maethu cymru | foster wales

annual report
2023/24

working together to build better futures for local children

contents

introduction

This report provides an overview of the second year of Foster Wales. It draws on performance returns from all 22 local authorities (LAs) for 2023/24, comparing to previous years and provides an update on progress in implementing the priorities of the Foster Wales workplan.

Foster Wales is the national network of 22 Local Authority, not for profit fostering services, with local fostering expertise.

Foster Wales evolved from the National Fostering Framework (NFF) which was one of the work streams of Welsh Government's Ministerial Advisory Group 'Improving Outcomes for Children'.

Foster Wales was launched with the aim to provide children with the opportunity to stay in their local areas, thrive and improve their life chances through well supported foster carer. It planned to increase the pool of Local Authority foster carers through enhanced recruitment and marketing, and to support retention by bringing consistency for foster carers across Wales in an improved offer of support, training and additional benefits.

Foster Wales Work Programme 2023-24

The work programme for the year included actions to meet these priorities including the following:

Marketing & Recruitment of Foster Carers

The overarching aim is to increase local placements and therefore improve outcomes for children and young people. By delivering on a comprehensive marketing strategy which has embedded the Foster Wales brand and implementing recruitment best practice, we have reversed the trends of recent years, with a 12% increase in fostering approvals creating a more stable foundation for future growth.

Retention of Foster Carers

Foster Wales aims to improve rates of foster carer satisfaction alongside creating a resilient and stable foster carer workforce, supported by a resilient and stable practitioner workforce. Our work includes further development of the national commitment for support and further embedding the learning and development framework. Through this work we have seen a 12.5% decrease in carers leaving the service compared with the previous 12 months.

Performance Management

Foster Wales aims to ensure the effective monitoring and analysis of data to enable improved outcomes. We use data to ensure that services can respond to demand, identify and address quality improvements, strive to achieve excellent outcomes for children and families and ensure sustainable service delivery. We have reformed the way we collect data, providing more up to date and accurate information on a monthly basis.

Governance

The aim is to ensure, develop, and sustain the effective governance arrangements for Foster Wales to enable successful delivery of the work programme. This included putting in place governance meetings involving senior staff and council Members and ensuring that effective methods for information dissemination and consultation were in place across all LAs. This also includes supporting and enabling every LA to maximise collaborative opportunities by providing and supporting the Regional Development Managers (RDMs) and Regional Marketing Officers (RMOs) in each region.

Through the collective effort of local authorities, and the impact of additional funding from Welsh Government, Foster Wales has been able to demonstrate significant progress in the recruitment and retention of foster carers, particularly from mid-way through the year once the additional investment received was utilised and implemented into local authority structures.

The collective effort in providing and reporting on the information in this report provides Foster Wales with a better understanding of fostering services across Wales, as well as identifying trends and themes at regional and local authority levels.

The information comes from monthly and annual data. RDMs have undertaken a significant level of quality assurance and been involved in the analysis of the regional information. These reports will be critical to the ongoing development and delivery of regional work programmes.

We thank all the local authorities and RDMs for their commitment to ensuring that this report is as accurate as it can be.

About us

Foster Wales is established with the following key roles to deliver the work programme.

Director of National Adoption Service & Foster Wales

The role oversees the strategic development of both Foster Wales and the National Adoption Service (NAS) and provides a strategic link with ADSS Cymru, AWHOCS and Welsh Government to drive improvement, consistency, and co-ordination of both programmes, through delivery supported by the host local authority Cardiff Council.

Head of Foster Wales

The Head of Foster Wales oversees the operational and strategic deliverables for Foster Wales. As well as leading on the work programme, leading on the progression of workstreams, matrix managing the Regional Development Managers and coordinating the national priorities, they have been focusing on collaboration with all local authorities and representing Foster Wales in national media opportunities, including on television and radio.

Central Team

This consists of key business support capacity provided by the Head of Business and Enabling and Senior Business Support Officer, shared with NAS, and a dedicated Foster Wales Business Support Offcer.

National Marketing Manager

The role provides coordination, leadership, and oversight of the marketing strategy for Foster Wales. This includes oversight of our partner organisations to coordinate the PR and marketing activity (Cowshed Communications), website delivery (Illustrate Digital) and Pay Per Click/ Search Engine Optimisation (Liberty). The National Marketing Manager coordinates regular meetings with the RMOs and oversees national and regional marketing opportunities.

National Joint Committee

This comprises of Council Members from all 22 local authorities exercising their oversight of Foster Wales [and the National Adoption Service for Wales] and joint powers for the provision of the national and co-ordinating functions.

Lead Heads of Children's Services (LHOCS)

The Lead Heads of Children's Services group (LHOCS) provides the operational governance for Foster Wales, including regular LHOCS Meetings and strategic oversight of the programme within the six regions with the other heads of service in their local authorities and regional staff.

Regional Development Managers (RDM)

The six RDMs coordinate the regional programme for their respective regions, providing oversight and facilitation of regional operational and strategic meetings, driving forward new developments through a co-productive approach with LA fostering services, as well as facilitating and quality assuring the monthly and annual data.

Regional Marketing Offcers (RMO)

The six RMOs coordinate marketing opportunities within each of the local authorities in their region, this includes working with fostering and corporate communication teams, assessing the impact of marketing and supporting the LA websites.

Recruitment Offcers

The twenty-two Recruitment Offcers are funded centrally by Welsh Government, through Foster Wales and sit within their respective local authority teams. The Recruitment Offcers coordinate recruitment activity, including community-based events and respond to all initial enquiries from prospective foster carers, leading on the early stages of the recruitment process.

In addition, a further 17 posts, facilitating retention, support of foster carers, business support and an enhancement of assessment capacity within LAs have been provided through the additional funding made available by Welsh Government.

progression in 2023-2024

Marketing and Recruitment

The National Marketing Manager and Regional Marketing Offcers drove forward the marketing workstream of the Foster Wales Work Programme during 2023-24, with the input of Cowshed Communications, who are commissioned to provide marketing and PR expertise.

April

Direct mail leaflets arrived on residents' doorsteps, included in council tax mailings to 14 local authority areas. Other Foster Wales teams used direct mail drops to target postcode areas in their community.

May

Foster Care Fortnight took place with national and local Foster Wales campaigns featuring a range of assets and press releases. There was a feature on S4C, with an interview with a Foster Wales foster carer. The activity created an increase in website traffc, social media and enquiries.

Foster Wales was present at the Urdd Eisteddfod, sponsoring the certificates at the event in Carmarthenshire.

June

A social media campaign featuring the needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) took place during refugee week 19-25th June.

Foster Wales was present with a stand in the main exhibition at Pride Cymru in Cardiff.

July

ITV Wales news featured a piece on UASC, including interviews with a young refugee, Mark, a foster carer for Foster Wales Newport, and Alastair, the Head of Foster Wales.

August

Foster Wales had a large presence at the National Eisteddfod event in Gwynedd, including a joint stand with NAS and a discussion panel featuring the Deputy Minister and foster carers linked to 'Fostering Friendly' policies.

Foster Wales was present at the Royal Welsh Show during August.

Awareness raising materials, about the Welsh Government 'Eliminating Profit (from the care of children)' policy were launched to provide information to foster carers.

September

The national 'recommend a friend' scheme, delivered through the 'Care Friends App' was launched. The scheme gives financial rewards to foster carers who refer friends/family members, with points being paid out at different stages of the applicant process.

October

This was 'children of foster carers' month, (formerly sons and daughters month). Assets, including pictures and quotes, were shared nationally and by LAs, thanking children of foster carers and reinforcing the message that you can foster if you have your own children.

Our national network for the new Foster Wales Recruitment Offcers was established. An induction programme was developed for them, along with recruitment best practice training and an e-book guide to recruitment.

November & December

We launched the '11+' campaign on the 8th December, which included the unveiling of a mural, featuring a poem, written by a group of care experienced teenagers in Bridgend, along with poet laureate Connor Allen. The campaign included a range of social media assets for LAs to share, busting some of the myths about fostering teens, along with several blogs on LA websites.

The poem aimed to address misconceptions about 'teens' in care and is displayed in Brackla street in Bridgend, next to the town centre. The mural was featured in several publications including 'Children and Young People Now', Martin Barrow's 'Week in Care' and was well received across social media. BBC Radio Wales picked up on the story and did an interview about the project on its 'Drive Time' show, with Alastair, Head of Foster Wales.

January

We launched our new advertising campaign with the theme "everybody can bring something to the table."

It featured three television adverts, along with radio and digital campaigns across social media and the websites. These are based on real foster carers' stories and experiences covering a range of fostering scenarios such as emergency placements, sibling groups, UASC, teenagers, single male carers, older carers, carers in full time employment, short breaks and the social work role. The adverts were supplemented by video case studies, featuring the real foster carers talking about how their story inspired the adverts. Various free media opportunities arose from the launch of the campaign.

A key event in the campaign was a live cooking event with Celebrity Masterchef winner, Wynne Evans, in Newport Market. The event was well attended by over 100 people and very positively received, including by the media, leading to features on S4C and ITV news with a prominent broadcast on the 6pm news on 30th January.

March

We supported LGBTQ+ fostering and adoption week through social media activity, including a representative case study video linked to the "Caravan" video from the ' bring something to the table' campaign. Joint press coverage from Foster Wales & NAS was featured in Pink news – an LGBTQ+ media brand.

A face-to-face national training event for the Recruitment Offcers took place on 7th March, which was very positively received. There were 20 delegates, an opportunity for collaborative working and peer learning across Wales as well as a focus on process mapping and best practice.

Links with national media were enhanced, with them regularly approaching Foster Wales for a variety of media interviews and opportunities. These included interviews on BBC News, ITV News, S4C, press articles and three appearances on BBC Radio Wales.

The national marketing activity was supported by Pay Per Click (PPC) Google advertising to ensure Foster Wales retains its ranking through search engines. National digital campaigns added new social media channels to the existing national channels. There were also regional digital campaigns in various targeted areas of Wales.

Various improvements of our web presence were completed;

– A detailed user analysis of all the Foster Wales websites leading to minor refreshes of them all
– Enhancement of new areas of the websites.

Results from the YouGov brand tracker survey showed a significant increase in brand awareness compared to competitor independent fostering agencies. Brand recognition for Foster Wales increased from 9% (Feb 2022) to 17% (Jan 2023), with the next closest competitor at 9%.

Foster Carer Achievements

Foster Wales won 6 National Fostering Excellence awards including the following:

• Outstanding contribution by a social work team- Foster Wales Ynys Mon
• Outstanding Contribution by a foster carer- Lynne and Steve (Conwy)
• Outstanding contribution by a kinship carer- Chris (NPT) and Anonymous (Ynys Mon)
• Outstanding contribution by children of Foster Carers- Megan (RCT)
• Outstanding contribution by young people- Eleanor (Pembrokeshire)

The Foster Wales National Commitment

The Foster Wales National Commitment is our vision that every local authority foster carer in Wales receives consistent levels of support, rewards, learning opportunities and additional benefits. It was originally launched in July 2021 and local authorities have been working towards implementation across Wales.

Key elements of the National Commitment include the following:

- Appreciation and recognition gestures
- Support groups and consultation opportunities and communication
- Fees and Allowances
- Discount cards and schemes
- Foster carers charter
- Mentoring and peer support
- Learning and development

New elements were developed and added during 2023-24 alongside continued focus on achieving greater consistency of the various elements. The new elements include:

- National 'Refer a Friend' scheme
- National learning and development e-resource
- National training opportunities, including allegations best practice
- Guidance and training for services on transferring in foster carers in.

Engagement and Collaboration

A key area of the Foster Wales Work Programme is consultation and engagement with key stakeholders, with a particular focus on foster carers and fostering teams.

Foster Wales has continued to embed itself across Wales. Teams report that they are benefitting from being part of a national collaborative and very much identify as Foster Wales. The regular pan-Wales collaboration has included continuing monthly meeting with Team Managers, a bi-monthly meeting of recruitment leads, quarterly meetings of learning and development leads, and a quarterly Operational Managers meeting.

The first annual Foster Wales survey was launched in May 2023, seeking to gather the views of all local authority foster carers as to how local authority fostering services need to develop to best support them.

There were 455 responses across Wales with the following main themes:

- 85% felt totally or somewhat supported by the fostering service

- 62.6% felt well supported by children's teams

- The priorities for respondents were as follows

    - Fees and allowances (68.3% ranked in top 3 priorities)
    - Peer support (50.6% and allegations 43.9%)
    - 43% wanted information shared in a more timely manner about children
    - 13% of foster carers felt opinions are never considered in the care planning process
    - Some concerns were raised over retention of staff and involvement in decision making

The survey results were used to further amend the work programme for Foster Wales and ensure the priorities fed back were actioned. These included:

- Prioritising the Fees and allowances work
- Continued roll out of the fostering wellbeing programme and recruitment of pioneers
- Introducing allegations best practice training for Foster carers and staff
- Raising awareness of the Fster Carer Charter & National Commitment
- Undertaking a review of the learning and development framework.

The second Foster Wales National Conference was held in September 2023, in Wrexham Football Club. The event was well attended, with over 100 people attending in person and a further 60 online.

The event saw contributions from Voices From Care Cymru, The Fostering Network, a general Question & Answer session and an inspiring interview with Rebecca Roberts about her journey from care to World's Strongest Woman.

Information areas were available for foster carers to browse and receive advice or information. These included:

- National 'Recommend a Friend' scheme
- Foster Wales Learning and Development e-book
- A Wellbeing/ Self Care area
- Consultation on the 'Big Welcome', a Foster carer profiles website
- The Fostering Network
- Voices From Care Cymru
- National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS and Tros Gynnal Plant Cymru (TCP) (advocacy provider)
- Pioneer Carers signed up to the Fostering Network Wellbeing Programme
- Fees and allowances consultation
- Foster Wales Marketing

Foster Wales has continued strong links with Voices From Care Cymru throughout the year, including attending several of their events and advisory groups, to hear the views of care experienced children and young people and promote the work of Foster Wales.

Governance and Structure

The national infrastructure has continued to embed and support the national leadership and co-ordination functions of the service. This includes managing governance, commissioning and management of national contracts plus financial and grant management. The new national Joint Committee, which provides all local authorities with oversight of Foster Wales and (NAS) was established, with the first meeting held in early April 2024.

Heads of Children's Services from the lead LAs for each region provide operational and strategic governance through the Lead Heads of Children's Service (LHOCS) meeting. The former National Fostering Framework Business Management Group (Executive), involving ADSS Cymru and the WLGA, continued to meet on an ad-hoc basis until the new Joint Committee was established.

performance information

placement use

All Placements

Note: the following data is from local authority returns for Foster Wales. It may vary to other data sources due to differences in definitions and cohorts of children counted.

1

Static Use

At **7,087** the overall level of Children Looked After in all placements had decreased by 1.3% (n94) on the 31.03.24. Overall figures show the following key changes:

- Foster care remains the largest placement type for children looked after, with 68.6% of children placed, marginally lower than the last two years.

- At 10.6% the proportion of children placed within residential care shows the most significant growth over the same period.

- Most children, 65.6%, were placed within their own local authority area, a slight increase on last year.

- The number of children placed outside of Wales has increased to 7.8%, while the number placed within Wales, but outside the local authority area, has reduced marginally now standing at 26.6%.

Location of Placements

- 68.5% of children were placed within their own local authority area, a rise of 3% on last year.

- 22.8% of children were placed within Wales, but outside their local authority area, a rise of 4.5% on last year.

- 8.6% of children placed outside of Wales (n269), a rise of1.5% on last year.

All New Placements

The total number of new regulated placements made during the financial year 23/24 was **3,223**, a decrease of 722 placements, or 18%, on the previous year. Overall figures show the following:

- Overall new residential placements increased by **12%** (n79) since last year.

Age Profile

- Over half of all new placements made, 52.9%, were for children aged 11+.

  - There has been a significant increase in children of this age range being placed since 20/21 when this was 43.8%, showing an ongoing and increased need to place older children.

- At 29.2%, fewer new placements made were for children aged 0-4 years. This is a slight increase from last year but a significant reduction from 35.9% in 2020/21.

- The proportion of new placements made for children aged 5-10 years, decreased to 19% in 2023/24 from 20.8% the previous year.

01 Placement Use

Static Placement Use

As of 31st March 2024, the overall number of children looked after in Wales stood at **7,087**, a decrease from 7,181 from March 2023 and marginally higher than the March 2022 figure.

550 children were living outside of Wales on 31.3.24; an increase from 543 children, or 1.3%, compared to last year. Of the children living outside of Wales, **21.5%** were with connected person carers, **21%** living in residential settings, **22%** in 'other' arrangements, **22%** in independent fostering provision (3rd Sector and commercial) and **4%** in local authority fostering placements.

The percentage of children going into each placement type has remained fairly static since last year, with a slight decrease in mainstream fostering placements and a slight increase in connected persons fostering placements. There was also a slight reduction in local authority mainstream fostering placements and children placed with commercial fostering providers. There was a significant increase of around 12% to the numbers of children placed in residential settings, a trend continuing from the previous year's increase. There was an increase of 8.6% in external residential placements and 36% in LA residential placements.

New placement use

There was a significant decrease in new placements made compared to last year, with decreases across all placement types apart from Regulation 26 placements, inter authority placements with other local authorities and internal (own LA) residential which rose by 4.3%.

New placements made with connected persons saw a slight decrease, although this may be attributed to the rise in regulation 26 placements over the last 12 months.

Fostering Placements

Static Use

- The proportion of children placed in connected persons placements continued to grow to 23.6% (n1,670) in 2023/24.

- There was a small decrease to 27.5% (n1,947) in children placed in mainstream LA foster care.

- The proportion of children placed with 3rd sector fostering agencies remained the same at 2.1% (n146) while those with commercial fostering agencies decreased slightly to 15.5% (n1,102).

- Children placed in local authority fostering provision stood at 74.3% (n3,617) at 31.03.24 compared with 74.2% (n3,694) the previous year.

Location of Placements

- Of the new foster care placements made, **84%** made within local authority provision were in the child's own local authority area, compared to **41%** of new placements made with commercial and third sector fostering providers.

New Fostering Placements

- New placements made with **Own** Local Authority Mainstream Foster Carers decreased by 15% (n258) to **1,420** and with **Other** Local Authority Mainstream Foster by 1 placement to **19**.

- New placements made with Independent **Commercial** provider Foster Carers decreased by 10% (n59) to **533** and increased with Independent **Third Sector** provider Foster Carers, by 7.5% (n5) to **70**.

- New placements made with **Connected Person** & **regulation 26** Foster Carers increased by 2.5% (n20) to **840**.

Age Profile

- The majority of new fostering placements made are for children aged over 11 years, and this number has increased substantially over the last 24 months.

- The proportion of children aged 11+ being placed with local authority foster carers reduced to 34.9% (n,491) this year from 37.9% (n637) the previous year.

- The proportion of children aged 11+ placed with commercial foster carers reduced to 45.2% (n241) this year from 46.2% (n274) last year.

Foster Placements

The numbers of children in all types of fostering placements remained fairly stable compared with last year, aside from the continued growth in connected persons foster care. The significant overall decrease in new placements made, linked to the increase in placements in residential care, was the main reason for a reduction in fostering placements. However, this rise in residential use evidences the need to recruit carers to care for older children with more complex needs and to provide necessary capacity so that children and young people are not placed in residential care where a fostering household would be more appropriate for their needs.

However, to enable a wide range of placements in the sector, approval across the broad range of 0 – 18 years would provide more flexibility to meet demand and provide choice in matching. This would also provide further development opportunities for existing foster carers to increase their confidence and willingness to consider changing their age preference.

The proportion of children aged 0-4 placed with commercial foster carers has also increased to 25.9% (n,156) this year from 17.5% (n,115). This rise in external placements for children aged 0-4 shows that there may also be a need for more targeted recruitment and broadening of foster carers' preferences to care for younger children.

static placements

All Placements

Static placement use reflects the placements provided for all children looked after as at the last day of the financial year for each period.

2024 — 550 / 1888 / 4649 — 8% / 27% / 65%
2023 — 543 / 1969 / 4669 — 8% / 27% / 65%
2022 — 420 / 1960 / 4680 — 6% / 28% / 66%
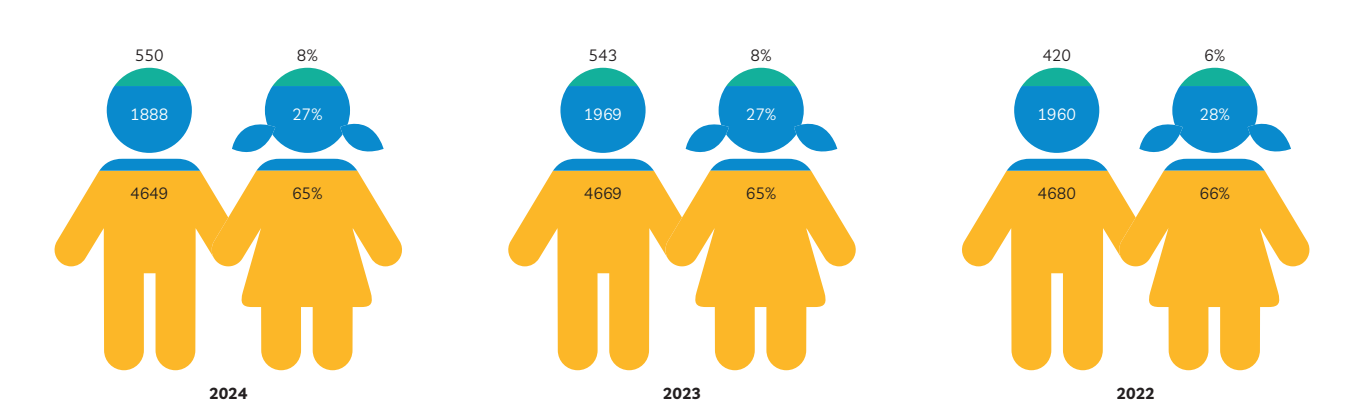
Static Use as at 31.03.24

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	CP FC	CP carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residen-tial (external)	Residen-tial (own LA)	OWR	'Other'	Total CLA
🟢 Outside Wales	20	2	108	10	11	111	262	155	0	11	122	550
🔵 Within Wales	266	20	211	59	84	647	1,277	346	1	12	252	1,888
🟡 Within LA	1,649	0	1,019	263	51	344	3,326	144	104	36	1,039	4,649
Total	**1,935**	**12**	**1,338**	**332**	**146**	**1,102**	**4,865**	**645**	**105**	**59**	**1,413**	**7,087**

Static Use as at 31.03.23

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons FC	Connected persons carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residential (external)	Residential (own LA)	'Other'	Total CLA
🟢 Outside Wales	21	2	114	21	6	131	295	115	3	130	543
🔵 Within Wales	293	10	228	33	102	660	1,326	370	1	272	1,969
🟡 Within LA	1,692	3	1,041	236	44	343	3,359	109	73	1,128	4,669
Total	**2,006**	**15**	**1,383**	**290**	**152**	**1,134**	**4,980**	**594**	**77**	**1,530**	**7,181**

Static Use as at 31.03.22

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons FC	Connected persons carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residential (external)	Residential (own LA)	'Other'	Total CLA
🟢 Outside Wales	24	0	103	14	1	74	216	105	0	99	420
🔵 Within Wales	301	13	250	38	78	719	1,399	292	1	268	1,960
🟡 Within LA	1,697	1	992	210	47	380	3,327	98	74	1,181	4,680
Total	**2,022**	**14**	**1,345**	**262**	**126**	**1,173**	**4,942**	**495**	**75**	**1,548**	**7,060**

New Placements

This data captures the new placements made over the financial year, including new entries to care and change of placements throughout the year. This data is intended to build a greater understanding of the placements used and build upon recruitment needs analysis.
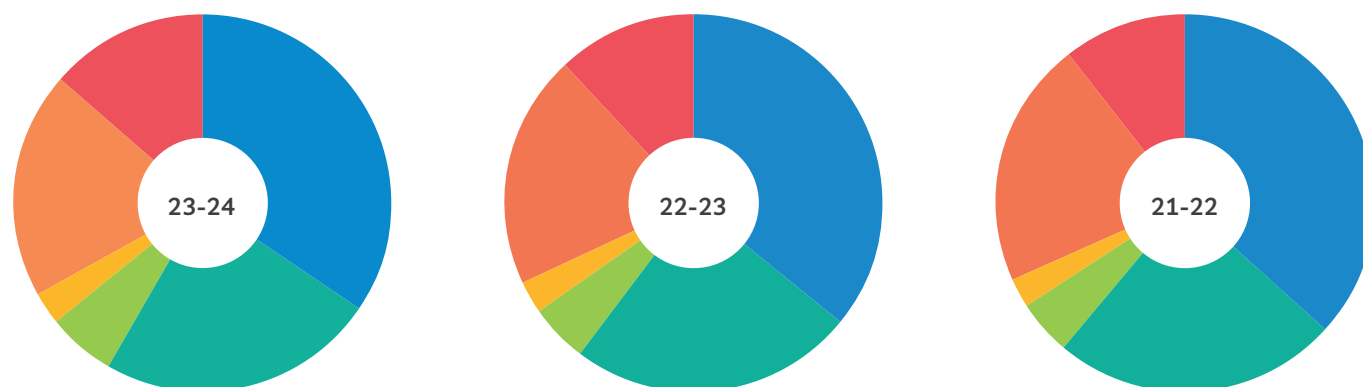
Static Use – New Placements

	2023-24		2022-23		2021-22	
■ LA Carer	1947	35%	2031	36%	2036	37%
■ Connected Persons	1338	24%	1383	24%	1345	24%
■ Reg 26	332	6%	290	5%	262	5%
■ 3rd Sector	146	2%	152	3%	126	3%
■ Commercial	1102	20%	1134	20%	1173	21%
■ Residential	750	13%	671	12%	570	10%
Total	**5,615**		**5,661**		**5,512**	

01 Placement Use

Age Profile of Children

The chart below shows the age profile of children in Wales, according to the placement type requested as of 31st March 2024.
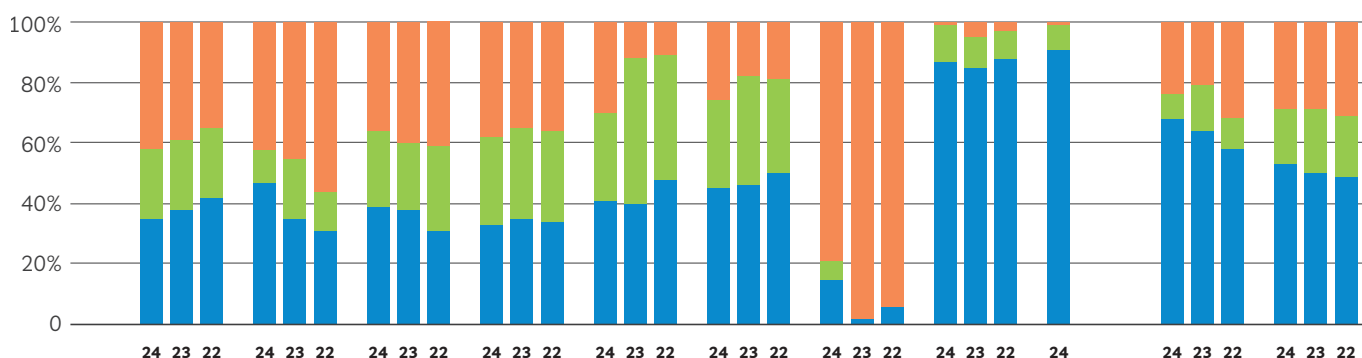
Age Profile of new placements 2023-24

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connec-ted Persons	Connec-ted carers s26 SS&WB	3rd Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	All Parent & Child Arrange-ments	Resi-dential (external)	OWR	All other new place-ments	Total Place-ments Made	%
0 – 4 yrs	601	8	124	185	21	135	129	4	2	347	1,556	29.2%
5 – 10 yrs	328	2	86	146	20	157	10	71	16	120	956	17.9%
11+ yrs	491	9	134	165	29	241	25	534	194	1,000	2,822	52.9%
Total	**1,420**	**19**	**344**	**496**	**70**	**533**	**164**	**609**	**212**	**1,467**	**5,334**	

Age Profile of new placements 2022-23

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons	Connected carers s26 SS&WB	3rd Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	All Parent & Child Arrange-ments	Residential (external)	All other new placements	Total Placements Made	%
0 – 4 yrs	659	9	136	169	8	107	165	32	318	1,603	29%
5 – 10 yrs	382	4	76	141	31	211	0	68	215	1,148	20.8%
11+ yrs	637	7	131	167	26	274	6	569	949	2,769	50.2%
Total	**1,678**	**20**	**343**	**477**	**65**	**592**	**168**	**661**	**1,482**	**5,520**	

## Age Profile of new placements 2021-22

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons	Connected carers s26 SS&WB	3rd Sector FC	Commer-cial FC	All Parent & Child Arrange-ments	Residential (external)	All other new placements	Total Placements Made	%
0 – 4 yrs	501	9	153	175	5	98	116	16	410	1,483	30.9%
5 – 10 yrs	327	2	107	145	18	160	0	46	136	941	19.6%
11+ yrs	606	5	119	160	21	247	8	469	744	2,379	49.5%
Total	**1,434**	**16**	**379**	**480**	**44**	**505**	**124**	**531**	**1,290**	**4,803**	
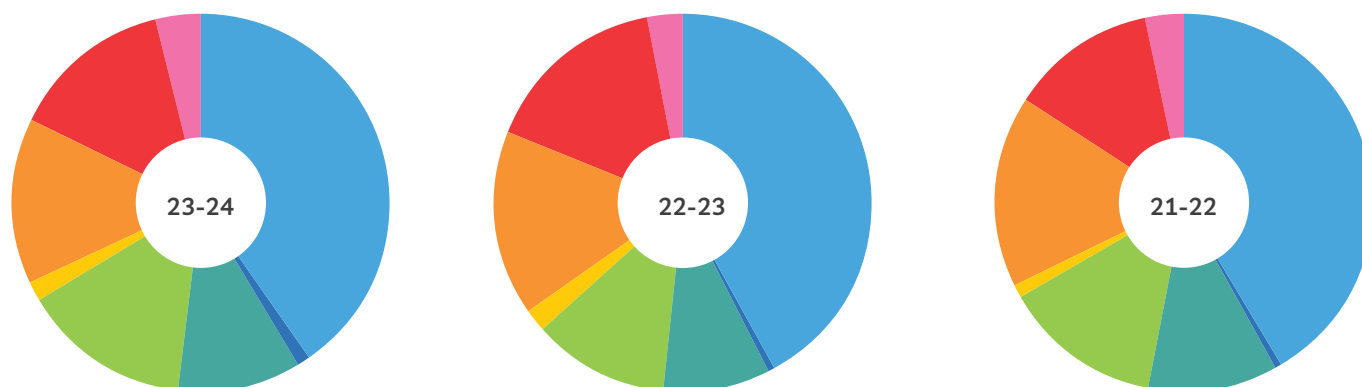
Location

Location of new placements 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2024

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons FC	Connected persons carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commercial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residential (external)	Residential (own LA)	Total CLA
Outside Wales	71	4	18	29	9	46	177	90	2	269
Within Wales	134	20	45	74	27	204	504	201	12	717
Within LA	1,075	10	280	363	17	185	1,930	110	106	2,146
Parent & Child	20	0	0	0	0	25	45	45	1	91
Total	**1,300**	**34**	**343**	**466**	**53**	**460**	**2,656**	**446**	**121**	**3,223**

Location of new placements 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons FC	Connected persons carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commercial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residential (external)	Residential (own LA)	Total CLA
Outside Wales	7	2	23	22	5	83	142	135	0	277
Within Wales	257	15	56	63	49	355	795	286	4	1,085
Within LA	1,384	3	275	376	10	140	2,188	115	112	2,415
Parent & Child	36	0	0	0	7	40	83	85	0	168
Total	**1,684**	**20**	**354**	**461**	**71**	**618**	**3,208**	**621**	**116**	**3,945**

**Location of new placements 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022**

	Own LA FC	Other LA FC	Connected Persons FC	Connected persons carers s26	Third Sector FC	Commercial FC	Total CLA Fostered	Residential (external)	Residential (own LA)	Total CLA
Outside Wales	13	0	35	18	0	44	110	86	0	302
Within Wales	206	15	79	88	26	322	736	251	0	1,278
Within LA	1,199	1	279	368	8	161	2,016	76	111	3,085
Parent & Child	36	0	1	0	2	51	90	25	0	115
Total	**1,454**	**16**	**394**	**474**	**36**	**578**	**2,954**	**438**	**111**	**3,501**

Placement availability of LA fostering placements

Key Messages:

- The total approved mainstream Local Authority foster placements decreased by 3.9% to **2,574**
    - **81.6%** (n1,941) placements were occupied, an increase on 79% last year with nearly all placements occupied by children from the home LA.
    - **5.7%** (n136) unoccupied placements were available for use. This is a significant decrease of 78 placements from 8.6% (n214) last year.
    - Only 1 parent and child place was available, compared with **6** the previous year. Total parent and child placements have declined from 22 to 13 across Wales.
    - **0.8%** (n20) placements were occupied by children from other LAs, a slight increase on last year.
    - The remaining **11.9%** unoccupied placements were not available for use.
    - There was a decrease of 1 respite placement to **195**.
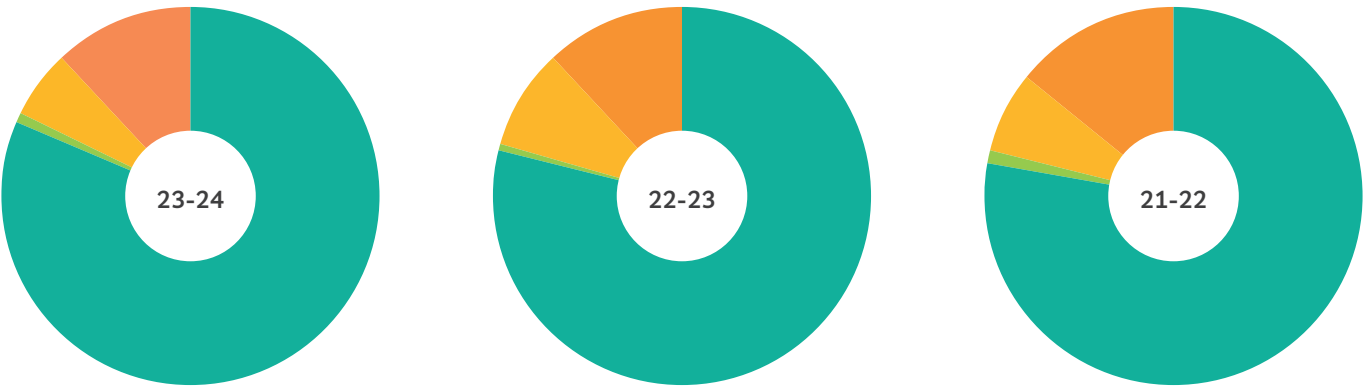
Availability of Foster Placements

As at 31.03.24	Number of placements occupied by own LA Children	Number of Placements Occupied by Other LA Children	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Available	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Not Available	Total
Mainstream Short Term	925	10	96	149	1,180
Mainstream Long Term	1,011	10	39	126	1,186
Parent & Child	5	0	1	7	13
Total	**1941**	**20**	**136**	**282**	**2379**
Percentage split	**81.6%**	**0.8%**	**5.7%**	**11.9%**	
Respite only	36	1	127	31	195
Total placements	1,977	21	263	313	2,574

Availability of Foster Placements

As at 31.03.23	Number of placements occupied by own LA Children	Number of Placements Occupied by Other LA Children	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Available	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Not Available	Total
Mainstream Short Term	1,060	5	161	199	1,425
Mainstream Long Term	892	9	47	89	1,037
Parent & Child	10	0	6	6	22
Total	**1962**	**14**	**214**	**294**	**2484**
Percentage split	**79%**	**0.6%**	**8.6%**	**11.8%**	
Respite only	42	0	93	59	194
Total placements	2,004	14	307	353	2,678

01 Placement Use

Availability of Foster Placements

As at 31.03.22	Number of placements occupied by own LA Children	Number of Placements Occupied by Other LA Children	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Available	Number of Unoccupied Placements which are Not Available	Total
Mainstream Short Term	907	10	135	166	1,218
Mainstream Long Term	909	6	31	155	1,101
Parent & Child	12	0	2	4	18
Total	**1,828**	**16**	**168**	**325**	**2,337**
Percentage split	**78.2%**	**0.7%**	**7.2%**	**13.9%**	
Respite only	87	1	84	34	206
Total placements	1,915	17	252	359	2,543

Findings

There was a small decrease of 3.9% in the number of LA foster care placements this year, bringing the total to 2,574.

The level of approved vacancies available decreased to 5.7% from 8.6% last year. Meanwhile, the level of placements occupied by LAs' own children increased to 81.6% from 79%; there have been increases in this over the last 4 years.

The number of parent and child placements occupied has decreased, and the availability of these placements has also decreased. The data earlier in the report shows there is a need to develop this type of fostering provision with LAs; 20 placements were made with independent fostering agencies and 45 in residential settings.

Rates of unoccupied placements continue to vary significantly across all local authorities, with the lowest rate of unoccupied available placements being 0.7% and the highest 17%.

Services should consider whether mechanisms to make best use of inter-authority placements for children could be strengthened. Inter-authority placement numbers have dropped slightly and remain lower than we would expect to see with the vacancies reported. It is recommended that robust systems and monitoring processes are in place to ensure that neighbouring LA fostering provision is explored prior to any wider placement search process being initiated.

Unplanned Endings – Children Looked After in Foster Care

Key Messages:

- The number of children who experienced their placement ending in an unplanned way decreased to 10.4% (n508); this was a reduction from 12.4% (n619) last year.

- Across all children fostered in local authority provision (mainstream and connected persons) the rate was 8.9% (n323).

- This compares to 11.7% (n129) in commercial fostering provision and 6.8% (n10) in 3rd sector provision.
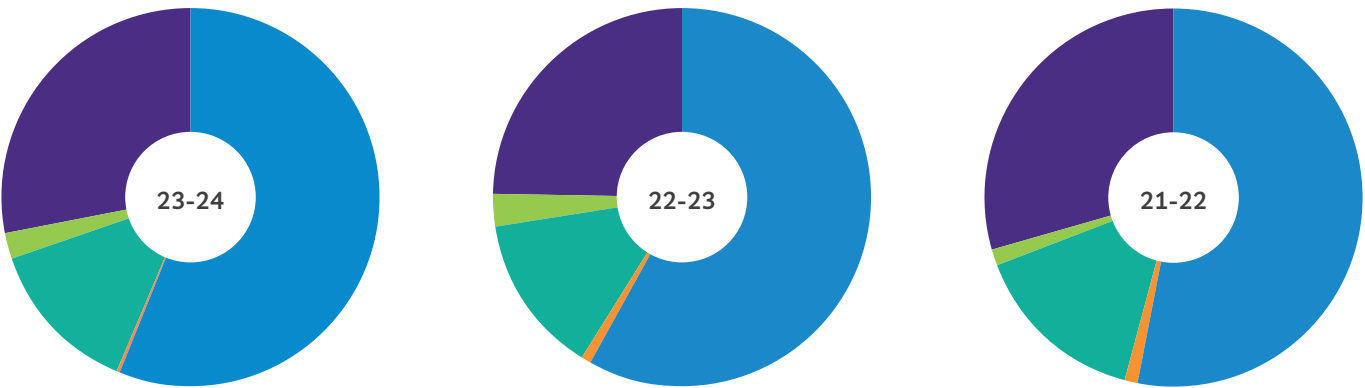
Unplanned Endings

		Placed with local authority foster carers	Placed with other local authority foster carers	Placed with connected persons foster carers	Placed with independent third sector provider foster carers	Placed with independent commercial provider foster carers	Total
2023-24	number	260	1	62	10	129	508
	percentage	13.4%	8.3%	4.6%	6.8%	11.7%	10.4%
2022-23	number	361	5	84	17	152	619
	percentage	18%	33%	5%	11.2%	13.4%	12.4%
2021-22	number	243	5	68	6	134	449
	percentage	12%	35%	4.3%	4.8%	11.4%	9.1%

Findings

The number of children who experienced their placement ending in an unplanned way decreased during 2023/24.

The biggest reduction was in local authority mainstream fostering placements, which decreased from 18% (n361) to 13.4% (n260) although when the connected person's data is combined this falls to 8.9% (n322).

The rates also reduced in the third sector and commercial fostering agencies to 6.8% (n10) and 11.7% (n129) respectively.

Placement stability continues to be a key factor to improving outcomes for children looked after and should be closely monitored.

mainstream recruitment and retention

2

Recruitment

Key Messages:

- 2023/24 saw an increase in enquiries and approvals of mainstream foster carers, the first year in 5 years for this to happen.

- The reduction in initial visits over the last 5 years has slowed down significantly and stood at a similar level to last year.

- There are encouraging small increases in enquiries from both people new to fostering and those who have fostered before; this reverses previous trends, indicating that fostering with the Local Authority is becoming more attractive.

- The total number of enquiries to foster increased by 19.2% (n277) in 2023/24 to **1,721**.

- **126** households were approved, an 11.5% (n13) increase on last year. This reflected a conversion rate of 7.3%.

- **124** new placements made available. These were made up of **88** short-term placements, **35** respite placements and **1** parent and child placement.

Recruitment of General Foster Carers
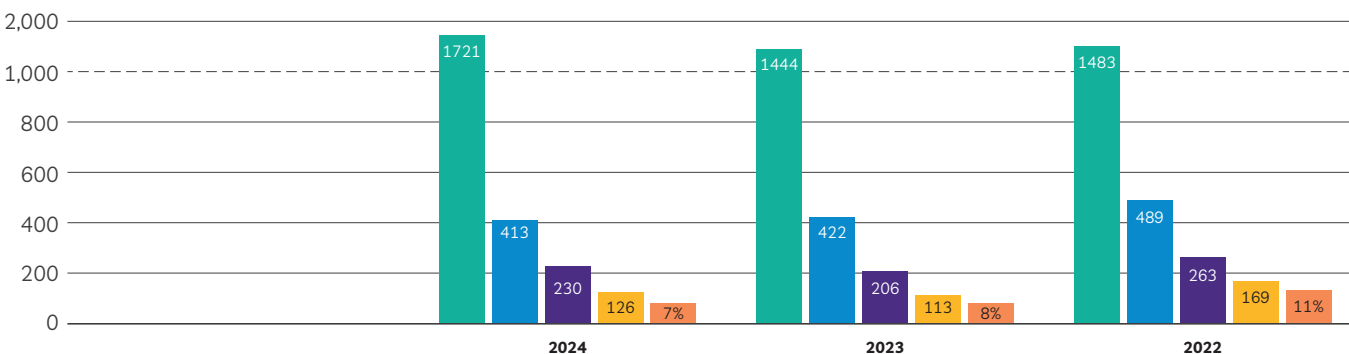
	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
▇ Enquiries	1,721	1,444	1,483
▇ Home visits / assessments conducted	413	422	489
▇ Fostering Assessments allocated	230	206	263
▇ Approvals made	126	113	169
▇ Approval conversion rate	7.3%	7.8%	11.4%

Findings

The progress in increasing initial enquiries achieved in 2022/23 continued in 2023/24, with a further increase in initial enquiries of 19.2% compared with 2022/23. This included increases in 5 out of the 6 regions ranging from 3.9% to 57%. This is in the context of a reduction in enquiries over the previous 7 years, signifying substantial change.

Although there was a small decrease in initial visits by 2.1%, there was a significant increase in Q4 as the additional resources were embedded within the LAs. 4 regions saw an increase on the previous year, ranging from 7.6% to 33%. The large numbers of enquiries meant that conversion to initial visit fell to 24%; there is a longer-term aspiration to increase this to 33%.

The proportion of delayed IVs due to service capacity has increased marginally to 6.8% and the proportion of initial visits being closed has remained stable at 23%. This helps us to calculate potential dropout rates.

02 Mainstream Recruitment and Retention

There were 230 assessments allocated, an increase of 28 on the previous year, with 60 being closed prior to completion. This shows a higher conversion from initial visit to allocation than in the previous year. Allocations increased in each of the last 3 quarters of the year.

The conversion rate from allocation to approval reduced slightly to 54.8%. However, 13 more foster carers were approved than in the previous year, an increase of 11.5%. 68% of these assessments were completed within 6 months, compared with 57% last year.

Monthly monitoring and quarterly reporting of recruitment data continues, through the KPI data collection tool. It is hoped that this monitoring of data, as well as the development of recruitment best practice training, embedding of improved recruitment practice across services and the marketing activity delivered through Foster Wales, will assist us in increasing enquiries, as well as seeking ways to continue to improve the conversion rates from enquiry to approval.

Enquiries
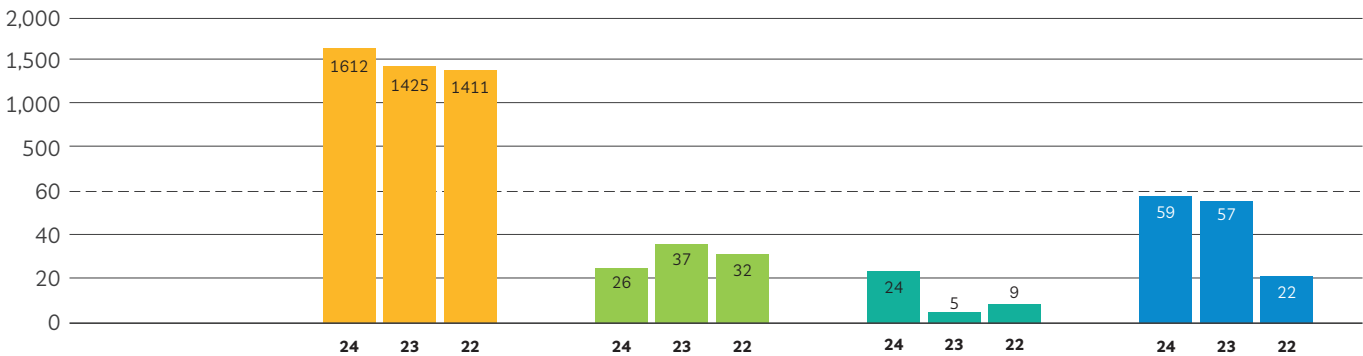
	Households that have not previously fostered	Households that have previously fostered through other LAs mainstream	Households that have previously fostered through third sector organisations	Households that have previously fostered through independent commercial organisations
2023/24	1,612	26	24	59
2022/23	1,425	37	5	57
2021/22	1,411	32	9	22

Findings

The number of enquiries from households that have previously fostered increased by 10 on the previous year and enquiries from households that have not fostered before by 187. These figures indicate that LA fostering is attractive to many people who have fostered before and that more people are seeking local authority fostering as their first step. In 23/24 there was a significant increase in applicants interested in transferring to their local authority from third sector organisations.

Retention

Key Messages:

- Retention of foster carers improved again in 2023/24.

- Foster carers leaving the service was the lowest ever recorded, with 12.5% (n23) fewer leaving than last year.

- 5% (n11) fewer placements were lost compared to last year.

- At year end 2024, a net loss of **35 households** and a net loss of **58 placements** was reported.

- The main reason reported for fostering households leaving the service in the last financial year was long service.

- 96 of the 126 approvals that ended were due to natural circumstances (long service, ill health, family circumstances, relationship breakdown or relocation).

**Net Gains and Losses of All-Wales Carers**
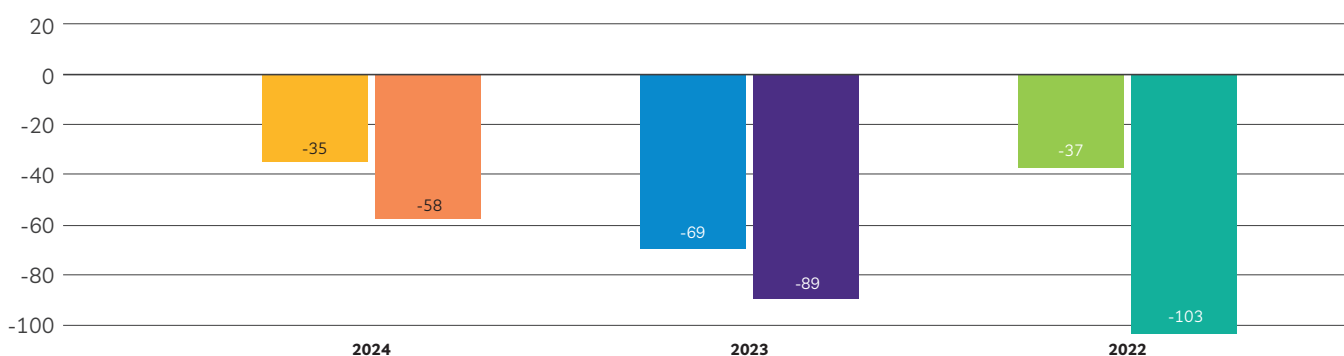
	2023-24		2022-23		2021-22	
	Households	Placements	Households	Placements	Households	Placements
Number of approvals during the year	126	144	115	124	169	201
Number left the service during the year	161	202	184	213	206	304
Net gain / loss	-35	-58	-69	-89	-37	-103

Findings

There was a decrease in terminations of approval, indicating that local authorities are retaining more foster carers. The number of carers resigning due to long service saw a substantial increase, with fewer carers transferring to commercial (for profit) and not for profit fostering providers. This indicates that more chose to stay with their local authorities. Foster carers leaving due to concerns, complaints or allegations also saw a decrease.

02 Mainstream Recruitment and Retention
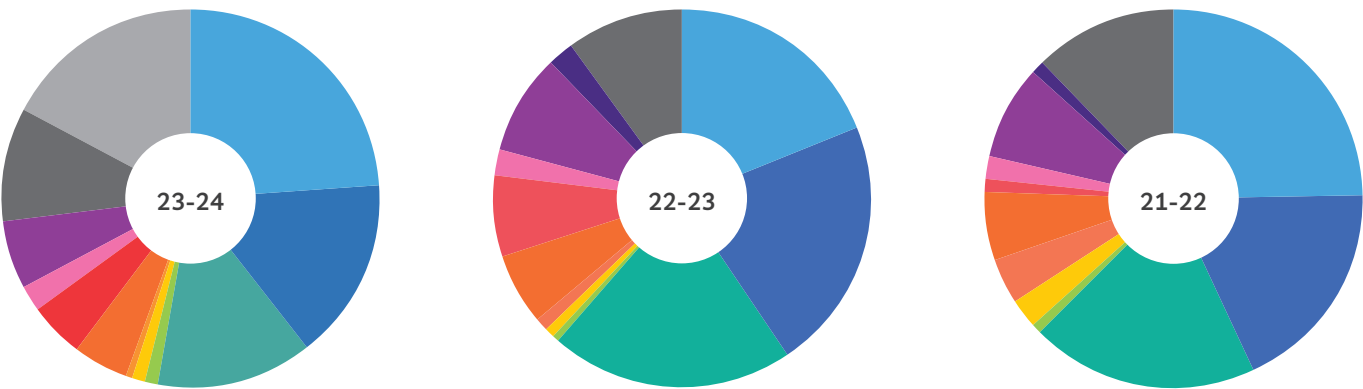
Reason for Mainstream Carers leaving the service

	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
■ Long Service	45	35	51
■ Ill health / Bereavement/ Relationship breakdown / Relocation	29	40	38
■ Change of Career	25	38	40
■ Transfer to other LA	2	1	2
■ Transfer to 3rd sector organisation	2	2	5
■ Transfer to commercial sector organisation	1	2	8
■ WIR / Supported lodgings arrangement	9	11	12
■ Special Guardianship Order made	9	13	2
■ Adoption Order made	4	4	4
■ Concerns / complaints / allegations	11	16	17
■ Child returned home	0	4	2
■ Fostering did not meet expectations	18	18	25
■ Family circumstance	32		
Total	**184**	**184**	**206**

Findings

The net loss of foster carers has reduced substantially over the last 3 years. This is positive and provides a building block for Foster Wales, whilst also highlighting the need for an increased focus on both recruitment and retention to ensure that Foster Wales can achieve growth within local authority fostering provision. Both the National Commitment and the Marketing Strategy will be key to delivering this.

connected persons recruitment and retention

3

Recruitment

Key Messages:

- The demand for connected persons assessments by local authorities remained high with 999 viability assessments undertaken, 75% (n744) of these being undertaken by fostering service staff/jointly and the remainder by other teams.

- More than three times as many connected persons assessments were allocated than mainstream assessments i.e. 744 compared to 230. This maintains a pattern seen for several years.

- There were 350 new connected persons approvals, an increase of 22% (n64).

- The number of Special Guardianship Orders made following these viability assessments was 181, a decrease of 8.4% (n14).

- 1,670 children were living with Connected Person Foster Carers at the end of 23/24, an increase of 0.2% (n3) from 22/23.

Viability/Initial Assessments
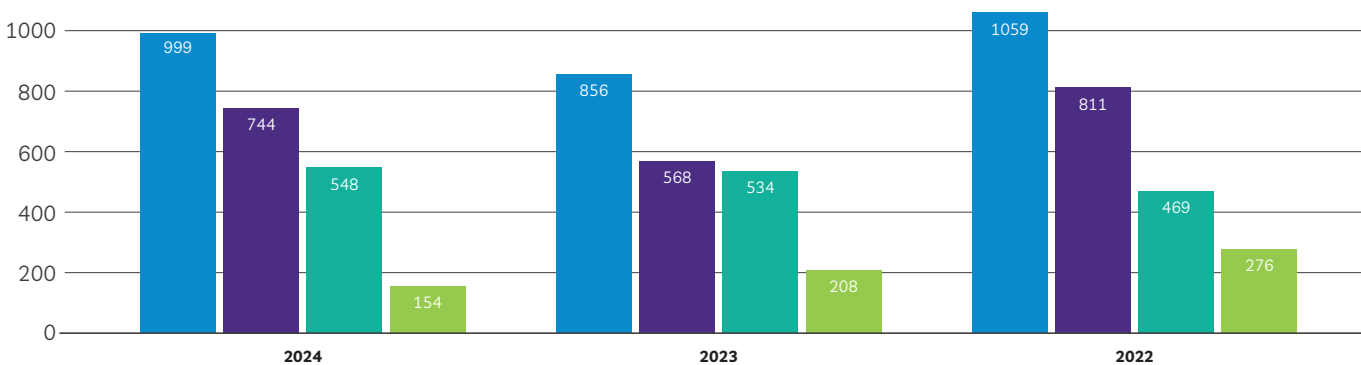
	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
Viability/initial assessments referred to fostering service	999	856	1,059
Viability/initial assessments completed by fostering service	744	568	811
Positive viability/initial assessments by fostering service	548	534	469
Viability/initial assessments completed solely by childcare teams	154	208	276

03 Connected Persons Recruitment and Retention

Full Connected Persons Assessments
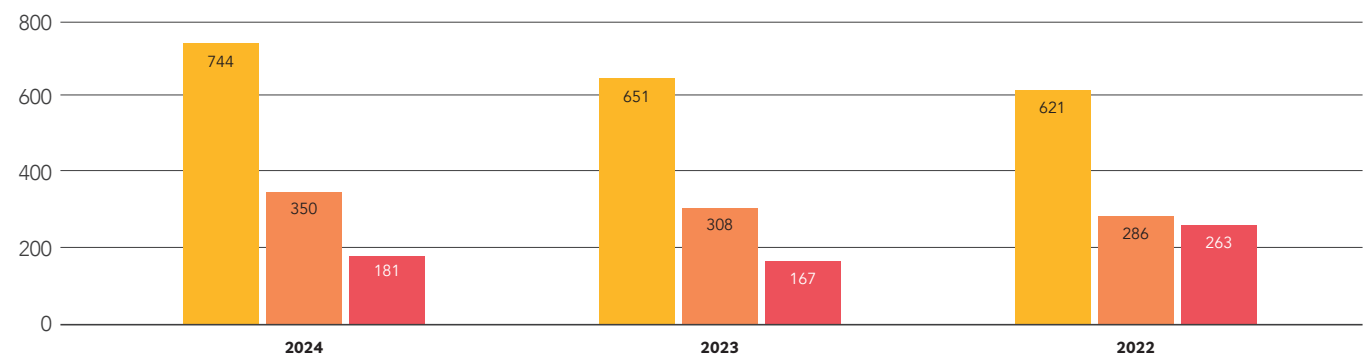
	2023-24	**2022-23**	**2021-22**
🟨 Full assessments allocated	744	651	621
🟧 Approved as Connected Persons	350	308	286
🟥 SGO granted	181	167	167

Findings

The demand on services in respect of connected persons assessments continues to remain high across local authorities and the level of requests for viability assessments and full assessments increased compared to the previous year.

The proportion of initial viability assessments completed by the fostering teams or jointly with childcare teams was 74.4% (n744), compared with 66% (n568) the previous year. This shows that the resource needed for these viability assessments is mainly coming from within fostering services and has a further impact on capacity of assessing social workers for mainstream foster carers.

The proportion of initial viability assessments deemed positive reduced to 55% (n548 of 999) from 62% (n534 of 856) the previous year.

When these figures are directly compared to mainstream assessment demands, more than three times as many connected persons assessments are allocated each year. In 23/24 76.4% of all assessments allocated by fostering services were for connected persons assessments, with 230 mainstream assessments in comparison to 744 connected persons assessments.

This has significant resource implications for fostering services and the resources available to mainstream assessments and support. The number of new connected persons foster carer approvals has also increased over the past 12 months, although the number of Special Guardianship Orders made initially as a result has decreased.

03 Connected Persons Recruitment and Retention

Retention

Key Messages:

- The number of connected person foster carers in Wales increased further with a net gain of **91** households including approvals of 350 households and 375 placements in 2023/24.

- 7.4% more **connected persons** (n18) fostering households ceased to be approved than in the previous year.

- The main reason reported for fostering households leaving the service in the last financial year was due to **Special Guardianship Order** made.

- The **second highest reason** for households ceasing to be approved was due to being not required to care for the child. This indicates assessments were undertaken where the carers were subsequently not required, although this number has reduced from the previous year.

- There were more connected person fostering households ceasing to be approved due to complaints, concerns and allegations.

Gains and Losses of All-Wales Connected Person Carers
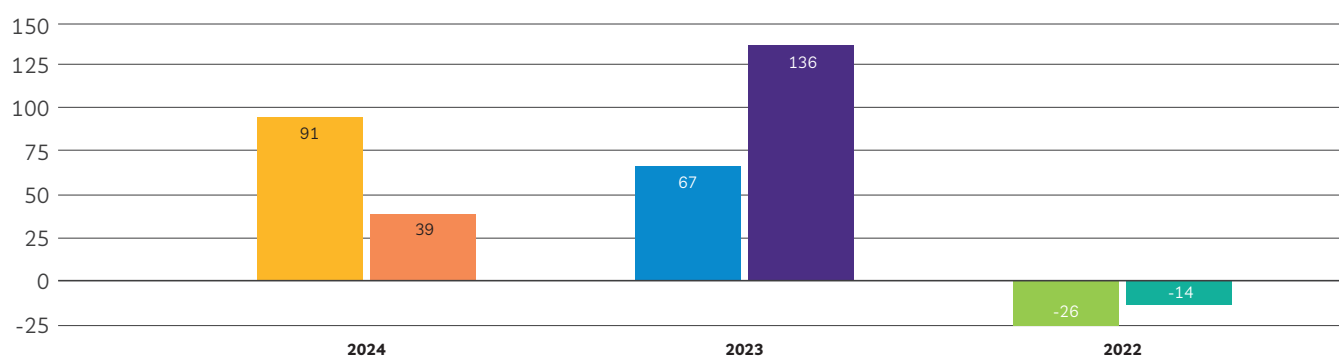
	2023-24		2021-22		2020-21	
	Households	Placements	Households	Placements	Households	Placements
Number of approvals during the year	350	375	308	439	286	406
Number left the service during the year	259	336	241	303	312	420
Net gain / loss	+91	+39	+67	+136	-26	-14

03 Connected Persons Recruitment and Retention
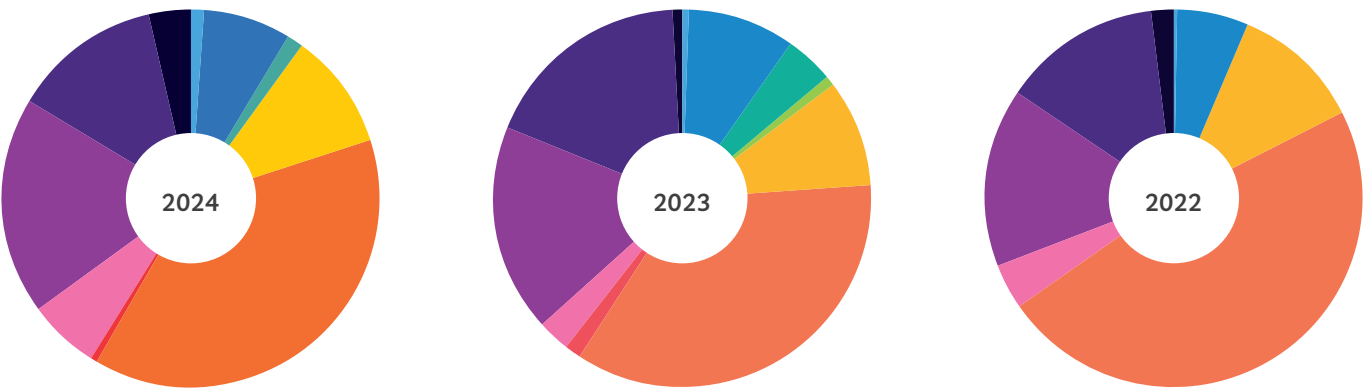
Reason for Connected Persons Foster Carers ceasing to be approved as foster carers

	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
■ Long Service	3	2	1
■ Ill health / Bereavement/ Relationship breakdown / Relocation	17	22	19
■ Change of Career	3	10	0
■ Transfer to other LA	0	2	0
■ WIR / Supported lodgings arrangement	23	22	35
■ Special Guardianship Order made	88	85	149
■ Adoption Order made	1	3	0
■ Concerns / complaints / allegations	14	7	12
■ Child returned home	43	43	48
■ Carer approved but not required	29	43	42
■ Fostering did not meet expectations	8	2	6
Total	**259**	**241**	**312**

Findings

There has been a net gain of 91 households and 39 placements since last year. This is mainly due to carers approved for multiple children ending their approval as foster carers and the majority of new approvals being for 1 child only, combined with changes of approval status through the year.

The second highest reason for households ceasing to be approved was due to being not required to care for the child. This indicates assessments undertaken where carers are not required, although this number has reduced by 32% (n14) from the previous year.

There were more fostering households ceasing to be approved due to complaints, concerns and allegations, this has increased by 100% (n7) since the previous year.

associated costs

4

Key Messages:

- Local Authority foster care remains the most cost effective of the fostering placements within the sector in Wales.
  - The average weekly cost of a mainstream LA placement is **£547** (including placement and whole service support costs)
  - The average weekly cost of a connected persons LA placement is **£386** (including placement and whole service support costs)
  - The average weekly cost of an independent third sector placement is **£845** (including all costs charged to the LA)
  - The average weekly cost of an independent commercial placement is **£926** (including all costs charged to the LA).

- On average the cost of placing a child in a commercial or third sector IFA placement is, at minimum, an additional **£19,708** per child per year.

- If every commercial IFA placement was brought back into local authority provision, the total cost savings to local authorities would be **£25,076,914**.

- Placements with independent fostering agencies make up 53% of all placement costs, whilst at the same time providing only 28% of the total weeks of care.

- Parent and Child arrangements average weekly costs follow a similar pattern
  - **£825** for LA provision,
  - **£1,779** for commercial and
  - **£5,204** for residential placements

- The additional cost of placing a Parent and Child arrangement within a commercial IFA is **£11,448** more for a 12-week placement and within a residential setting is **£52,548** for the same length of placement.

Foster Wales costs

The costs associated with looked after children placements have risen considerably in recent years; the largest proportion of this tends to be spent on foster care. In 2023/24 £137.99m was spent on directly provided and commissioned fostering services.

Most of the funding associated with the local authority fostering services that form Foster Wales comes from local authorities' own budgets, but local authorities and the Welsh government have provided grant aid to support a level of national and regional infrastructure plus new and additional approaches in local authorities. In 2023/24 this amounted to circa 2.2% of the overall expenditure on foster care in Wales; much of the Welsh Government grant aid is made available to local authorities via Foster Wales.

The table below outlines the funding available to Foster Wales nationally for 2023/24.

04 Associated costs

Income Stream and Source	Allocation of spend		Totals
WLGA – Allocation from RSG **£504,444** (confirmed annually)	Staff, offce, and national co-ordination costs. Funding towards 6 x Regional Development Managers employed by lead LAs	£504,444	**£504,444**
Welsh Government Grant 'All Wales Brand' **£558,700** (secured to 31.03.25)	Staff	£116,100	**£558,700**
	Funding towards 6 x Regional Marketing Offcers employed by lead LAs	£132,000	
	National Website maintenance & development	£6,025	
	National and local marketing & PR	£304,575	
Welsh Government Grant 'Supporting Foster Wales' **£1,980,829** (secured to 31.03.27, significantly increased for 23/24 & 24/25)	Infrastructure – staff and hosting costs	£186,479	**£1,980,829**
	Recruitment Offcers	£793,100	
	Recruitment, Assessment and Support	£901,250	
	Additional Marketing	£34,000	
	Foster Carer Profiles	£46,000	
	Learning and Development	£20,000	
Fees & Allowances project funding **£48,100** (short term project)	Fees and Allowances year 1	£48,100	**£48,100**
Total Income			**£3,092,073**