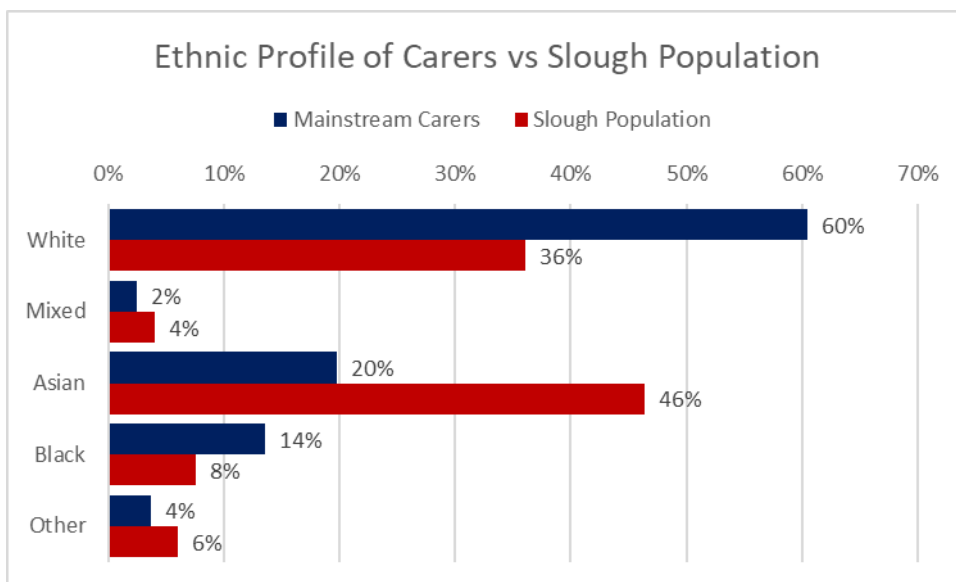


There were 9 single carer households



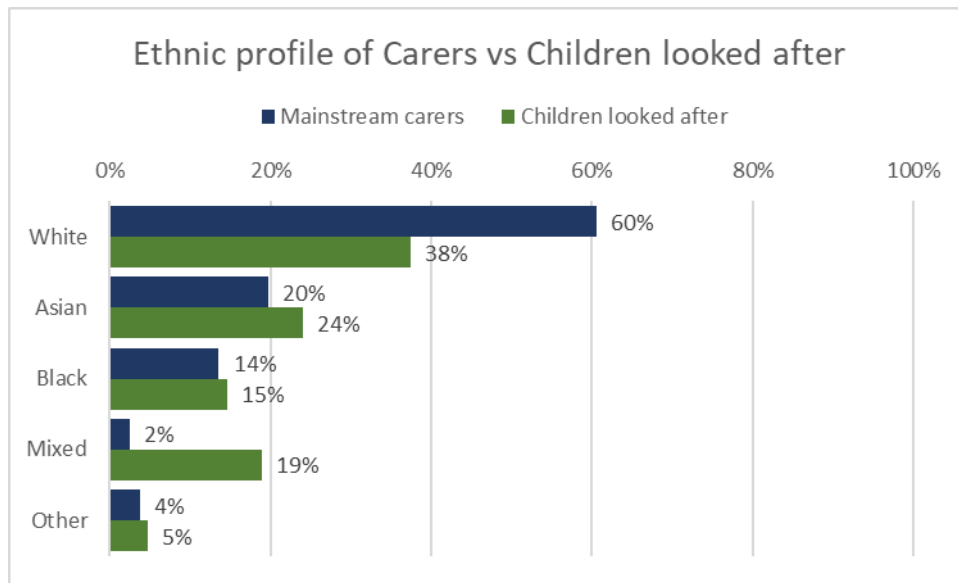
Although the majority of carers (60%) are from a white background, there is representation from other communities, with 20% of carers from the Asian community, 14% from the black community, 2% from a mixed background (dual heritage) and 4% from other backgrounds.

When compared to the Slough population, there is over-representation of carers from a White and Black community. Carers from an Asian background are significantly underrepresented.



Similar comparisons can be drawn when comparing the profile of carers against children looked after. There is an overrepresentation of carers from the White community and under representation of those from the Asian community. Of note is the significant under representation of carers from a mixed background (2%) with 19% of Slough children looked after being from a mixed background. A key focus of revised recruitment strategy and action plan is to provide targeted recruitment activity to seek foster carers from

diverse backgrounds that are representative of children looked after population and reflective of the different needs of the children we look after.



The majority of our foster carers are from the UK, we have foster carers from all over the world including the Caribbean, Africa, South East Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Mainland Europe.



The average time that a mainstream fostering household has been approved for is 7 years, demonstrating long term stability and support for our children looked after.

The longest serving foster carer has been with Slough for 19 years and 10 months.



Fostering Placement statistics and analysis - April 2022 to March 2023 of Children Looked After in SCF.

Gender of our Children Looked After

98

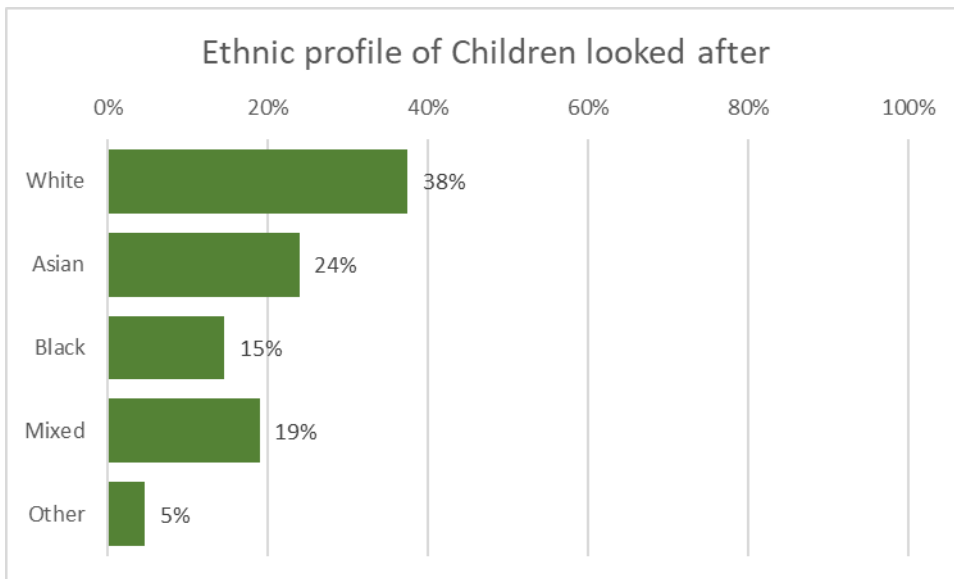


Are female

155



Are male



Under 1 year



18

Aged 1-4



31

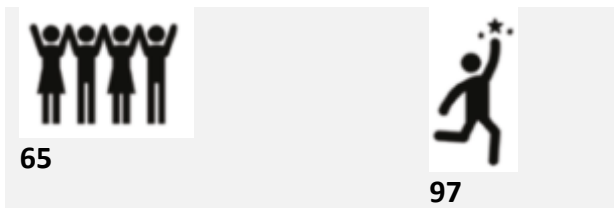
Aged 5 to 10



44

Aged 11-15

Aged 16-17



Slough Children looked after placed with mainstream in house foster carers

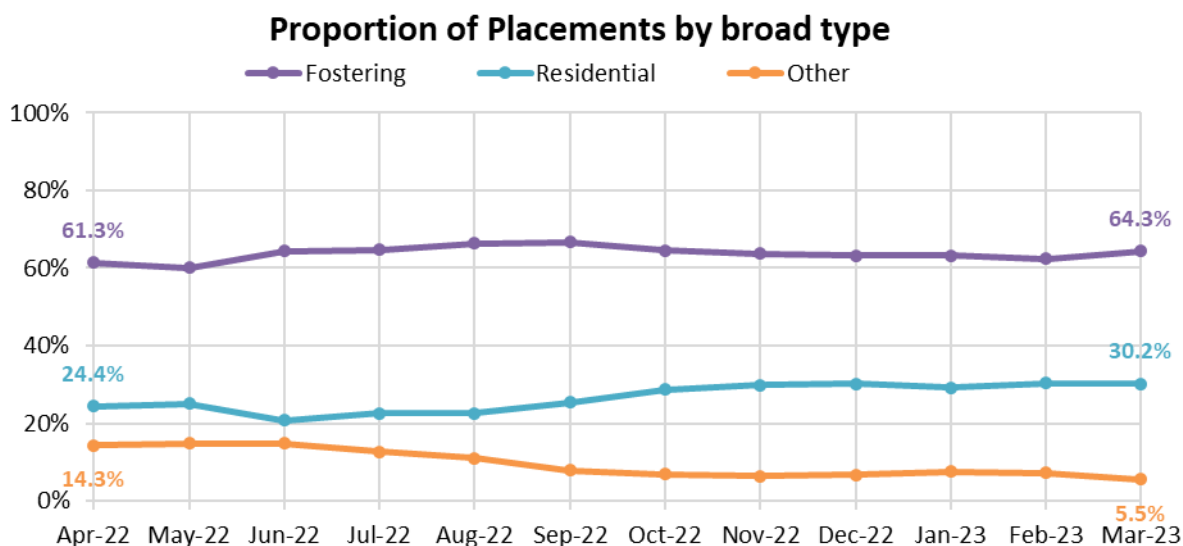
Slough Children looked after placed with External Independent Fostering Agencies



Slough Children looked after placed with Friends and Family foster carers.



The proportion of children looked after in SCF and placed in any type of foster placement has increased in the last 12 months, from 61.3 % at the end of April 2022 to 64.3% at the end of March 2023. Residential type placements (this includes semi-independent, children’s homes, mother and baby placements etc.) saw the largest increase in the last 12 months; this is due to an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children requiring our support and services due to absent parenting, over this 12-month period who are placed in semi-independent accommodation outside of the Fostering Service.



Between April 2022 and March 2023, the overall number of foster placements increased from 146 to 164 children. There was an ‘in year high’ of 164 fostering placements and a low of 146 whilst residential placements (including semi-independent placements) rose from 58 children in (April -2022) to 77 in (March-2023).

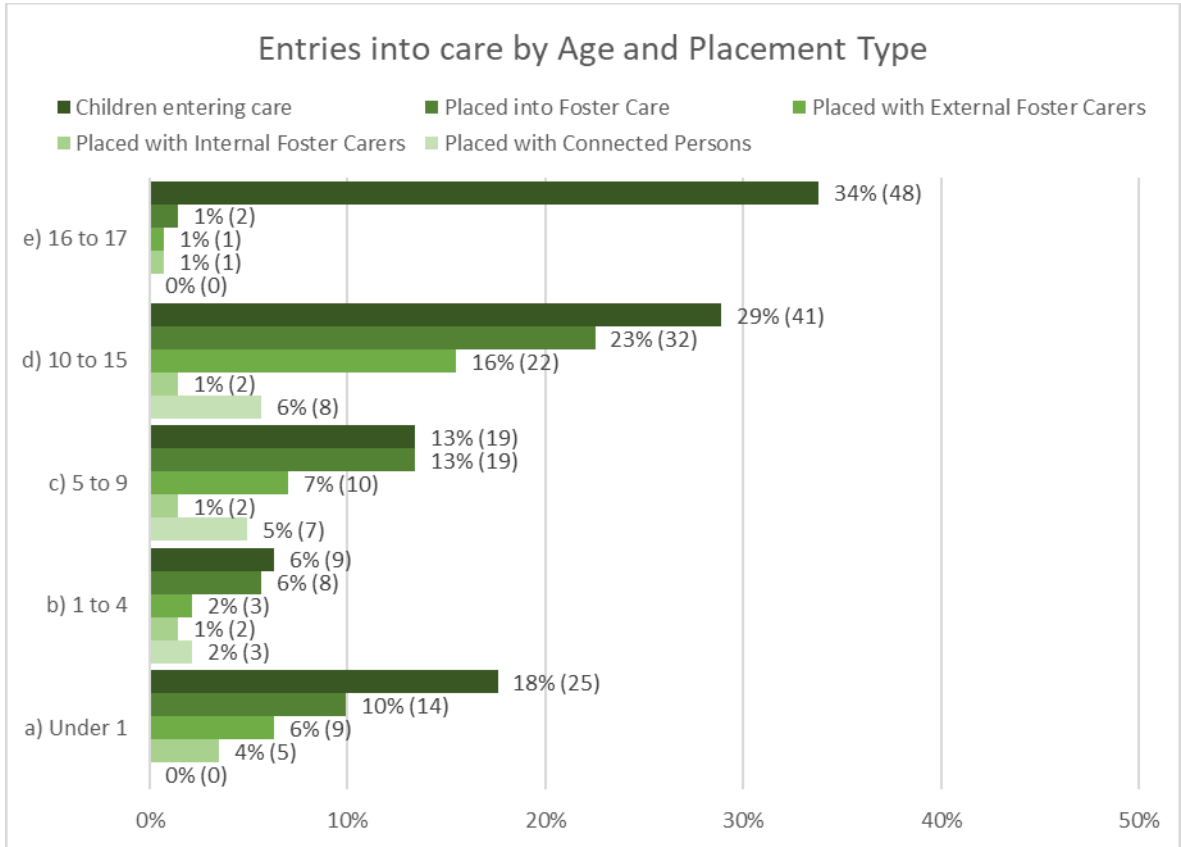
External Fostering placements increased to a high of 98 (Oct-22, 58% of fostering placements at the time), whilst the high for the In-house Fostering placements was 44 (Mar 2023, 17% of fostering placements at the time). The highest number of children in Connected Carer (Friends and Family) placements in year was 34 (Jul-22, 24.7% of all fostering placements at the time).

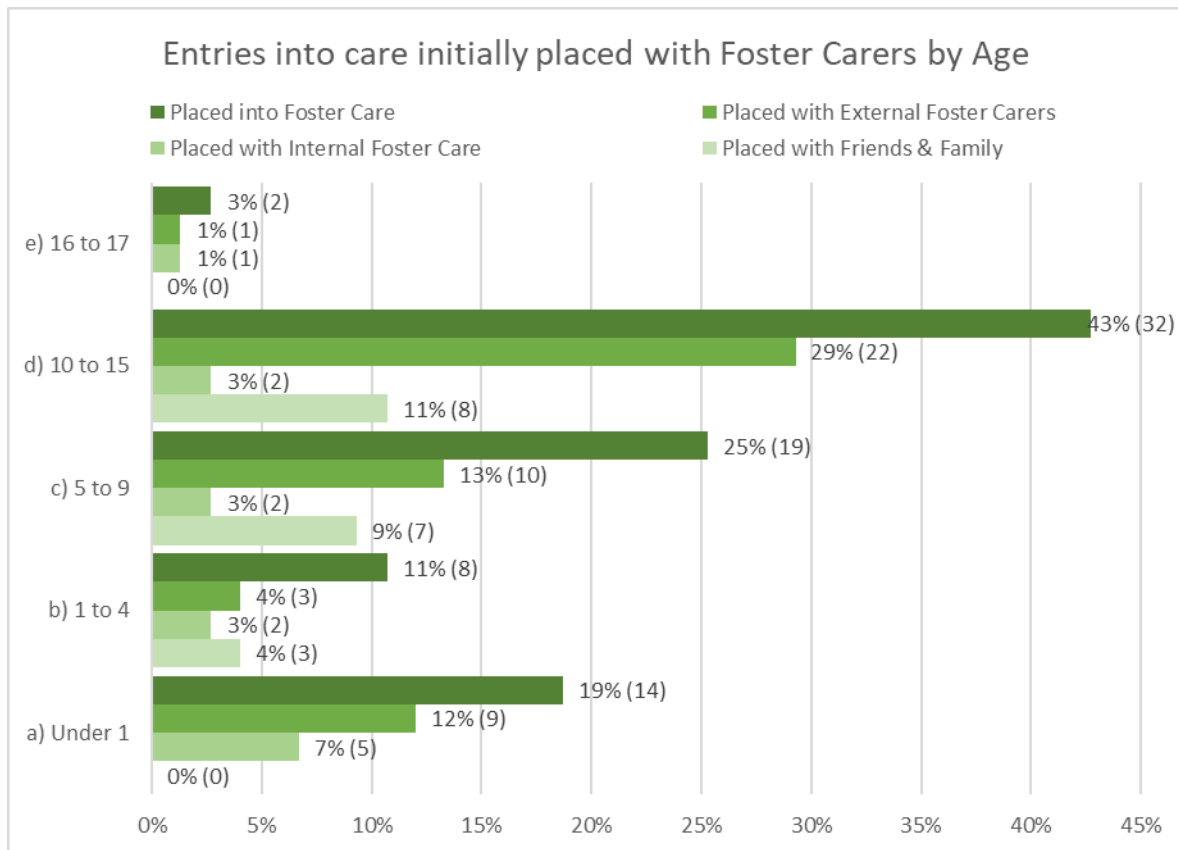
In terms of age of children entering care, proportionally most of the children that came into care in 2022-23 were aged 10 and over (63%) , with a third aged 16-17. Of all the children entering care in the year, 52.8% were initially placed in fostering placements. This consisted of 45 children (31.7%) placed with external foster carers, whilst 12 children (8.5%) were initially placed with in-house carers, and 18 children (12.7%) were initially placed with Connected Carers (friends and family) carers.

When looking exclusively at the 75 children in year that were initially placed with foster carers on their entry into care, we can see from their ages that 24% of the cohort of children were aged 10 and over, whilst 29% of the cohort were aged 5 and under. This highlights the need for targeted recruitment of foster carers to support children age 10+ and for teenagers. Our Sufficiency Strategy for 2023/26 highlights the sufficiency gaps for children by age, informing our Fostering Recruitment & Retention action planning for the forthcoming year in regard to targeted recruitment.

67% of children over 10 were placed with foster carers from external IFA’s, further highlighting the sufficiency gap with our internal IFA for this age group. It is important to highlight that 24% of these children were placed with Connected (friends and family)

carers, which are family or friends with an existing relationship with a child, who are assessed to care for that child only. 3 children over the age of 10 were placed with in-house carers. In year there were a total of 12 children that were initially accommodated within in house fostering placements (8.5%).





2022-23, saw an increase in the duration of time that children are in care. Proportionately, the largest increase related to children requiring care for a period between 1-6 months (this increased by 38%) and those requiring care for a period between 7-12 months (increased by 39%). This demonstrates that children are remaining in our care for longer periods of time, and therefore increasing demand on the provision of foster care placements able to provide care for children over extended periods of time.

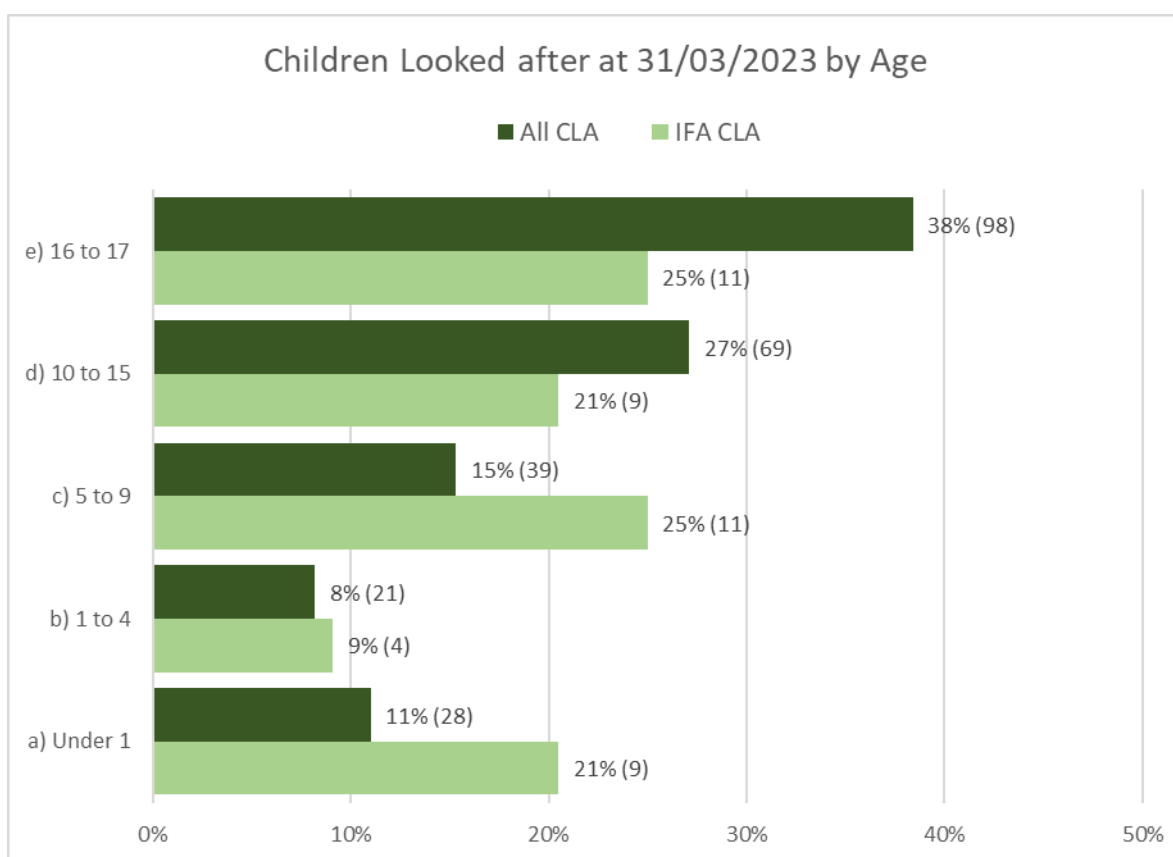
34 of these children (31%) were our unaccompanied asylum seeking children; and whilst these young people are predominantly aged between 16/17 years, this demonstrates the sufficiency demand for semi-independent provision.

The number of children looked after for 10 or more years increased from 4 to 8 children over the course of the year. This means that those children placed with IFA foster carers, of this age, are staying longer due to the stability of the placements and requiring long term care arrangements.

Duration in care	Apr-22	Mar-23	Numerical Change	% Change
under one month	7	6	-1	-14.3%
1-6 months	42	58	+16	+38.1%
7-12 months	36	50	+14	+38.9%
1-2 years	48	39	-9	-18.8%

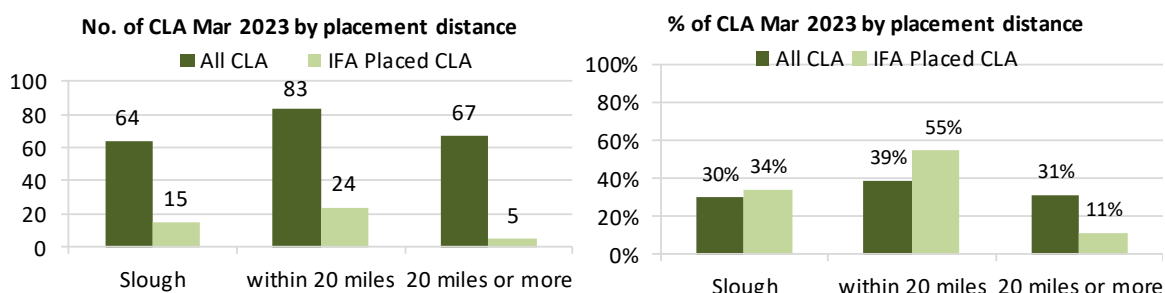
2-5 years	64	61	-3	-4.7%
5-10 years	37	33	-4	-10.8%
over 10 years	4	8	+4	+100.0%
Total	238	255	+17	+7.1%

Similarly when looking at the CLA age population at the end of March 2023. We can see that proportionally more children aged under 10 (55%) are placed within the IFA. The largest cohort of which are those aged 5 to 9 years. 20 children (45.5%) aged 10 and over are placed within the IFA and are in stable placements. Also, some of the older children placed in the IFA moved to independent living through semi-supported accommodation, going to university or moving to independent accommodation evidencing good outcomes for the care experienced children who have become young adults. Young people also remained with their foster carers through Staying Put arrangements (2022/23).



Slough is a small unitary authority with a condensed population. There are many bordering authorities with a 20-mile radius of Slough. When finding a home for a child looked after a priority is for children to remain in Slough or within at least a 20-mile radius, to maintain schools, community, family and friend networks wherever possible. A number of our children looked after (39%) are placed within the 20-mile radius due to limited provision within the Borough. However, 69% are placed in Slough or within this radius. The 31% of children placed outside of the 20-mile radius indicates the sufficiency planning work required to create more homes, in and around Slough.

Due to our demographic profile many of our internal Foster Carers (IFA) are not located within the borough of Slough but in neighbouring boroughs and Local Authorities. 89% of children placed with IFA foster carers are placed in Slough (34%) or less than 20 miles away (55%).



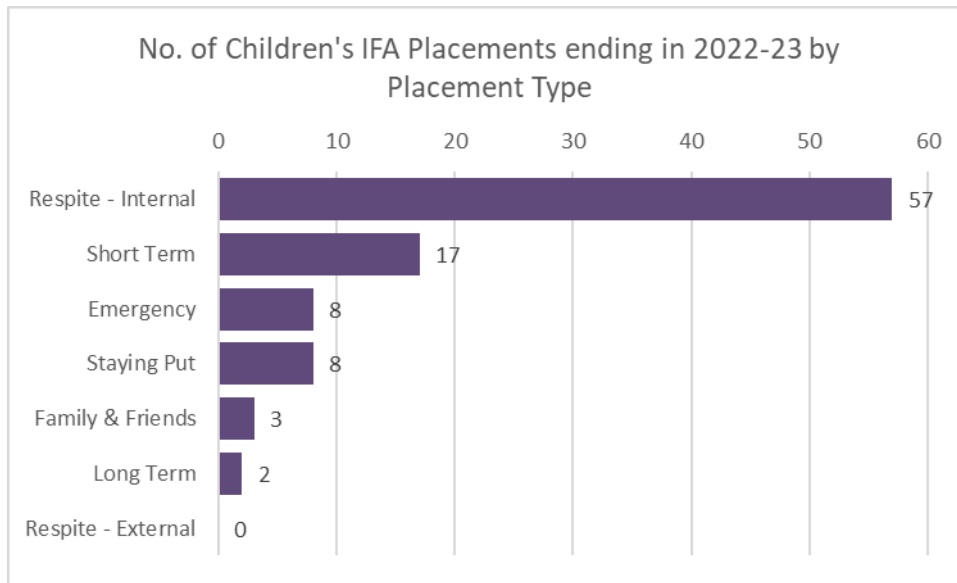
As demonstrated in the table below, during 2022/23 the IFA has identified 10 foster care homes for children in an emergency; and 21 for children requiring short term foster care. A significant area of activity in the IFA is to identify 'respite' foster care, which is another foster care family that provides extended foster care support to the child's main foster care home; during this year 57 'respite' homes were providing wrap around and extended foster care support.

Placement Type	No. of Children Placed in month												Total
	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22	Jul-22	Aug-22	Sep-22	Oct-22	Nov-22	Dec-22	Jan-23	Feb-23	Mar-23	
Emergency	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	2	0	1	0	3	10
Family & Friends	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Long Term	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Respite - External	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Respite - Internal	3	2	2	6	4	4	6	5	9	4	8	4	57
Short Term	0	2	2	4	2	1	0	4	1	1	2	2	21
Staying Put	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	5
Total (exc Staying put)	3	4	6	10	6	7	6	11	10	6	10	9	88
Total (inc Staying put)	3	6	6	11	6	7	6	12	10	7	10	9	93

Over the year, the number of children in long term placements (including those with friends and family) has decreased because of these children reaching 18. The number of short-term placements increased from 26 to 31.

8 young people (18-21y) who remained with their foster care family on a Staying Put arrangement ended. For example, as young people progressed to University or to independent accomodation.

During this period 1 Connected Carer resigned as the young person turned 18 but had remained via a staying put arrangement.



Comparing 2021/2022 to 2022/2023 placements offered.

In 2021/22 financial year there were 69 children accommodated by the IFA as compared to 93 children in the 2022/23 financial year, thus evidencing a 16.6% increase in the number of placements offered by SCF IFA in the current financial year.

Recruitment of carers for SCF Independent Fostering Agency

Fostering recruitment and retention is a key priority for SCF IFA. The service continues to conduct recruitment campaigns that are informed by current research into 'what works' even though the national shortage of foster carers is a complicating factor and working with a finite budget for marketing activity. However, the IFA utilises internal resources to best effect and efficiency and is creative in the approach to marketing responding to the current climate. This has meant we currently have a higher number of assessments in progress (7) when compared to last financial year of (2). There were 4 approvals during this time, which is in line with national trends associated with a shortage in recruiting carers. The IFA's goal is to continue to strive to increase the numbers of fostering households to meet the sufficiency targets and strategy; aiming for an additional 6 to 12 foster care households in 2024/25.

Also, post covid impact such as people going back into work, dealing with post lockdown stress/anxieties and the increase in cost of living has impacted recruitment. The service has also had to deal with low staffing numbers (including not having a marketing officer in post) which increased the pressures on existing staff to manage and assist with assessments and recruitment.

Be that as it may, the IFA continues to prioritise the recruitment of foster carers to meet the ongoing demand for in-house foster placements. Because Slough is a small Borough,

the IFA marketing plan includes reaching beyond the perimeters of Slough and this has yielded results in approved carers and ongoing assessments within this year.

The onus on increasing the skill base of our current and new carers to take on a more diverse and specialist placement for children with increased and complex needs remain part of our recruitment strategy and a tier payment system in our finance policy supports the IFA in implementing this aim.

All enquiries from prospective foster carers are welcomed without prejudice and are responded to promptly and impartially. The SCF IFA microsite within the SCF website includes information about fostering, the different types of fostering, the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval process and subsequent matching and placing processes. There is a skilled Recruitment Advisor available to answer all queries and provide guidance and advice in respect of the fostering application and assessment process.

Applicants also continue to give positive feedback on the recruitment process at panel and the IFA is committed to improving recruitment and is persistently exploring and developing new ideas to increase the number of foster carers in the service. This helps to gauge effectiveness, understand the market, and compete with other agencies.

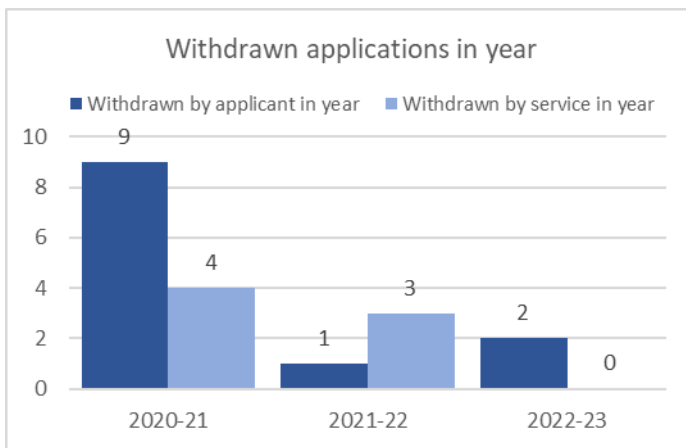
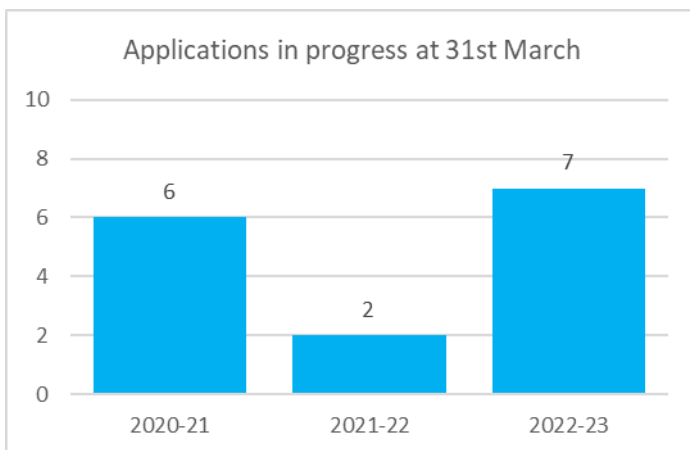
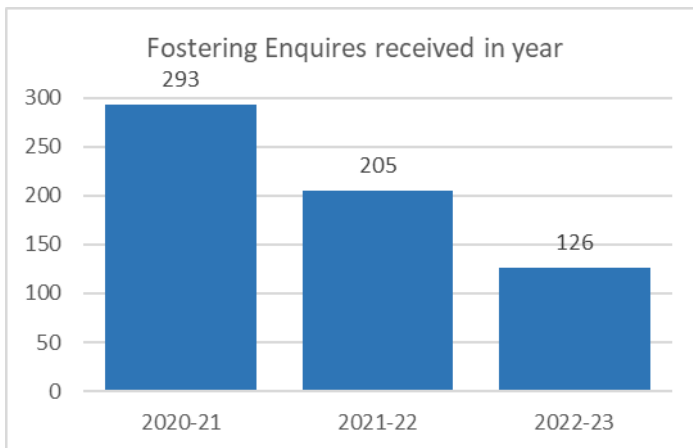
We have been holding face to face marketing activities and recruitment campaigns in the community and this has increased at a steady pace in the review period. Advertising banners have remained at various sites in Slough including roundabouts; outside the office; places of worship, shops, GP surgeries and at local schools just to mention but a few. These have been monitored and relocated during the year to achieve optimum visibility in varying locations within Slough.

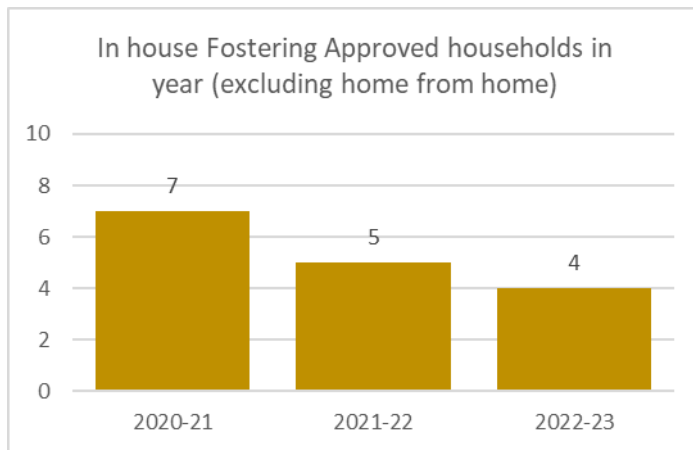
Social media is currently the most prevalent form of attracting new applicants in the IFA. There is a strong presence on the SCF IFA platforms such as Facebook and Instagram which consistently increases interest and generates new leads.

The IFA approved foster carers support recruitment, advertising, and skills to foster training for new applicants. They are committed to supporting and encouraging new applicants to foster for Slough. The refer a friend's scheme remains in place and is used by staff and foster carers to earn additional income through the recruitment process.

Recruitment Statistics

Recruitment campaigns aim to reach all groups within the community in order to facilitate placements that reflect the ethnic, cultural and religious needs of children and young people looked after by Slough Children First.





When comparing last year to this year, though there was a decrease in the approved foster care households from 5 to 4, as of 31st March 2023, however 3 new approvals were agreed by the ADM in April 2023 which increased the overall 45 households to 48 households. Though there is a decline in initial enquiries, the conversion rate shows an increase (250%) in the applications in progress which evidences a higher conversion rate despite the low enquiries. Equally, this demonstrates effective screening of applicants at the point of enquiry.

The IFA Key Target and Priority Areas (As identified in the Sufficiency Strategy 2023/26)

Following the analysis of fostering placements in the previous and current review period, we will increase the numbers and capability of our own foster carers and review our existing carers to develop and match their skills to the needs of our children. We will revise our communication and marketing strategy for the recruitment of foster carers and adopt an ambitious and targeted approach to increase the number of in-house carers. This will also include the development of a therapeutic fostering model and expansion of our Mockingbird constellation, and the creative use of media, work that will be taken forward by a nominated manager. By implementing a targeted and engaging marketing strategy, we will attract more potential foster carers to Slough and help to address the ongoing need for foster carers in the local community. This will be achieved by:

- **Review and refresh our Fostering Agency brand.** To stand out in a competitive market we will review our fostering brand to ensure it reflects our vision, values and intentions, to promote fostering for children in Slough.
- **Develop a comprehensive marketing strategy.** Our marketing strategy will be reviewed to ensure best use of social media, advertising campaigns, word of mouth and community activities to promote and recruit foster carers in Slough and bordering authorities.

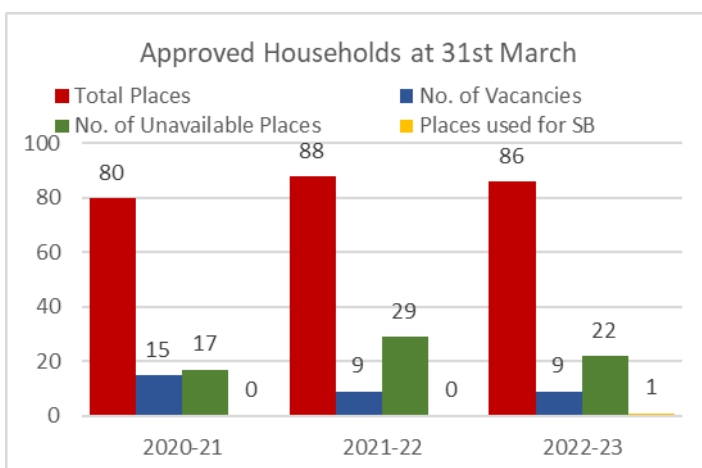
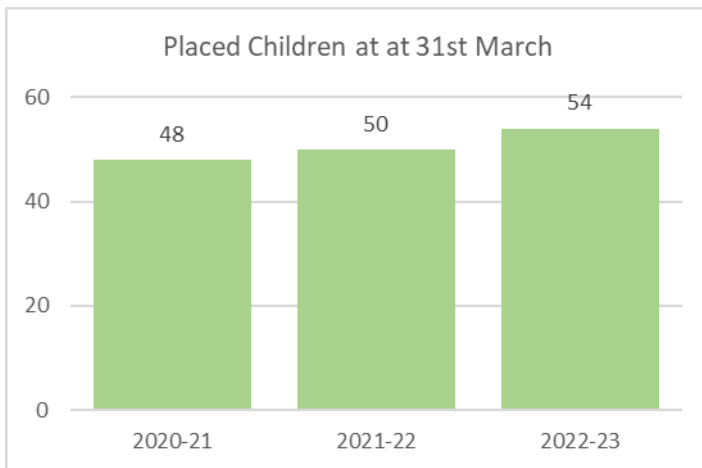
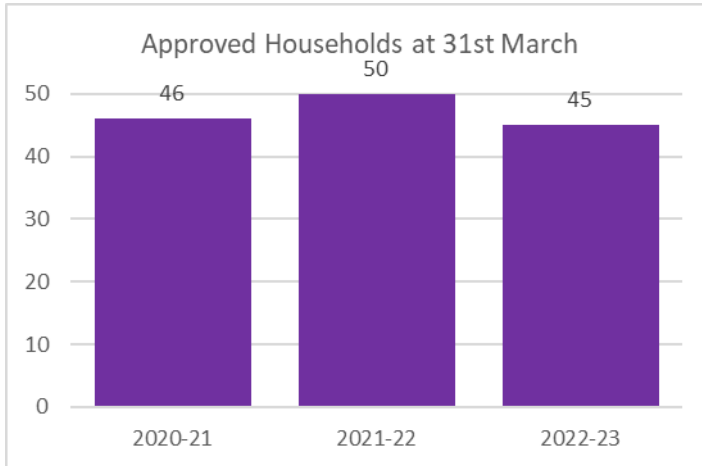
- **Working in partnership to develop fostering opportunities.** We will work closely with schools, community and faith groups, and other organisations to raise awareness and promote fostering opportunities in Slough.
- **Building a strong online presence.** We will make best use of our fostering website to ensure all contacts, enquiries into the service have easy access to the right information and contact details to explore fostering in Slough, standing out amongst a crowded market.
- **Targeted recruitment and creating the right foster homes for our children.** We intend to provide targeted recruitment activity to ensure we have the right homes for all of our children, recognising their individual needs. We will also seek to recruit specific therapeutic foster families for our children with more complex need.
- **To review our in-house foster care support package.** To recruit and retain foster carers we recognise the need to ensure we celebrate our robust package of support and enhance this further to support foster care families in the important care they provide to our children. This will include a review of further support opportunities and a review of our foster care pay structure to ensure competitive rates.

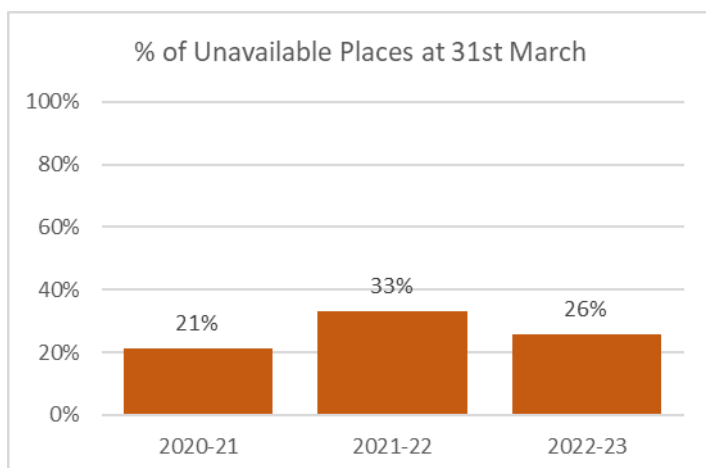
The IFA will also continue to place more emphasis on targeted marketing by:

- Targeting foster carers specifically for sibling groups
- Targeting foster carers specifically for children aged 10+
- Targeting foster carers from a Black, Asian, Mixed and other backgrounds, including LGBTQI+?
- Targeting foster carers specifically for children with disabilities
- Targeting foster carers specifically for parent and child placements
- Targeting foster carers specifically for children with challenging behaviour and high emotional needs.
- Targeting foster carers that can offer emergency placements.

Fostering Households

As of 31st March 2023, there were 45 fostering households, but this increased to 48 households by 30th April 2023.





Communications

The IFA hopes to continue to promote communication in all of the following ways:

Foster Carers Feedback

Regular communication and support are provided to all foster carers as below.

In addition to this, In April 2022, the participation officer met with our children in the IFA and made an animation video) which includes some positive messages about foster care and their experiences. 'My Foster Story' animation was made by the children looked after (cared for by Slough IFA carers) explaining their story of being in foster care. This can be viewed on [My Foster Story - YouTube](#)

Newsletter

This continues to be sent to foster carers to share information and give an update on the service. Due to the impact of the current cost of living crises on carers, the IFA shares money saving tips with the carers and has recurring sections on training, book recommendations and strategies on keeping safe.

Coffee Morning Support Groups

This progressed to face to face monthly coffee mornings at St Mary's Church Hall Wexham after the covid restrictions were lifted. This enables foster carers to network/support each other in a safe environment. Carers learn from each other and exchange tips, techniques/strategies and have a general catch up. There is also a male support group and general support available to male carers as well.

Bi-Monthly Forums

Bi- Monthly Forums continue but were changed to a drop-in session with the management team. These provide carers with updated information about the IFA and afford carers the opportunity to discuss issues, make enquiries and provide feedback about the service.

Slough Foster Carers Association

The SFA is supported to fund activities for children and several activities to GO Ape, Jump in and the Zoo were organized and attended by children placed in eth IFA. An IFA staff also attends to support carers with activities. The leadership of the SFA meet regularly with the IFA management team as part of open communication.

Annual Awards Ceremony

The IFA staff worked hard to raise money for the foster carers awards ceremony that took place on 16th October 2022. This was held at the Stoke Place Hotel Slough and all carers were appreciated with flowers and certificates; the carers that had achieved milestones in their fostering careers also had additional gifts.

Retention of Foster Carers

Retention is another primary focus within the IFA as it competes with neighbouring Local Authority fostering services and other Independent Fostering Agencies. The IFA therefore ensures that all foster carers are provided with a good standard of service which consists of:

- Access to the Foster Carers handbook for all carers, through the fostering microsite.
- Phone check in
- A family support worker who offers one to one work with carers and the children when needed.
- Buddy/Informal Mentor support
- 4 – 6 weekly visits from a supervising social worker to offer advice and support to foster carers, children and their families.
- Fostering out-of-hours telephone advice and support and Regional Out of Hours/Emergency Duty Service for weekends and through the night Competitive fostering fees and allowances.
- £200 per annum reward payment for completion of a successful annual review.
- A birthday and festival allowance paid per annum per child.
- Access to the In - house play therapist and hub clinician support
- 2 weeks holiday allowance
- Membership of Slough's Fostering Association (SFA).
- Fostering Network membership.
- IFA service newsletter that contains news/updates about the service, current guidance and research.
- A full training package for mandatory, supplementary and bespoke training courses.
- Thank you, brunch at Christmas, and during Foster Carers Fortnight in May
- Increased carer mileage payment and also paid a one-off cost of living payment to all carers in March 2023.
- Annual Carer Award Ceremony took place on 16th October 2023
- Carers conference (planned for 8th July 2023)
- Placement stability meetings

Annual Reviews

The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 (amended 2013) require that formal reviews of foster carers take place at least annually, and foster carers first review must be presented to the fostering panel. Reviews will take place more frequently in the event of a significant change in circumstances for foster carer for example where there are concerns about the care provided by the foster carer as a result of a complaint or allegation or where there is a change in approval sought. All foster carer reviews are presented to the panel every

three years or more frequently if there are any concerns which need to be addressed. After a successful review foster carers are awarded a retention payment of £200.

100%

All foster carer reviews were completed within timescale from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 so were at a 100%.

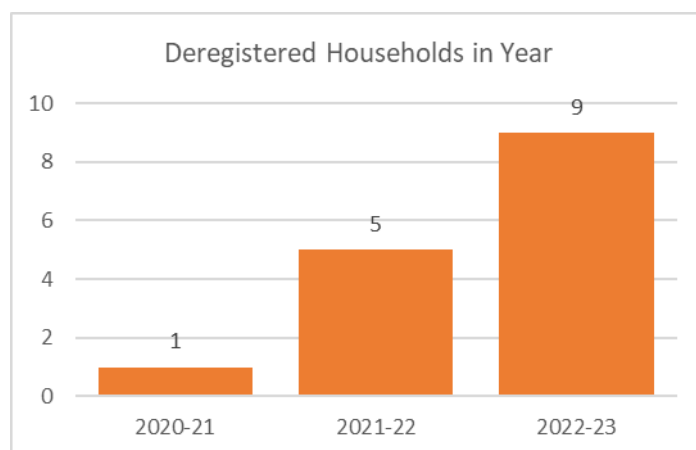
Foster Carer Agreements

All our Foster Carers Agreements are on our Charms system and are shared/signed electronically on the system. This is renewed annually and are all in date.

Termination / De- registration of foster carers

Foster carer resignations and terminations of approval are presented to the Fostering Panel. Carers have the right to appeal to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) if they believe that the IFA has not acted appropriately within its decision making.

There has been a slight increase in the number of deregistration's through resignations that have taken place in year compared to the previous financial year. These are for the reason listed below.



- Two fostering households - connected person's carers retired on children turning 18.
- One connected person resigned after relocating to Wales and following a standard of care concern.
- One household adopted the child in placement and resigned.
- One household resigned following safeguarding concerns.
- One household resigned following the death of a spouse and the young person turned 18
- One household resigned – newly approved carer informed fostering is not for them, wants more flexibility to do things in their personal life.
- One household returned to work post covid.
- One household resigned as they felt they needed more time for themselves post Covid and post-retirement. They felt they were not able to dedicate the time to fostering as they had anticipated.

Complaints/Allegations

An allegation involves circumstances when a child or young person alleges to have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused or neglected by a foster carer or a member of their household or family. It can also be defined as an unproven assertion of abuse or neglect that has yet to be proved or supported by evidence.

A standard of care concern arises where no allegations of abuse or neglect have been identified but where there is serious concern that the foster carer is not meeting agreed standards of practice in respect of their care of the child. Or in circumstances when criminal or safeguarding risks have been alleged in regards to a foster carer.

3 allegations were made against 3 carer households and 2 were investigated with an unsubstantiated outcome against 2 carer households and the third carer resigned immediately after they were informed of the safeguarding concern and made a formal complaint against the agency.

Three standards of care investigations relating to the conduct of carers were completed and one formal complaint against the IFA by a carer who resigned due to safeguarding concern was undertaken. The complaint was not upheld.

Fostering panel

The Fostering Panel continues to take place on a four-weekly basis with extra panel requested when needed. The Panel is exclusively used by Slough Children First (SCF) Independent Fostering Agency for Approvals of Foster Carers, Regulation 24/25 Carers, Foster Carer reviews and Long-Term Matches etc. Panel continue to be held virtually post covid and the plan is for this to be done through a mixture of face to face and virtual panels in the next financial year.

The staffing of the panel remains stable with many panel members having been on the Central List for many years. In April 2022, the long-standing Panel Chair resigned from the role, and this is currently being covered by the two Vice Chairs. The panel chair role has been recruited into with start date of July 2023. The panel is fortunate to have these two experienced and competent Vice Chairs, who are independent of SCF IFA and remain in post. We have an interim Panel Advisor who was appointed in October 2021 and remains in post thus offering a level of consistency within this review period. A new panel advisor has been recruited and also has a start date of July 2023.

There is a good level of diversity in terms of gender, age, religion, culture, and experience within the Central List which is reflective of the local population of Slough. The panel consists of an adult care leaver, an elected member, foster carers for other agencies, an adopter, independent social workers and members who have experience in education, youth work, housing and semi-independent living. A new health representative has been recruited as well.

Panel members are also annually appraised by the Panel Chair and Panel Advisor. A dedicated Panel Administrator has been in post since 2017, this gives panel a good level of consistency.

At each Panel, feedback is sought on how applicants have found the process and their experience at Panel. Generally, positive feedback is received from applicants and professionals who feel that the Panel is welcoming and enables them to discuss difficult issues.

As reported in the 2021/2022 annual report, there was an Ofsted requirement in relation panel in the July 2021 Ofsted inspection. In addition to the actions and steps taken to address this in last year's report, the following actions have been taken to meet this requirement.

- Full day Panel training on the role and function of Panel including legislation that underpins Panel's role and function held in May 2022.
- Another Joint panel training on learning from serious case review was held 27th January 2023. This was joint learning for panel members and the fostering service.
- On 22nd March 2023, a refresher training on the National Minimum Standards (NMS) was delivered as joint training to panel members and the team. New panel members on the central list also attended to support their learning on the application of the NMS in considering approvals and reapprovals.
- The panel advisor continues to have discussions on the role and functions of panel. The advisor does targeted pieces of work with panel members at panel business meetings before and after panel sittings.

Placement Stability Meeting/Disruption Meetings

Placement stability meetings are held to support placements to prevent breakdowns and disruption meetings are held where a placement has broken down. Themes from these meetings continue to inform the IFA learning and improvements.

Training

Training continues to be a priority and a comprehensive training programme is available to carers. The programme continues to assist in developing foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people placed with them. Training is enhanced through a mixture of in-house and external training. Training is offered to carers in a hybrid manner through face to face and virtual learning. Carers can also access different online courses through the SCF Learning database.

The total number of mandatory training topics is now seven and the frequency for this is three yearly. The seven mandatory training are Safeguarding, Safer Foster Care, Managing Behaviour, Managing Allegations, Record Keeping, Paediatric First Aid and Prevent.

Other training offered to carers within this review period are Equality and diversity, Data protection. Display Screen Equipment – DSE, Gender Identity Awareness, Children coming to care - perspective of assessment team, Carer fatigue /blocked care, Communicating with Children and Young People, Mental Health – Understanding children and young people, Self-Harm, Unconscious Bias, CHARMS Carer Training, Emotional Literacy, Life

Story Work, Moving and Positioning of Individuals, Peer on Peer Abuse, Substance and Alcohol Misuse, Trauma and the Impact on Brain Development, Working with CLA 16 Leaving Care and Pathway Planning, Attachment and loss, Working with children with Disabilities, 'Attachment, Trauma and Resilience' Five to Thrive, County Lines, Female Genital Mutilation, Health & Safety, Healthy Relationships and Online Safety, Having Constructive Conversations with Distressed Young People, Self-Harm and Suicide Prevention training Level 2: Intermediate and Understanding Trauma and its Impact.

As part of foster carers recruitment, applicants are encouraged to complete safeguarding training, as well as safer foster care and/or managing challenging behaviour.

In the reporting period mainstream foster carers completed:



Fostering Network

Every foster carer is automatically provided with membership of the fostering network. The Fostering Network offers a unique package of membership benefits for foster carers, including Independent Advice and support, 24-hour dedicated helplines, Practical advice and guidance on all fostering issues, Expert legal assistance, financial advice on tax, national insurance, benefits, mortgages and pensions.

Supporting and recognising foster carers own children

The fostering service provides opportunities for carer's children to meet on a regular basis as part of Kids Care 2! Sessions offer them support and recognize the role that they play in the fostering household.

Financial report

Slough Borough Council issued a section 114 notice which continues to have serious financial implications for SCF including the IFA. This remains in place with spending subject to a high level of scrutiny. The internal fostering budget for 2022/2023 was £2.73M and outturn in the financial year has seen an underspend of £150k. The budget increased by £76k at the 2021/22 budget due to anticipated growth in in-house foster placements following initiatives around carer allowances to recruit more carers and encourage more carers to care for more challenging young children and teenagers. There were also some income contributions from other Local Authorities placements within the IFA. This underspend has been partly offset by overspends in staffing due to previous reliance on agency staff to cover vacant posts. The service continues to work actively on recruiting into the vacant posts regardless of the status report on the national shortage of health and social care workers. Two permanent supervising social workers are starting in June and July 2023 respectively.

Charms

The service moved from the use of ICS to a charms data base system which is a more suitable data base for a fostering service. This has supported carers to be able to log their recording for children directly on the database and supervising social workers read the logs. Where needed, supervising social workers request amendments or updates to the logs to ensure it captures the child's lived experience.

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM)



There are currently 7 families (including the hub home) and 10 children involved in this constellation. The constellation has supported a number of children's moves to adoptive placements, rehabilitation home etc.

The MFM offers a method of delivering foster care that has improved placement stability, safety and permanency for children and young people and support for, and retention of, foster carers. The MFM uses the concept of a 'hub' and 'satellite' approach, forming a 'constellation' of fostering families providing peer support, respite care and activities for all those including training to equip members of the service to maintain, support and replicate the constellation in subsequent years.

If the children in the constellation stay within the hub home, this is regarded as a sleep over, and not respite. The scheme continues to evidence good outcomes with regards to placement stability and we have received positive feedback from carers and children. Some of the positive impact on children and young people looked after, who are part of the MFM are:

- Improved confidence and resilience in children and young people
- Stronger relationships that support CLA and fostering families
- A network of strong and authentic relationships able to replicate the support offered by an extended family.
- Improved placement stability and reduced placement breakdown. There are two examples of a placement that would have broken down in the year under review, but the robust support offered by the hub carers went a long way in preventing this.
- Improved experience of peer support

- Strengthening/maintaining sibling relationships
- Improved sibling contact
- Better and improved experience of birth family contact
- Improved process and experience of respite care
- Improved skills, confidence and role satisfaction for foster carers
- A strong, robust and resilient structure able to support children, young people and fostering families through times of crisis and transition.
- Supervision of family contact in the community negating the need for contact center/supervisors, reducing costs and providing more natural and meaningful interactions.
- Provision of social activities and creating a sense of community and belonging for all involved. This has been very successful in the current pandemic as virtual social activities have continued online.
- SCF is part of a national evaluation project to provide some data and information as to the difference to children being a part of a constellation makes, and the impact on placement stability.

Highlights from the year which illustrate some of the success of the model within the SCF IFA includes: -

- A MFM Financial Awareness event for young people hosted and facilitated by the Hub Home Carers. The aim of the event was to help young people to gain a better understanding and awareness of financial matters, for example, the average salaries for different professions; tax; national insurance; housing costs, including rental costs and utility bills. Ultimately, the aim was to better equip young people in regard to budgeting, saving and to think about how they can achieve their financial goals.
- The Mockingbird Hub Home carers have facilitated contact for siblings placed in different IFA's who lived some distance away from one another. The eldest sibling had voiced that she was desperate to see her siblings, and this was making her sad. Sleepovers have enabled the children to quality spend time with one another in a relaxed home environment.
- The Mockingbird support provides deep friendships. This was demonstrated when one young person was anxious that no one would attend her 16th birthday party. She asked if the first person she could invite was a young person from another Mockingbird household. This was because her friendship with this person had grown as a result of getting to know one another through Mockingbird events. The young person felt this friend would attend and this reduced her anxiety around no one attending her party and also increased her confidence.

Slough IFA Constellation families are looking forward to attending an event hosted by the Fostering Network in August 2023. This event will provide an opportunity for the constellation to bond together and support one another, as well as meeting people from other constellations throughout the UK. It aims to develop resilience, confidence, and communication skills through adults, children and young people participating in a range of practical and physical challenges such as high ropes, problem solving and nature-based activities.

Family Finding (permanent fostering)

The aim of the Family Finding Team is to secure permanency for looked after children within nurturing, loving and stable foster placements. What is best for each child or young person will depend on individual factors. Children should be cared for in long-term foster care when this is deemed to be in their best interests and is set out clearly in their care plan. The child's views, wishes and feelings must be at the centre of all decision-making concerning long-term foster care.

The family finding team has received referrals for 33 looked-after children. One child was matched with the current carers in March 2023, and the plan is for 9 of the children. to be matched with their current carers in the next 6 months. Two children will be transitioning to long-term foster placements from residential provision once they have received therapeutic interventions. From these placements, 6 are with carers for the internal Slough IFA and 24 are with carers from external IFAs.

From April 2022 to March 2023) ,1 child was matched with internal IFA carers. Two cases have been deferred as parenting assessments needed to be undertaken. There has been a delay in taking some of the matches to the panel due to the following reasons:

1. Care Order not yet granted
2. Parenting assessments being undertaken.
3. Breakdown in potential long-term placements in external IFA's
4. Assessments on the child and therapeutic support not finalised.
5. Change in social workers and, therefore, a delay in the CPR being completed
6. PPM's not being held regularly for some children.

There has now been a full review of the forms, reports and processes within the family finding team to ensure the process is robust and timely for children requiring long-term foster care. This has been done in consultation with the Panel Advisor. Furthermore, the long-term matching policy was updated in January 2023 to reflect the changes.

The family finding social worker and Manager continue to challenge the frontline Team and escalating to their managers and IRO's where there is delay in permanency planning for children.

As previously reported, there continues to be a focus on increasing ways to elicit the voice of the child to make this evident during the process and at panel where matches are agreed to include:

A rigorous process for permanency planning is needed to promote good decision making, and to ensure that the plan is pursued in a timely way and that drift is avoided.

Family, Friends and Connected Persons (Regulation 24/SGO)

Since March 2020, the Connected Persons Team became independent of the IFA but the data is included in this annual report for the purposes of our senior leadership team having

a general oversight of all aspects of fostering in one report. Maryke McCarty is the team manager responsible for the connected person and SGO team and her report is as follows:

The dedicated team completes joint initial viability assessments, Reg 24 placements and Special Guardianship assessments and supporting carers with Family and Friend's Foster carers/SGO.

Whilst the Reg 24 carers are undergoing their assessment, they are supported by a supervising social worker as per the Fostering Regulations, attend specialist foster carers training such as Skills to Foster and have access to the Fostering Network, as well as the Out of Hours Duty phonenumber. The assessment has to be presented to the Fostering Panel within 16 weeks either recommending to approve as connected persons foster carers, not to be approved as connected persons foster carers or for a further 8 week extension. This panel decision is then sent to the ADM for review and for a final decision to be made.

There are currently **177** children placed with **186** carers/**128** household on a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

186 SGO Carers
(128 households)



177 children

Summary Statistics

- During the year **9** families were **granted** SGO orders
- **95** joint viability assessments have been completed
- **8** families were assessed under Reg 24/25
- **8** families approved under Regulation 24
- **24** SGO assessments were undertaken, **9** ended early due to applicants withdrawing or children being moved
- **20** concurrent Regulation 24 and SGO assessments completed

Joint viability assessments:

During the year, there were **95** joint viability assessment referrals completed for prospective placements with Family, Friends or Connected persons/ SGO. All referrals received were completed jointly between the child's social worker and an assessing social worker from the Connected Persons team.

Disruption:

We have had no SGO revoked and no placement breakdowns.

Support to SGO carers:

The Connected Persons team offer telephone advice and support to our carers as well as specific training for SGO carers, which covers topics such as attachment, managing contact, life story and memoirs, managing difficult behavior, safeguarding, healthy living, education and CSE. If there is a specific training need, carers are also invited to attend training available to foster carers. There is good engagement from carers at training. However, due to the Covid19 pandemic, we were unable to offer training to SGO carers since March 2020 face to face and training was moved online. We are currently planning to commence face to face training again as from 2023, but due to long term staff illness we have not yet launched face to face training. A training program has been devised and as soon as capacity in the team allows, this will be offered.

Ongoing support is offered to our SGO carers, including visits for new placements as agreed within the support plan; financial support until a child is 18 years (if eligible) subject to means test; advice and support by team and signposting to Slough Family Information Services, support from Virtual School on education and applications to the adoption support fund for therapeutic needs.

There are also SGO forums 6 times a year, where carers can share their experiences, offer advice, seek advice and work in partnership with carers in order to further develop our services. There are also fun days planned twice a year and newsletters sent twice a year. Unfortunately, due to the Covid19 pandemic, the SGO forums moved online and has continued to be online for the duration of 2021 and 2022. We are now alternating face to face and online SGO forums as some carers prefer online meetings whilst others prefer face to face. We have reintroduced Fun Days, which were well attended by SGO carers and children.

Support to Family and Friends Reg 24 carers:

Whilst the Reg 24 carers are undergoing their assessment and once approved, they are supported by a supervising social worker as per the Fostering Regulations, attend specialist foster carers training, including Skills to Foster, and have access to the Fostering Network.

During the assessment process and once approved, Family and Friends Connected Persons Foster Carers are treated as foster carers and have the same expectations and support as per the Fostering Regulations.

We are currently consulting with Reg24 carers to introduce a support group.

Home from Home family based care

Home from home carers are able to offer:

- Volunteer carers looking after children with disabilities up to their 18th birthday in their own home or in the family home, depending on the needs of the child.
- This is for a few hours per day/ per week, depending on the child's needs and agreed arrangement
- Working as part of a team - with professionals and other Home from Home carers
- To use and develop caring skills.
- To enable others, develop life skills and broaden their horizons, to allow parents/main carers a respite break and maintain children remaining at home with their family
- Home from Home carers also support approved foster carers with transport to and from contact, as and when needed.

Home from Home carers receive support and 6 weekly visits by their supervising link worker and have access to foster carers training and additional specialist training to children with disabilities, when necessary and dependent on their linked children's needs, for example epi-pen training.

Currently there are **10** Home from Home carers (7 families) approved under this scheme. During the year they have supported 16 children, 6 of whom were to support IFA foster carers with school runs and/or contact.

Non-Agency Adoption assessments

- During the year **1** adoption order was granted
- During the year 3 non-agency adoption assessments were completed, 1 is still awaiting a court date
- 4 non-agency adoption assessments are currently ongoing

Conclusion

The Fostering Service will continue to provide high quality care in a family setting for those children and young people, who, for whatever reason, cannot be brought up by their parents or other relatives.

SCF Fostering Service will strive to achieve the sufficiency recruitment targets and to ensure a range of provision is in place to provide secure and loving homes for our children to develop and reach their full potential, and to maintain the improved Ofsted judgement of 'good' or become outstanding during our next inspection.

References:

- Fostering National Minimum Standards - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/192705/NMS_Fostering_Services.pdf
- Fostering Network Research and Statistics - www.fostering.net

- SCF Foster Carers' Charter is available at: <http://www.scstrust.co.uk/publications-and-reports/>
- Statutory Guidance for fostering services - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-act-1989-fostering-services>