



2023-24
QUARTERS 1 & 2
REPORT

APRIL - SEPTEMBER

LINCOLNSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Quarter One Fostering Report 2023/2024:

The Annual Report for 2022- 2023 was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in September 2023. The Statement of Purpose was revised and was ratified on the same day.

This is the half yearly report for 2023- 2024 which is being presented as an exceptional report owing to the Corporate Parenting Panel agenda. It is expected that reports will be presented quarterly moving forward.

Introduction:

In 2023/2024, the Fostering Service has an annual budget of ££9,543,967. All fostering allowances have been increased by 12% for this financial year which has ensured that allowances continue to remain above the government recommended minimum rates. Lincolnshire fostering service promptly implemented this increase at the very start of the financial year in an effort to boost allowances to support fostering families to cover the cost of caring for the child/ren. This much needed increase arose following the announcement of the strategy of the reform of children's social care: *Stable Homes, Built on Love*.

The timing of such an increase has never been more critical given the national numbers of carers ceasing to foster, children in care date from the government from latest figures published in March 2022 confirm a 2% increase totalling 82,170 (www.gov.uk) in the children in care population and reflects the rise in the national cost of living.

Reviewing fostering allowances in the context of a broader support offer has been critical in terms of supporting Lincolnshire fostering in undertaking this valuable and integral role in maintaining local children with local fostering families.

For Lincolnshire to be the carers number one provider of choice it is vital that allowances including the retention element, in the context of a strong supervision, support and development offer are key given the rigorous competition from other fostering agencies within the region.

The fostering 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 exhibiting challenging behaviours.

Additionally, the authority support fostering families with recognised discount cards that are compatible with what is available to Lincolnshire County Council Social Care staff alongside all other employees. This affords an additional benefit for carers longer term.

Nationally and regionally, it is observed that the fostering marketplace continues to be extremely challenging with competition at a peak level with several independent agencies actively recruiting in the Lincolnshire region. When the Council are unable to source and match internal resources there is a reliance on using commissioned foster placements. We

readily acknowledge that there are occasions when this is unavoidable, but the sourcing of these commissioned placements is becoming more difficult week upon week owing to all providers across the region and country facing the same challenges in terms of carer numbers, choice and availability. Whilst availability is a presenting challenge the overall costs of new placements are at increased rates which is an additional financial burden to the Council.

It is recognised within the whole of the children's service and fostering community that the retention and ongoing recruitment of foster carers continues to be an absolute priority. Whilst remuneration, supervision and support are strong components of the Lincolnshire offer, the growing emergence of the fostering community online is one aspect of the support offer that carers have reported remains an interesting and valuable forum. The online presence invites contributions from all with varied experience and significant knowledge about their volunteer role.

The emphasis on recruitment and retention remains a service priority and at the forefront of the council and this fostering agency. The efforts of last year together with a creative and renewed approach for this year is an effort to maintain and where possible increase the interest and conversions for foster carer's approval.

The Fostering Network, the UK's leading fostering charity has recently published research into fostering recruitment and retention in England. This includes a range of recommendations for fostering services including incorporating lived experience into application processes and building quality relationships, and ensuring good support for foster families, timely, transparent administration of payments to foster carers, and offering exit interviews to all resigning foster carers.

The above is a kindly reminder of the good practice and what serves to influence people's motivations to apply to this authority and continue to foster for Lincolnshire.

The service has seen 5 new fostering households join the fostering community since the start of April 2023 with further fostering assessments progressing and being scheduled on the fostering panel later this year. This is important given the continued number of children in care and the national and local diminishing number of foster carers.

The Fostering Network, the UK's leading fostering charity lead on innovation in the field of recruitment and retention of foster carers and support agencies with research, new approaches and how agencies can improve the conversion rate of people who express an interest in fostering getting through. In May 2023, Fostering Network released new research addressing the vital knowledge gaps into the retention and recruitment of foster carers in England which they presented to the Minister for Children for Children and Families and comes at a crucial point as the Government begins to implement their strategy for children's social care.

The current data from the Fostering Network highlights the national shortage of foster carers. This alongside the think tank Social Market Foundation predicts a shortage of 25,000 carers in England by 2026.

At the end of August 2023 (data is unavailable for September 2023) the number of children in care stood at 747 with 503 of these children being in foster care. This equates to 68% of the children in care population. These figures include a total of 56 children who are in commissioned placements Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) which reflects an increase of 8 children from the end of March 2023.

Over the period from April to end of August 2023, 169 children became children in care for the first time, of these 119 were placed in foster care and Kinship care arrangements. The remaining children were placed in residential care within Lincolnshire's own provision, independent residential establishments, NHS residential establishments and Independent Living within a supported setting.

In relation to the Children in Care stability date that concerns children who have been in care continuously for at least 2.5 years who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years (NI063) this stands at 68 % which is slightly below the target range, but efforts continue to support carers in managing the children they care for and the distressed behaviours seen. Likewise, the service works collaboratively with other parts of the council and partner agencies to support carers and review within support and disruptions meetings whether placement breakdowns could have been prevented.

Likewise, the percentage of children in care with three or more placements during the year stands at 1.7% which at this stage in the year remains good, but this is a cumulative indicator and may change at year end. Despite showing promise this continues to be a difficult year, yet Foster Carers have proven to be very resourceful and committed to the children they care for. However, placement availability has been negatively impacted as some Foster Carers have chosen to concentrate on the children already in their care and declined to take additional placements.

The number of children and young people exiting care stood at 155 children with the highest proportion leaving care by the route of adoption, reunification to family, moving to living independently within supported accommodation and Special Guardianship Orders.

The fostering service continues to be engaged in developmental work with a strong focus on the core offer to foster carers and the ongoing development and practice of the Valuing Care Toolkit which is an integral part of the foster carer's annual reviews, experience and Form F assessments. The Valuing Care Toolkit implementation into all Kinship and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments has been implemented in an effort to ensure that the support and skills set of the carers are suitable matched to the needs of the child given the lifelong arrangements that form part of these assessments.

The Fostering Service eagerly awaited the Government's strategy and response to the Care Review reforms- *Stable Homes, Built on Love* that was published earlier this year and coincided with the increase in the national minimum allowance for fostering households. This implementation of the pillars of reform did address the financial support to fostering households together with investment in national recruitment and retention programmes with a focus on local need in recognition this differs across the country.

It is really positive that Lincolnshire immediately responded to the announcement by Government and increased their allowances from the start of April 2023 to all of our fostering households by 12%. This has been positively received given the economic challenges and serves to reflect that Lincolnshire are a responsive service.

Within the Care Review the Department of Education accepted the recommendation to regionalise placement commissioning through the test and piloting of Regional Care Co-operatives. This principally which would serve to address the insufficiency, excess profits and poor outcomes for children who are placed a distance away or where placement availability results in instability.

Whilst the concept of regional working is not new given the existence of Regional Adoption Agencies some years ago it is yet to be seen and understood how these national restorative actions will be implemented in an effort to deliver best practice for children in care and the valuable resources caring for them within a fostering sector that is on the brink.

Recruitment and Retention:

Lincolnshire acknowledge and understand that recruitment and retention are key elements for any successful fostering provider, and it has never been more important at a time when it is widely acknowledged there is a national shortage of foster carers. Lincolnshire is not immune from these challenges with the fostering shortages deepening nationally and several national reports speculate on the varied reasons for this however, it is universally acknowledged that the Covid pandemic impacted and the numbers of children in care have risen across the country.

Although forward thinking and innovative, the service continues to struggle to meet the demand of placements. Lincolnshire County Council and the Fostering Service are taking every opportunity to raise awareness in the community, delivering messages around the need for foster carers and establishing Lincolnshire fostering service as part of the local community and working to be recognised as the local fostering agency of choice.

Online creative, targeted marketing continues to provide the service with the flexibility and low-cost options of supporting part of the services' recruitment activity. The fostering service uses online options to increase capacity, accessibility, and convenience for foster carers and fostering applicants. This includes online recruitment events and the fostering preparation course.

Those making formal or informal enquiries to foster are encouraged to attend information events. Information events have been advertised through paid adds on social media across greater Lincolnshire. These also direct people towards the fostering service webpage.

The service plans to review the webpage during the next reporting period, ensuring it is user friendly and the landing page gives a good first impression of the service.

The participation in recruitment information events remains higher than face to face events and can be delivered more cost effectively. Online events will continue at this time but will be reviewed on an ongoing basis. The information events will remain under review and will continue to adapt to market research and participation feedback.

The service has held several pop-up stalls in public areas for increased visibility and the intention to build better relationships with local businesses. Members of the fostering team also attended the Lincolnshire Show in June 2023.



During the summer the service have continued to engage with the community to increase visibility and build upon better relationships with businesses. Members of the fostering team also attended the Pride in August 2023 and Saxilby waterfront Festival in September 2023.





Lincolnshire Fostering Service is at Lincoln Pride UK. 19 Aug · 🌐

Thank you to everyone who came to support our fostering recruitment day at #lincolnpride. We welcome applications to foster from across Lincolnshire society. ❤️🧡💛💚💙💜

lincolnshire.gov.uk/fostering ❤️

#lincolnshirecountycouncil
#lincolnshirefostering #lincolnpride



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Ongoing analysis is being undertaken in relation to the process and performance of becoming a foster carer, motivations, barriers to becoming approved and how we can make improvements continue to inform improvements and developments in our application, assessment, and approval process.

The recruitment team have now started to record at the initial enquiry stage the motivation for applying and the type of fostering they are interested in to help inform recruitment campaigns and the advertising strategy.

Replacing those who leave the fostering community during the year is essential. Every year the service expects to lose carers, some of these are unavoidable as carers come to the end of their fostering careers, retire or people’s circumstances change, or they experience ill health. The focus remains on learning from those the service loses that could have been avoided but also understanding more about why people choose to remain.

Retention of Foster Carers remains the most effective means of recruitment which is commonly noted in various research and endorsed by the Fostering Network in May 2023. Providing individual levels of support to carers and specifically those newly approved remains crucial. The Fostering Service needs to continue to grow the population of foster carers given the number of children coming into care has been rising in recent years thus enabling more choice whilst not disputing that the reliance on the independent market in some instances.

The annual survey completed and reported on in January 2023 reported that 69% of foster carers participating in the survey felt the financial package needed to improve. The fostering service increased the fostering allowance by 12% from 1st April 2023 which was warmly received. The service via the payment's handbook have aided carers with guidance on how the allowance has been uplifted for pocket money and clothing allowances in addition to other areas of spend.

The recruitment team have researched the area of marketing and recruitment of foster carers, this has included taking key recommendations from the state of the nation report Fostering Network, 2022, The Care Review (DFE,2022) and the Foster Care retention and recruitment in England, Key research findings and recommendations (May 2023). It has been possible to learn about the trends and benchmarks for performance and data to understand the strengths of our own service and the areas where the service can continue to develop.

The work moving forward will continue to closely monitor quality with a strong emphasis on good customer service and community. The impact of changes in practice and processes can be seen through key performance indicators. Conversion rates from applying and approval saw a significant rise last year, the aim this year is to maintain this high standard of applicant experience.

Over the last 12-months, work has continued 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. This is something that requires more promotion, so it's clearly understood more widely, and foster carers feel confident in accessing and understanding what is available.

The investment in a community approach to support is clearly felt by those engaged with this being reported as a one of the strongest parts of the support offer in the last annual survey.

The hub continues to be supported by the foster carer champions who have roles that cover responsibilities as 'Hub Links'. They also hold social groups and support with workshop delivery. Social groups are an area for development, foster carers have requested more face-to-face groups. Three have taken place since April 2023.

The Placement Support Workers remain a key part of the support offer for the service, offering a high level of intervention to those families and children in difficulty.

In June, the South Team BBQ took place, this was an event welcoming foster carers and their families to join the fostering team for a day of shared activities and food. The annual event is well received and enjoyed by fostering households. Feedback from the community was positive. The North fostering team held a similar event in July 2023 which was a tremendous success.

In August, the Summer Supportive Superstars event took place at Lincolnshire Wildlife Park, this was an event welcoming foster carers birth children to join the fostering team for a day of shared activities. The event provides an opportunity for connection and sharing between birth children around their fostering experiences.

Marketing:

During this half year there have been 98 Initial Enquiries of Interest (IEI) were received from the public enquiring about becoming a foster carer.

There have been 5 approved households in this first part of the year and the service hope to secure a total of over 20 in this financial year. The figures are compared with East Midlands colleagues who are facing the exact same challenges that this service is. Despite having a clear and committed retention and recruitment strategy the service continues to review this to maximise our efforts to secure the right people to care for the right children. The service continues to review this strategy to ensure that our marketing resources are suitably matched to attract the local community with the intention of increasing in-house fostering capacity.

There are 18 ongoing assessments currently being undertaken with 13 scheduled for Fostering Panel later in the financial year.

Advertising:

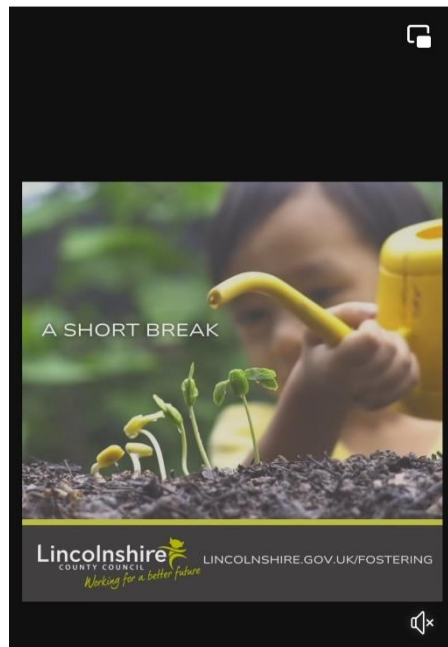
In Lincolnshire, the service continually reviews the marketing strategy and continuously develop the approach as being a local option for carers wanting to care for Lincolnshire children.

During this period special attention has been paid to the consistency of branding with an emphasis on appealing to local communities and engaging with broader advertising within the Council's literature and beyond.

Service adverts have been reviewed; this has included information events. Performance data indicates that videos were more successful. The recruitment team have created a paid video advertisement for the information events which is shared on Facebook. The targeted audience was reviewed also, in line with recommendations recently set out in the recruitment research completed by the Fostering network (May 2023). The recruitment team have reported an increased reach of 468% and increased engagement of 196%. 157 Facebook users used the advert to visit the service webpage.



Additionally, a paid advert was used, this was a 45 second video advert, the music for this advert also linked with the advert that is played on Lincs FM, bringing consistency and connection. The paid add achieved 1,000 views, 1000 web clicks and thousands of interactions and impressions. The full video was also followed by an array of short positive clips with clear text, enhancing virtual interaction to gain public confidence and trust in the service.



The research sets out and it is widely acknowledged fostering is something families will think about over a long period of time before applying, the service has 2 adverts on Facebook at any one time and users will see these on their newsfeeds, they will act as a regular reminder.

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

April-June 2023

- As part of the permanence campaign, the service has shared anonymised profiles on social media of children seeking long term homes. This has now extended to paid videos adverts.
- “Myth Busting Monday” on social media has continued, which shares either a 10 second video or a graphic created in house regarding misconceptions about fostering. These posts reach on average 320 people each week.



- The Refer a friend promotion continues with current households on the virtual chat groups and features in the fostering monthly newsletter.
- Lincs FM have 3 adverts that they are playing on Lincs FM and Greatest hits radio. This includes a general fostering adverts, a respite/ short breaks advert and a long-term fostering advert.
- Int Comms within the County Council have shared monthly updates about fostering and the information events to staff.
- During fostering fortnight which ran from 15th- 28th May 2023 fostering featured as an intranet article and an article featured on the front page of the LCC website.
- Lincolnshire County Council have shared posts about fostering on their social media pages weekly.
- Boston Borough, South Kesteven and East Lindsey District Councils have promoted through their Internal communications information about fostering. This has resulted in some initial enquiries to fostering. They have also shared information about fostering on their social media accounts.
- A countdown to fostering fortnight took place on social media.
- Foster Carers, Schools and Local Authority staff during May 2023 were reminded about all the ways they can support the fostering service in recruiting more foster carers.
- During fostering fortnight adverts were created that featured local images, helping people connect the service with their communities.



July-September 2023

- As part of the permanence campaign, the service has shared anonymised profiles on social media of children seeking long term homes.
- The Refer a friend promotion continues with current households on the virtual chat groups and features in the fostering monthly newsletter. We have received 2 this quarter.
- Lincs FM have 3 adverts that they are playing on Lincs FM and Greatest hits radio. This includes a general fostering adverts, a respite/ short breaks advert and a long-term fostering advert.
- Int Comms within the County Council have shared monthly updates about fostering and the information events to staff. Weekly articles were also shared throughout September about fostering friendly policies in Lincolnshire.
- Lincolnshire County Council have shared posts about fostering on their social media pages weekly.
- Lincolnshire fostering service attended Lincolnshire Pride and Saxilby Waterfront Festival
- Lincolnshire Fostering Service are now advertised in Marshalls Yard in Gainsborough on the large advertising screen in the main shopping area, displaying a video clip every few minutes.
- One of Lincolnshire's foster carers featured in a Lincolnite article where they raised awareness around the shortage of foster carers and the need for local people to come forward.

- The Services Team Manager was interviewed to raise awareness of the need of more foster carers on BBC Lincolnshire Radio.

Permanence:

Attracting long term foster carers remains a priority for the service as the number of children seeking a long-term home increase. Profiles and campaigns are created for children seeking permanent foster homes, this includes anonymised profiles which are shared online.

These anonymised profiles are shared on the Council’s social media platforms as part of the marketing campaigns to attract new carers, this includes the Caring2Learn closed Facebook group. Profiles are shared with fostering applicants during the assessment period and at the preparation course. A campaign ad is played on Lincs FM and Greatest Hits Radio and there is a dedicated page on the councils.gov webpage.

In addition to attracting new carers, the service recognises that people’s circumstances change, and Supervising Social Workers continue to have conversations about different types of fostering keeping long-term fostering on the agenda. Fostering households are kept up to date on long term events and can attend these to explore their interest and options. Articles about long-term fostering and those children seeking long term homes also feature in the monthly newsletter and the profiles are also readily available in the foster carers google drive.

The profiles on social media create a lot of attention and are the most liked and shared posts. Although each profile is individually designed and attempts to connect with the child’s individual interests and personality helping the community to feel connected the service has developed a clear branding using a child with a backpack, providing consistency for media purposes.



Supporting applicants considering long-term fostering early in the assessment process remains a priority, by engaging them early in family finders’ events, matching and training.

Family Finding:

It has been another exciting and productive time during this first half of the year within Family Finders. The service continues to meet monthly to consider all children with a care plan of long-term fostering who do not already have a long-term placement identified. This includes children within residential settings that have a trajectory to return to a fostering household and those in inhouse fostering placements or with Independent Fostering Agencies. These meetings have several different professionals attending including representatives from the fostering service, children in care team, recruitment and marketing team and placement support workers.

There has been a steady progression over the last two years of children referred to Family Finders. This period alone a further ten additional children have been referred to Family Finders. Eight children have been removed from family Finders after the service has been successful in achieving permanence for them, this was made up of four sibling groups of two children. Of these four sibling groups two sets are remaining with their current carers and the other two sets have moved to their long-term carers.

These introductions have taken place over a significant period of time and Placement Support Workers have been allocated to each of the children to support them throughout the transition and to provide some consistency. It is recognised that the transition period can be challenging for both children and adults and Placement Support Workers are vital throughout this period. Regular support meetings have been introduced to ensure both the carers and the children feel supported and affective communication takes place.

Family Finders figures have dropped slightly this quarter with now twenty-seven children awaiting permanent foster placements, this includes six sibling's groups of two children and fifteen singleton children. Eight of these children reside in residential settings, two with Independent Fostering Agencies and seventeen with in-house foster carers.

Family Finders Review continues to be utilised as an internal mechanism to prevent delay and drift. Meetings take place on a monthly basis with children being referred when they have been placed Family Finders for over three months without any potential permanent options being available. These meetings are routinely chaired by two Heads of Service for Fostering and Children in Care.

The Fostering Service is now preparing for the next permanence event following the last event held in July 2023. The next event is scheduled for December 2023. The children's profiles are all being reviewed to ensure up to date information is shared and the service are considering different options in engaging potential carers with the children that need long term stability and security.

During the OFSTED inspection in April 2023 members of the Family Finding team met with the inspectors to discuss how children in Lincolnshire are supported to achieve permanence. The OFSTED report highlighted: "Leaders, managers and staff understand the importance of children achieving permanence without delay. Permanence is considered early. For some children, this is before they enter care. Once in care, leaders closely track

children's plans for permanence. Permanence plans progress at a suitable pace, in line with children's needs. Delays are either purposeful or unavoidable. Social workers consider all permanence options for children and, through concurrent planning, identify the best option for them."

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. Approved Foster Carers also have access to the anonymised profiles of the children and Supervising Social Workers discuss these regularly with carers.

Training and Development:

The ongoing personal and professional development of foster carers remains a priority for the service and is crucial in the development of a skilled foster carer community who can meet the needs of children in care. Ensuring that carers have the skills and knowledge required and these can be supported to develop and grow. It is also important to consider how the service better prepares families for fostering.

Lincolnshire believes well prepared households will experience a smoother transition and are less likely to leave fostering early in their fostering journeys. Applicants have access to training and development throughout the assessment period. Recruitment have seen an increased number of applicants accessing the offer and booking mandatory training in advance of approval. This early investment in their journey is having a clear impact on the conversion to approval.

The training offer ensures a range of training at different levels to support this objective.

The fostering training offer will remain under review and alongside the scheduled events the service ensures that carers are updated on events that are offered by partner agencies and organisations such as the National Association of Therapeutic Parents and the Fostering Network. These expand and compliment the available learning opportunities to support personal and professional development, avoids duplication and helps to build relationships across services which was identified by the community as a priority for development.

Group work is included within the training offer and is used as intervention. Development for carers through building knowledge and skills and then supporting this be transferred to practice in a group setting where carers can share experiences and reflect with a Placement Support Worker and other carers. As a group learning session and form of support it encourages networking between households. This has been successful and has already run three times this year.

In this first half year 44 courses were delivered with 573 attendees taking part from fostering households.

Accredited Training Courses :

- First Aid/ paediatric training
- Safeguarding
- Safe Care
- Fostering Preparation Course
- Foster Carer Induction
- 3 Day Restorative Practice

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)
- Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a carer perspective
- TSD Support (Training, Standards and Development)

E-Learning:

Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) eLearning 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) is now fully embedded within the service.

Currently there are 95 homes and five residential settings that have achieved their Learning Homes Award. Due to all new carers completing the award within twelve months of approval as part of the TSD; the service is seeing the number of awarded homes to continue to rise.

Celebration Event:

The Foster Carers Celebration took place in April 2023 at Hemswell Court. The event recognised the contribution and achievements of our fostering community and welcomed all new carers. Foster carers received their long service awards together with a gift as a token of acknowledgement and appreciation. The event was well received by all those that attended, there was a great sense of occasion and all that attended left energized and inspired.



Kinship:

Kinship remains a core element of the Fostering Service and continues to be high on the agenda for Lincolnshire County Council.

There are changes afoot as the Government have pledged to deliver a dedicated national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023 which is likely to signal a change nationally to implement step changes to determine key changes for all kinship carers.

This new strategy which has resulted from the Care Review boldly highlights the value and importance of kinship carers and is an attempt to ensure equity across the nation by way of committing that support to this group equals that of what mainstream carers and adoptive families receive.

Lincolnshire continue to understand the benefits of kinship care for children and are well developed in their thinking and practice concerning the use of the family networks. As a children’s service we support kinship carers as we do all other fostering households whilst recognising that the benefits for children of being able to maintain family connections and achieve good outcomes in health and education is well understood.

The family network is fully explored from the beginning to ensure all family members and connected people to the children are considered. This is a key principle for all social workers as a family placement or a placement within the child’s network allows the child to remain with people of whom they have an established relationship with. This principle is fully supported and understood by all children’s social workers and also by the Independent Reviewing Service and the judiciary who seek to have clear evidence detailed of the child’s network and efforts made to identify appropriate connected persons.

The number of proceedings and pre-proceedings within Lincolnshire remains steady and is not decreasing, and therefore kinship care remains a high priority.

The service welcomes any initiatives to support this group of carers and are always reviewing practice and making improvements to internal processes where appropriate. Likewise, and owing to changes within the Family Court and Judiciary the service is respectful of any feedback and ensure that the Council’s adherence to good practice for children and their families continues. This has involved streamlining and modernising the kinship application process and the kinship preparation course is currently under review and further development.

The statistics for quarter 1 and quarter 2 of this financial year are set out below.

Number of Referrals	SGO Only	Reg.24 / SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering Including Ukraine	S38(6) assessments	Statutory Checks/CAO
42	15	7	7	5	2	6

Between the 1st July 2023 and 30th September 2023 there were fifty-four pieces of kinship work:

Number of Referrals	SGO Only	Reg.24 / SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering	S38(6) assessments	Statutory Checks/CAO
54	15	18	9	1	2	9

In relation to the figures the number of referrals has increased each quarter from the previous financial year, and the first quarter to the second quarter of this year. This is mostly seen in the number of Special Guardianship assessments and statutory checks. The number of regulation 24 assessments has also increased between quarter 1 to quarter 2.

Quarter 2 has seen a big drop in the number of private fostering assessments, with no Homes for Ukraine assessments in quarter 2. In order to support and raise continued awareness to Private Fostering all staff across children's services have been asked to update their training and this supports the work of the safeguarding partnership in keeping this very much part of the community and workforce agenda.

Lincolnshire County Council has recently announced its status as a Path Finder Authority which is an exciting time for children's services. A Practice Supervisor is being recruited to lead on the strategic element of family networks as part of this initiative which will consider the family network as a thread in all work prior to and including the involvement of social care.

This undoubtedly together with any practice shift arising from the Kinship Strategy will in due course have some impact on Lincolnshire's core offer to kinship carers which will have a positive impact on creating and sustaining these placements for Lincolnshire children in care.

Staying Put:

During quarter one, the total number of young people in Staying Put arrangements was 41. This figure fluctuated during quarter two with it standing as 37 as the end of the second quarter.

The scheme continues to receive a steady flow of referrals from children in care Social Workers with young people waiting to join the scheme when they reach their 18th birthday.

Of the 41 young people on the scheme during Quarter 1, 4 were at university, 25 in further education, 8 were in employment and 1 on an apprenticeship. 3 young people were temporarily not in education, employment, or training (NEET), one of these young people are awaiting their asylum status outcome, therefore are unable to be in education or employment. The remaining two are unwell with a joint approach being taken to support their mental health and engage them in some form of educational activity or employment.

Quarter 2 saw 6 young people at university, 16 in further education, 8 in employment and 2 were on apprenticeships. 5 young people were temporarily not in education, employment or training (NEET), one of these young people is still waiting for their asylum status outcome, 2 remain unwell and continue to have a temporary exemption from being in work or learning. The other 2 are being supported by the Leaving Care service to actively seek employment or learning opportunities.

It remains a core requirement of the scheme that young people are positively engaged in education, employment and training.

During quarter 1 the service has had a higher than usual number of positive moves on from the Staying Put scheme, the total number being 13. This is as follows:

- 4 young people moved into accommodation with either their partner or birth family.
- 3 turned 21 years old and remained with their Staying Put provider on alternate arrangements.
- 2 moved into their own accommodation.
- 1 bought their own house.
- 1 moved into a semi-independent flat.
- 1 successfully completed a degree in Social Work
- 1 ended due to unforeseen circumstances.

Quarter two saw 7 young people move on from their Staying Put arrangement:

- 1 young person turned 21 and moved into their own flat.
- 4 young people had planned moves into alternative accommodation.
- 2 young people turned 21 and remained living with their Staying Put provider on alternative arrangements.

The emphasis on joint working with the Leaving Care Service remains pivotal to support young people post 21 when they commonly transition into independent living. At times when a Staying Put arrangement is at risk, timely interventions continue to be a key to the scheme's success as we work alongside Staying Put Providers, the young person and the Leaving Care Service to achieve resolutions to issues and to stabilise the arrangement.

The number of out of county Staying Put arrangements has seen a slight decrease from 8 in quarter 1 to 7 in quarter 2. This is due to the young person choosing to move back into Lincolnshire. There are currently arrangements in Leeds, Mansfield, Brigg, Peterborough, Ilford and Birmingham.

The scheme allows care leavers to remain living within the household that they feel comfortable, cared for and to retain lifelong links whilst at the same time being supported by a team of people to develop the skills to transition successfully into adulthood. The Council's continued commitment to the scheme displays its success for young people

remaining with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 if both parties agree. However, it is acknowledged that Staying Put is right for many care leavers but not for all.

Conclusion:

During this first part of the year there have continued to be pressures on placement availability and despite this most children are placed within the Lincolnshire County Council approved foster carers community. There has and will continue to be a reliance on external resources hence the need for this service to recruit and retain carers to maximise placement choice and sufficiency.

There are many variables that can affect the match of a child with a carer and the strengths-based approach together with the Valuing Care toolkit enables those searches to take place and give the children the best possible chance to achieve positive and child focussed outcomes.

The service continues to prioritise the matching of children with permanent carers where possible and this period has seen a positive and encouraging event in January and July 2023 with plans in place for the winter event in December.

It is important to note the findings of Ofsted who conducted their inspection in April 2023 that the work of the service is outstanding and the efforts to secure children placements minimising delay and create stability and permanence was regarded as quality work. This is something that all carers and staff have had fed back to them which is testament to the calibre of carers and those the council employ.

The service and council work hard to recruit and retain foster carers and after a very successful year last year the ambition and aspiration is to continue in our efforts. The service is aware of the national challenges, the predicted shortfall of carers by 2025, the cost of living crisis yet focuses on securing carers that are able to empathise, love and support the children who have experienced trauma.

The fostering core offer and tiered approach to involve applicants commencing this journey has been warmly received and hopefully delivers a key valuable message from the outset. Despite this the service take nothing for granted yet the action by the council to increase payments, support the discount schemes available and retain the retention payments are a massive bonus.

During this first part of the year supervision and support to carers has been ongoing and invaluable in terms of maintaining best practice standards and improving placement stability. Many fostering households continue to make the difference and have despite the enormous challenges in recent years, demonstrate their commitment to the Lincolnshire children in their care. Carers go above and beyond with their good will warmly acknowledged.

The service continues to be heartened by the interest from the Lincolnshire public in the fostering role and the service hope to secure an increased trend in registrations of interest

and applications going forward. The efforts of foster carers, staff and the community in generating interest and delivering high quality services is a continued achievement.

The continued efforts to maintain and develop the core offer for fostering households will remain under constant review. This is essential given the current challenging climate both locally and nationally regarding placement sufficiency for local authorities and the independent market. Despite the landscape being tough, Lincolnshire are committed to maintain and further enhance an effective and ambitious service that continue to want to grow their caring community to give children the opportunity to live their best lives with Lincolnshire families wherever possible.

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