

Fostering Quarterly Report
July-September 2022



Quarter Two Fostering Report

The Annual Report for 2021/2022 was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in September 2021. The statement of Purpose was revised and was ratified on the same day. This is the second quarterly report for 2022/2023.

Introduction

In 2022/2023, the Fostering Service has an annual budget of £9,102,467. Most foster carer allowances have been increased by 2% for this financial year. This has ensured that allowances continue to remain in advance of the government recommended minimum rates.

This is important aspect of the fostering retention strategy given the foster care marketplace is challenging with competition at a peak level with several independent agencies actively recruiting in the Lincolnshire region.

To retain our competitiveness, allowances are a significant factor alongside the continued annual retention payments within a framework of high-quality supervision and support. The budget continues to afford flexibility to provide enhanced allowances to certain categories of carers such as those offering permanence or managing particularly distressed children and those with challenging behaviours.

There have been recent discussions in the foster carer forums regarding the current cost of living crisis and what it means for people caring for other people's children. This is a lively debate that the service is attuned to. In a continued effort to support carers in the best way possible, the service has supported fostering families to have access to recognised discount cards that are compatible with what is available to Lincolnshire County Council Social Care staff alongside all other employees.

The continued emphasis on recruitment and retention was impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic where the service had seen an increase in numbers of children in care (CIC) and diminishing foster carer availability owing to retirement, health and social factors.

Most carers who took time out during Covid have returned to fostering and continue to offer a variety of placements across the board. The service continues to seek new recruits and prioritise the wellbeing of all existing carers given the national shortfall.

The development of the virtual foster care community during the pandemic, via service and Caring2learn, created a model platform to increase interaction and engagement within and across the fostering community which continues with significant momentum. This has

proven to be a valuable forum for carers who have recently joined Lincolnshire or those that are well versed with fostering and see their role in mentoring and supporting others wherever in their fostering journey.

For the purposes of this report the performance data from July to September 2022 is unavailable until early November 2022. The data will be provided for the quarter three report due to be presented to Corporate Parenting in January 2023.

The fostering service continues to be engaged in various aspects and strands of this work with a strong focus on the core offers to foster carers and the development and practice of the Valuing Care Toolkit being an integral part of the foster carer's annual reviews and Form F assessments. Further work is occurring in relation to embedding the Valuing Care Toolkit so that it is integrated in all Kinship and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments.

Recruitment and Retention:

Fostering continues to work through the challenges of the rising cost of living, recruitment activity is returning to a more stable place that matches previous activity trends pre covid pandemic. Recruitment continues to develop into an area that is viewed as everyone's responsibility with a wider pool of Supervising Social Workers completing half of all initial visits and other Children's Service areas considering how they might support this continued service priority.

Online platforms continue to provide the service with the flexibility and low-cost options of supporting part of the services' recruitment activity. The fostering service will continue to include online options to increase capacity, accessibility, and convenience for Foster Carers and fostering applicants in the future. This includes online recruitment events and the fostering preparation course.

The service has also introduced Recruitment events in the daytime, previously information events took place exclusively at night, fostering staff recognise the important of providing events that suit both working and non-working applicants. Attendance at these events will be monitored to inform the planning of future events.

Those making formal or informal enquiries to foster are encouraged to attend information events. Virtual events have seen a substantial rise in people attending, recent changes to encourage participation has also made these sessions much more interactive and relational. This is supported in the feedback and improvement of conversion to people going on to stage 1 of the recruitment process.

The Preparation to Foster course offers both face-to-face and virtual events this year, both types of events are well attended. Plans have been made for three face-to-face courses and three virtual courses within this financial year. This way of working will be evaluated to ensure it is a most appropriate use of time and resource.

A Supervising Social Worker facilitates each course together with a Caring2Learn representative, Placement Support Worker and at least one Foster Carer Champion.

A recruitment Council audit and review completed last quarter has informed the strategy along with key findings and best practice guidelines provided through research and external reviews. The recruitment strategy is revised monthly, and performance reported to help understand and inform the actions and trajectory of activity. Key recommendations from the state of the nation report (Fostering Network, 2021) and The Care Review (DFE, 2022) have been taken into consideration in all activity and planning for the service.

The work continuing will closely monitor quality with a strong emphasis on good customer service and community. Initial results from the impact of changes in practice and processes can be seen through key performance indicators. Conversion rates from applying and approval has already seen a rise from 4-6% over the past 5 years to over 11% currently.

The average national conversion rate in the UK for Local Authorities was 11% last year, this set the target for Lincolnshire's own performance. Lincolnshire County Council have successfully raised our conversion rate to meet this national benchmark although in the meantime the national average has fallen to 6%, with this in mind this makes the progress even more significant, superseding national trends and expectations.

Previously the service did find that almost half of those in stage 1 would change their mind about fostering and choose to withdraw although the service has seen a 34% increase in retaining those in stage 1 due to applicant decision. An indication of the strong support offer and customer service that has developed.

Retention of Foster Carers remains the most effective means of recruitment. Providing individual levels of support to our carers and specifically those newly approved remains crucial.

Work continues to develop a community hub approach across the county. The support forums continue to act as a way for Foster Carers to access support from other Foster Carers and children's service's teams. This is providing a more integrated approach to support.

Feedback from the Foster Carers strongly indicates that virtual platforms have helped carers overcome challenges in attending events, such as childcare. Online support plays a huge

part in helping people to connect and support each other away from geographical and office hours challenges

The hub continues to be supported by the Foster Carer champions who have roles that cover responsibilities as 'Hub Links'.

The service now allocates a 'Hub Link' on receipt of their fostering application, Therefore, it is more likely they will access general support and guidance from more experienced carers through established relationships rather than relying on new connections. Hub Links are allocated thoughtfully to promote relationship and connections between carers and their support network. Hub Links have also been allocated to existing carers and Special Guardians where they are experiencing challenges and require additional support.

A Supervising Social Worker is now allocated around day 30 of stage 1, this creates more time for assessment and allows recruitment to make a much more informed decision regarding someone's suitability to foster prior to moving to Stage 2 of the process. Applicants are also much more invested earlier in the process, which is contributing towards the conversion rate positively. Allocating earlier allows the service to complete the recruitment process in shorter timescales.

A tiered support offer has been set out, which includes a stage 1 support package, stage 2 support package and then a support offer to all approved carers. This allows for a smoother transition to fostering for all applicants. Supporting them to be better informed and equipped for the journey, whilst feeling and experiencing a level of support from the service. The intention is to support and boost their level of confidence in Lincolnshire as a fostering provider.

Participation in the different areas of the hub continues to increase. Assessed need is monitored to ensure that the right kind of support is identified and delivered. Carers have welcomed the return of face-to-face support and feedback from carers is positive with regards to their feeling really supported.

A recent survey along with the audit information has formed a picture that general advice and support for Foster Carers is going well; however, carers feel more support and improvement is required during challenging times often relating to the trauma experienced and behaviour exhibited by the children they care for.

A challenging time has shown to be the most likely reason Foster Carers consider leaving the service or spend time offline. This is a key area for attention, planning, action, and ongoing review for 2022/2023. Other key themes for retention include support to carers that are offline, new Foster Carers and staff retention.

Marketing:

During this quarter 61 Initial Enquiries of Interest (IEI) were received from the public enquiring about becoming a Foster Carer.

There have been 7 newly approved households in this second quarter of the financial year. 11 fostering households have been recruited since April 2022.

On 30th September 2022 there were 38 open applications in stages 1 or 2, 34 of these have a panel date booked this financial year.

Advertising:

In Lincolnshire, the service continually reviews the marketing strategy and continuously develop the approach as being a local option for carers wanting to care for Lincolnshire children.

During this quarter and for the whole year our objective is to draw upon the strengths of carers joining an Ofsted rated Outstanding authority who work collaboratively to find local placements within a local community for local children.

Our continued energy in advertising is to ensure that the objective is understood that Lincolnshire is further establishing itself as a local option.

The last three months have had a continuous and busy approach to identifying Lincolnshire as a number one choice. Our efforts are detailed below:

July 2022

- During the month of July, our fostering adverts were shown a total of 37,681 times to over 17,550 people on social media. As July was the first month in the last year with a higher paid advertising campaign, its results will be considered the base and we will need to wait to analyse its performance, comparing it to future months. However, this is already a huge improvement from the average 10,000 views from previous years when a similar budget was allocated.
- Joint working with three district councils through the fostering friendly employer scheme and agreements for their fostering advertising was agreed and confirmed.

- July marked the start to a short breaks (respite) campaign through social media advertising and a new advert on Lincs FM. This campaign will run until 31st October 2022.
- Promoted refer a friend with current households on the virtual chat groups and the fostering monthly newsletter.

The majority of the IEI's received during the month have confirmed that they originally sourced their interest from social media.

August 2022

- Joint working with Schools, district councils, local businesses to help us promote fostering within their social media forums.
- Attended Lincoln Pride to promote fostering
- "Myth busting Monday" material was created and shared as short 10 seconds videos. They were published on a weekly basis during July reaching an average of 270 people reached per post
- Targeted paid-for Facebook advert, August had a Facebook page reach of 96,031, an increase of over 310% from the previous month.
- Fostering campaign running on Lincs FM, choose local and short breaks
- Article on Int Comms within the County Council advertising information event
- Promoted refer a friend with current households

September 2022

- Joint working with Schools, district councils, local businesses to help us promote fostering within their social media forums.
- More advertising airtime was agreed with Lincs FM to support the ongoing short breaks campaign and later the Permanence campaign.
- "Myth busting Monday" material shared as short 10 seconds videos.
- A recruitment event welcomed 12 households

- Targeted paid-for Facebook advert, September had a Facebook page reach of 54320, a decrease of 33.3%
- District councils East Lindsey, Boston and South Holland have helped us promote the service by social media as well as with their internal communications and public bulletins.
- Lincolnshire Fostering Service collected food during their service day to donate to a local food bank. A good amount of food has been donated, and the whole service has been thanked publicly within their social media accounts. This supports the establishment of Lincolnshire fostering service as part of the wider community and supporting causes important to its residents.
- Article on Int Comms advertising information event
- Promoted refer a friend with current households

Due to her Majesty the Queen's passing during the month of September, our account was closed for a total of 12 days to reflect our condolences.

Our social media accounts have received less traffic this month.

September had a Facebook page reach of 54,320 a decrease of 33.3% from previous month. However, we still achieved 6 more page likes this month, which are added to our 138 new page likes this financial year.

Permanence Campaign:

Attracting long term foster carers remains a priority for the service. Fostering have developed four areas of activity in attracting new and existing carers to this type of fostering. This includes attracting new carers to permanent fostering, supporting those currently in the assessment period to consider permanent fostering and explore possible matches prior to approval, holding a quarterly family finders' event and supporting and encouraging existing households to consider new permanent links or a change in approval.

Profiles are created for children seeking permanent foster homes, this includes anonymised profiles. These anonymised profiles are shared on the Council's social media platforms as part of our marketing campaigns to attract new carers, this includes the Caring2Learn closed Facebook page which invites staff, social care and health staff and existing carers. The

profiles are also readily available in the foster carers google drive and are shared with fostering applicants during the assessment period.

The campaign page on the Lincs Fm radio cite features, information about permanent fostering along with the Council's webpage which has a page dedicated to this campaign.

Family Finding:

During the second quarter of this year Family Finders has continued to meet monthly to consider all children with a care plan for long-term fostering who do not already have a placement identified. These meetings have all taken place in person.

Family Finding review meetings, are held quarterly, and are chaired by Senior Managers, the role of the review meeting is to consider children where no suitable match has been identified after a three-month period. This is to ensure there is no delay for children. During this quarter, three children were referred to this process.

Family Finders continue to use profiles alongside children's Valuing Care profile to try and identify any permanent placements. The children's anonymised profiles have also been shared on the Foster Carers "G drive" so that carers can access the profiles and arrange further discussions with their Supervising Social Worker. Profiles are also circulated to all Supervising Social Workers to consider any appropriate links with current carers.

A permanence event took place in July 2022, where approved foster carers and those within the assessment process were invited to attend and learn about some of the children that were awaiting permanent homes. Social workers and foster carers spoke about the children and used the Valuing Care Toolkit to identify the strengths and needs of the children.

Family Finding workers have recently attended the Children in Care Service Day in September to highlight the process for Family Finding and to provide an opportunity to discuss any queries or questions, and to further promote joint working arrangements.

The Permanence Campaign is on-going and includes a variety of advertising, With the use of social media platforms including, radio, local publications and the use of the fostering Facebook page and Instagram. The Instagram page is utilized by the service as part of the recruitment drive. The County Council fostering web page continues to provide information on long-term Fostering and the support available to Foster Carers.

Over this second quarter five additional children have been referred to Family Finders and there has been one child removed. There are now twenty-one children currently seeking

long term placements, nine of these are singleton placements and there are six sets of two siblings.

There has been considerable progress this quarter in finding suitable, long-term placements for children. One child has been removed from Family Finders and will be remaining with her current carers and two further sets of siblings have moved to new carers on a task centred basis with a view of permanence, these are likely to be removed from Family Finders shortly.

One of the links was as a direct result of carers attending the permanence event held in July. The carers were in stage 2 of their Fostering assessment. A further link is being progressed due to a carer expressing an interest in a further sibling group. This is currently at the information sharing stage which is promising.

Training:

A virtual and Face to face offer remains in place and has been welcomed by carers, providing flexibility and options that cater to different circumstances and learning styles.

The fostering training offer remains under review, ensuring that the service continue to meet the needs of the fostering community in providing quality and informed care to children with a diverse range of needs and interests. The training offer for 2023/24 is current been created.

Whilst considering how we better prepare people for fostering included in the hub is access for applicants to training and development throughout their assessment period. We have seen an increased number of applicants accessing the offer and booking mandatory training in advance of approval.

Other courses have been planned in response to data and information concerning placement breakdowns and unplanned moves, these include therapeutic crisis intervention and mental health first aid. Feedback from the therapeutic crisis intervention has been positive, PSW have also completed the training, so they are able to advocate this practice and support foster carers to put it into practice in the home.

It is important in training and development to also ensure our more experienced foster carers and those that have attended many of the courses on offer continue to have access to further learning and development. The service has specifically identified the 6-day social pedagogy and 2-day Restorative Practice to address this objective.

19 courses were delivered during this quarter with 172 attendees taking part from fostering households. This is a smaller number compared with 1st quarter although we do not deliver training during the 6-week summer break.

Training:

In this quarter the training schedule has continued to be delivered to assist the training and development of Foster Carers. This is an important factor in improving outcomes of Children in Care and young people. Access to this develops knowledge and skills in areas of interest as well as provides the mandatory courses. It facilitates carers also sharing ideas and experiences where they can share experiences and learn from one another.

Various courses have been available including:

- First Aid/ paediatric training
- Mental Health First Aid
- Safeguarding
- Safe Care
- Fostering Preparation Course
- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention

Practice Workshops:

- Introducing Social Pedagogy
- Introduction to Restorative Practice
- Introduction to mindfulness, Creating Calm
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Supporting sleep, nightmares, and night terrors.
- Supporting grief, loss, and positive endings
- Relational repair
- Fostering Weekly therapeutic parenting Programme (Caring2gether, 6 weeks)

E-Learning:

LSCP courses are still being accessed and Foster Carers have attended.

- Safeguarding
- Safeguarding refresher
- Hidden harm
- Covid 19

- Think Safe be safe
- Equality and inclusion
- E-safety

Learning Homes:

The toolkit for new carers which includes the standards from the Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDs) has been well received. The service is now starting to see these come in for assessment resulting in carers receiving a Learning Homes award with an expectation to resubmit a portfolio every three years to ensure on-going personal and professional development.

Currently there are eighty-two foster homes and five residential settings that have achieved their Learning Homes Award. Due to the number of toolkits collected over recent months and the expectations that all new carers complete the award within twelve months of approval; the service are seeing the number of awarded homes to continue to rise significantly.

Celebration Event:

The Foster Carer Celebration took place over Zoom last year. The event recognises the contribution and achievements of our fostering community. Foster carers will receive their long service awards, a voucher and lapel badge. The voucher and lapel badge are given to carers as a token of gratitude and was positively received.

Last year we formally introduced new foster carers to the community, and this was our opportunity to thank them for choosing Lincolnshire as their provider. Likewise, this will remain a feature at this year's event too which is scheduled for March 2023.

Kinship :

Kinship options are always considered when a child enters care for the first time and throughout their care experience. Joint work has been completed and is ongoing between the Fostering Service and other teams to ensure consistency with viability assessments and the referral process.

Practice Supervisors and Social Workers from within the service work collaboratively with other social care staff to ensure that all family and their networks are engaged in the care planning process where it is deemed to be safe and, in the child/ren's best interests.

Practice Supervisors maintain good working relationships between Fostering and the other teams; this continues to be effective as conversations are held early on and consultations are taking place prior to viabilities being concluded and placements being made.

The Government's manifesto committed to review the children's social care system which was launched in March 2021. As part of this independent review of children's social care, the author Josh MacAllister highlighted the value and significance of Kinship placements the author in May 2022 who cited the following:

“For some children, care will always be the best option and Chapters Five and Six of this report set out how we can transform the care system. However, many children should and could safely– with the right help – remain within their family network rather than enter care.

Growing up within a family network means retaining a strong sense of identity, culture and place, which young people have told the review is often lost or significantly diluted through care. A child living with their grandparents, aunt or uncle is unlikely to have to rely on social workers to recount their life story, nor grow up with carers who have very different family or cultural values.

While foster and residential care will come with an end date, with young people often having to set out in the world alone, staying within a family network, usually known as kinship care, is significantly more likely to mean children grow up with love, and retain those loving relationships throughout their whole life.

Kinship is deemed appropriate for children and young people to be supported by the Local Authority with every effort made to identify and assess the family networks to ensure that children and young people can be safely cared for by people who they have an existing relationship with and are known to them.”

In Lincolnshire, the children's teams continue to work proactively in identifying the family networks by completing thorough viability assessments and having early conversations to support the next steps on assessments.

There are sound working relationships established between Fostering and the children's teams, regular discussions and joint supervisions take place and are standard practice. These proactive measures support and improve care planning for children and young people and supports the reduction in placement moves by identifying key supports for both the children and their prospective carers, by identifying the right carer at the right time.

Between the 1st July 2022 and the 30th September 2022 the following data reflects the work undertaken during this period:

Number of Referrals	SGO	Reg.24 / SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering Including Ukraine	Statutory Checks/CAO
51	24	17	2	5 (includes 3 YP from Ukraine)	3

The service has seen the same number of referrals as was highlighted in the last quarterly report. These figures continue to demonstrate the Local Authority’s efforts to secure kinship placements for children and reflect the ongoing improvement in practice in exploring and assessing children and young people’s network. Both the children’s teams and the court arena continue to ensure all family networks are explored, and alternative placements are seen as the last resort.

Overall, there has been a rise in the work including the children’s placements under Regulation 24 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and subsequent amendments, which progressed to Special Guardianship Orders (SGO’s). The number of SGO assessments has also seen a rise which suggests that all options have been considered within the Court arena. This reflects a practice of planning for permanence for this cohort of children.

For statutory checks, these are undertaken when the children’s social work teams are completing assessments of family members for private law orders such as Child Arrangement Orders or Special Guardianship Orders. The circumstances in which the assessments are being completed outside of public law proceedings, or when the children are not children in care. The number of these has also remained the same since the last quarter.

Further expansion of Private Fostering Regulations in relation to Ukraine children and Young People only

In anticipation of the Government’s response following the invasion of Ukraine the Homes for Ukraine Scheme commenced in July 2022. This has involved processing applications from eligible children under the age of 18 who have already applied through the Homes for Ukraine Scheme to come to the UK without a parent or guardian in carefully defined circumstances.

- Within 24 hours of a child's arrival the council should carry out an initial welfare visit.
- The council will give the child information in Ukrainian and Russian about how to raise any concerns, and how they have a duty to help them if they believe they are at risk.

With regards to Private fostering assessments, they have risen from 3 referrals in the last quarter, to 5 this quarter. This has included the 3 Private Fostering Assessments of Hosts in relation to Ukraine children and young people. Overall, the service is seeing a gradual increase in the number of assessments requested which falls in line with Government processing Ukrainian cases.

Staying Put:

During this second quarter, the number of young people in Staying Put currently stands at 40. Of these 40 young people five are attending university, 26 are in further education, two are in employment, one is on an Apprenticeship and two are on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme. The remaining four are currently NEET with one of them imminently joining the army and the others looking for full-time work. Several of the young people in further education or at university have part-time jobs. Others are engaged in volunteering opportunities.

During this quarter four young people left the Staying Put scheme. One moved in with their partner and his family, one turned 21 and remained living with his grandparent, one moved into independent accommodation and there was a single placement breakdown. The young person whose placement broke down was supported into his own accommodation by the Leaving Care Service.

Staying Put remains an active element of the fostering service provision and continues to receive a steady flow of referrals from our children in care Social Workers. There are currently 19 young people waiting to join the scheme when they turn 18.

In summary

Staying Put arrangements are put in place in a planned and informed way, the Staying Put Co-ordinator works closely alongside Children's teams and the Leaving Care Service to ensure this happens.

Several of the young people who are in learning also work part-time or volunteer. Those that are not in work or learning are offered additional support by the Leaving Care Service.

We have seen four young people move on from the scheme during Quarter two. The primary reason for this being young people having a positive move on.

If a Staying Put arrangement is at risk, the service continue to work alongside Staying Put Providers, young people, and the Leaving Care Service to resolve issues and put solutions in place to stabilise the arrangement.

This quarter saw a slight reduction of young people in Staying Put compared to last quarter however this remains a valued option for some care leavers and remains a current choice for some young adults as transition to living more independently.

Conclusion:

It is reassuring that during this year the service have seen the recovery following the Covid pandemic with services returning to follow a pre pandemic trend. There continues to be a promising start with fostering enquiries and more carers have returned to fully resume their fostering role.

The pressure is slowly beginning to ease on the service which has faced staffing changes and vacancies which continue to reflect the national challenges in social care recruitment.

Despite this maintaining high quality supervision and support has been central by means of maximising and mobilising our placement capacity. Many fostering households continue to make the difference and have despite the enormous challenges in recent years, have demonstrated their commitment to the Lincolnshire children in their care. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis upon carers and their fostering families is fully appreciated and understood

The number of Children in Care remains significantly higher during the same period last year and the increase in this figure and reduced bed capacity results in pressures on the placements available and the matches achieved. The focus on the fostering service and wider colleagues is to continue to monitor and intervene early to prevent a placement breakdown and re-establish stability in the best interests of the child.

The service continues to be heartened by the interest from the public in fostering yet despite this there has also been an increased number of referrals to independent fostering agencies. The number of children placed in children's homes has increased alongside the use of external placements where necessary. Using external resources has a considerable impact on the resources of the Local Authority.

The continued transformation programme will continue to support the service in maintaining and developing the core offer for fostering households. This in tandem with the key decision to embed the Caring2 Learn Practice Supervisor into the service has continued to pay dividends in relation to our hub offer including training and support.

The concept of Caring2Learn remains woven throughout the service and this coupled with the continued work of the foster carer champions and colleagues it remains the ambition of the service to build upon our strengths during this year

Deborah Crawford
Children's Head of Regulated Services

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