



2023-24

QUARTER 3 REPORT

OCTOBER - DECEMBER

LINCOLNSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE

Quarter Three 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 third quarter report from the fostering service covering the period October – December 2023.

Introduction:

In 2023/2024, the Fostering Service has an annual budget of £9,985,323. All fostering allowances were 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 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 was critical given the national numbers of carers ceasing to foster with confirmation of 43,400 approved fostering households in England (Children in Care published November 2023 from www.gov.uk).

The data further serves to highlight the concerning downward trend in the number of foster carer applications and newly appointed carers. In 2022/2023 a total of 4,080 fostering households were approved, with 5,130 resigning resulting in a deficit of 1,050. Research via the Fostering Network, the UK's Leading Charity has identified a further 6,000 fostering families are needed immediately in England to ensure all foster children can live with the right family for them.

The above in conjunction with the increased numbers of children entering care has resulted in a national shortage of foster placements. The most recent Children in Care data (www.gov.uk) revealed that at the end of March 2023 confirmed there were 83,840 children being cared for by local authorities which is an increase by 2% from March 2022 with this being a further rise in recent years.

Nationally and regionally, it is regarded that the fostering marketplace continues to be extremely challenging with competition at a peak level with several independent agencies 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 owing to all providers across the region and country reportedly facing the same challenges in terms of carer numbers, choice and fostering placement availability. Additionally, the increased rates of sourcing independent placements are a financial burden to the Council.

In recognition of the national context and concerns relating to the fostering agenda and as announced in *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, the Department for Education launched Fosterlink Service in December 2023 whose aim is designed to support Local Authorities to review and improve their fostering recruitment practices. This service will be available from the start of January 2024 and its ambition is to provide an in-depth diagnostic overview of local authorities current fostering recruitment practices and recommend and share examples for improvement. Lincolnshire warmly welcome this visit scheduled for March 2024.

Likewise in December 2023, the government published the first Kinship Strategy that also originated from the government's strategy for children's social care where they set out the vision and reinforced children's existing legal rights to a family life wherever possible. This strategy serves to further emphasise the family first culture that empowers family networks and puts them at the heart of the decision making, whilst ensuring all children are kept safe and can thrive.

Lincolnshire already have a very well-established kinship (sometimes known as family and friends care) first approach and at present we have 21% of our approved fostering households caring for related children or known to them via their social network.

The strategy is welcomed across the country in an effort to provide all kinship households with a national standard including an updated kinship care definition laid down in renewed statutory guidance, advice on how all local authorities support kinship carers, appoint a kinship ambassador role to work with local authorities to raise standards and share best practice and launch a kinship allowance, paid at the same as fostering allowance beginning in 8 pathfinder local authorities (who are yet to be selected).

The entire vision is aimed at ensuring that all local authorities identify, recognise and value this group of carers who need to be empowered to ensure children can have the best chances in life to preserve these personal and family relationships and maintain important connections lifelong.

Children's Services in Lincolnshire welcome this national strategy and whilst are reassured that our local approach to Kinship is already well developed and in keeping with the principles launched, it is a welcomed and opportune time to review our practices and secure reassurance on what our areas of practice strengths are and areas for development.

This quarter has also seen the work on the Pathfinder which was announced in February 2023 as a further part of the reforms under *Stable Homes, Built on Love*. In July 2023 Lincolnshire received confirmation of their status in the first wave of this initiative to design and test radical reforms across several policies. This includes the family network pilot and whilst this pillar of the pathfinder does not sit with fostering directly, it emphasises the value and importance of family led solutions to aid families to play a more active role in providing loving, safe and stable homes for children hopefully in the longer term thus reducing the need for children to enter care.

In turn, Lincolnshire's Fostering Service continues to be committed to providing as many children in care as possible with a family experience in an approved fostering household. To

this end, our efforts continue to be robust in our efforts to recruit and retain our fostering resources who remain a precious commodity for the children and our local authority.

It is recognised across the whole of the children's service and the 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 continued presence 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.

Giving due regard to the fostering allowances is crucial in terms of supporting Lincolnshire fostering, maintaining children in their local community where possible and ensuring positive and sustained services in the future. 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.

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.

The Fostering Network, the UK's leading fostering charity published research in 2023 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 12 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 lower than predicted and forecasted but is reflective of a national system that is under immense pressure. With continued efforts, review of our recruitment strategy and the support from national government then it is hoped that we continue to promote interest and applications across our community to care for local children. This combined with a rebranding and using the intelligence from the Ofsted Data return that inform government policy, are critical steps in keeping at the front of an ever increasing and a fiercely competitive market.

At the end of December 2023, the number of children in care stood at 756 with 522 of these children being in foster care across internal and external placements. This equates to 69% of the children in care population. These figures include a total of 69 children in commissioned

placements with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) which reflects an increase of 13 since the end of August 2023.

Over the period from October to December 2023, 92 children became children in care for the first time, of these 54 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 accommodation setting.

In relation to the Children in Care stability data, which 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) stands at 71.6% which is above the target range forecasted. Meanwhile our 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 4.9% 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 continued to reflect their resilience and their willingness 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 78 children with the highest proportion leaving care by the route of adoption, reunification to family, moving to living independently within supported accommodation and through 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 fostering assessments.

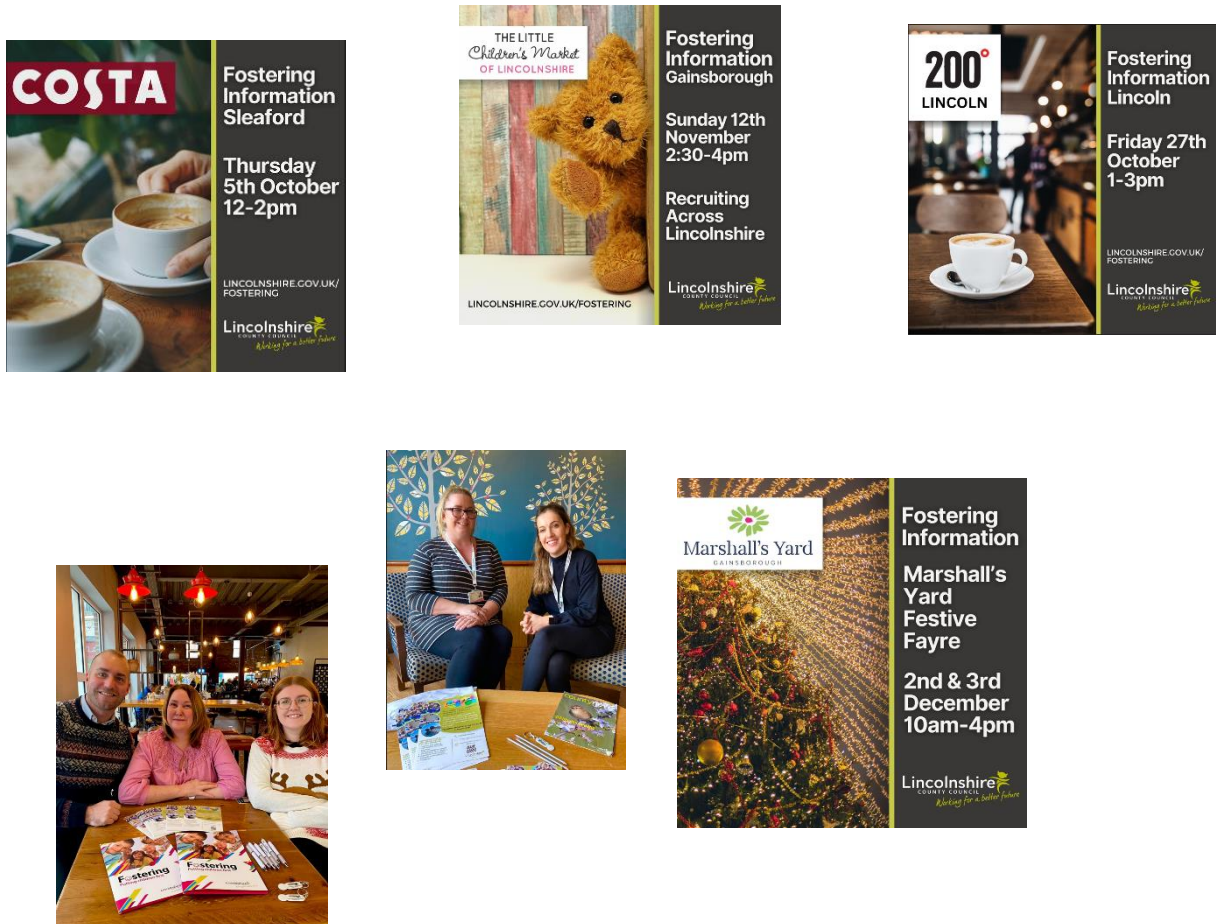
This quarter has seen a further busy period for the fostering service in conjunction with the national launch of initiatives and practice guidance across this regulated service. The valuable contribution of our carers and staff continues to be appreciated and recognised as we moved towards and embark upon a new year with a new set of challenges and solutions.

Recruitment and Retention:

Although forward thinking and innovative, the service has experienced continuing challenges attracting new foster carers to the service, meeting the demand of finding children placements and retaining its current foster carer population.

The strategy for fostering recruitment begins with awareness within the community, running a campaign, a call to action for local people for local children. Lincolnshire fostering service

are achieving this by increasing their visibility out in the community, by attending community events and being visible in public spaces. This is something that we will be enhancing in the new calendar year.



With limited amount of people coming forward it has never been so important to convert those good quality applicants to approval. Research completed by the Fostering Network (May 2023) stated that negative experiences when applying to become a foster carer, such as poor communication, delays or insufficient information from fostering services were common and put applicants off a provider and becoming a foster carer, with 71% of completed foster carer applications being withdrawn.

This emphasises the importance of good customer service and this work continues for the service, ensuring customer satisfaction and the development of a sense of community. A strong commitment to the applicants' experiences and good customer service supports a higher-than-average conversion rates from application to approval.

Lincolnshire fostering service is currently achieving results higher than the average identified by the fostering network in their research, demonstrating the strength of the customer service. However, foster carers recruitment and conversion rates research report commissioned by the Department for Education Government Social Research Dept in July 2023 identified some key findings that our service has considered and will do so as the service

move forward. These findings combined with the Fosterlink Service findings will help refocus our efforts in recruitment and enable the service to build upon the efforts despite the documented challenges.

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 which will be a hybrid approach going forward to maximise participation and learning for all applicants. In addition to the online events, the community events have created face to face opportunities for people to attend for information and to discuss fostering informally with a member of the team.

Online information events are being advertised through paid adds on social media across greater Lincolnshire. These also direct people towards the fostering service webpage. The traffic to the fostering website and the clicking onto the enquiry form is much higher than those completed forms being received by the service. The fostering service has evaluated this and developed in response a quick enquiry form option for people that are not ready to complete an application form and simply wish to ask a question or in the initial stages of considering fostering. The application to foster remains an option on the page and is still being completed. Data will be monitored to see if this increases the number of initial enquiries to the service over time.

Plans to review the webpage has started, ensuring it is user friendly and the landing page gives a good first impression of the service.

The recruitment team over the last 6 months have been collecting data to understand what people’s motivations are for wanting to foster when they contact the Fostering service, the categories were suggested in the fostering networks recruitment and retention national survey (2023). The data collected is below.

Reason	Percentage
Enjoy working with children	14%
Empty Nest/Spare room	5%
Know foster carers	10%
Wanting to make a difference	40%
Extend current family	6%
Retirement	1%
Other	23%

It is important that the future marketing strategy considers the motivations for fostering and the fostering service ensures it is used in its advertising and campaigns.

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, 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.

To date the service has deregistered 20 fostering households, 8 were related to moving out of the area or poor health. 1 was due to dissatisfaction with the service and 2 due to financial reasons. 9 due to changes in circumstances or were unspecified.

The service continues to provide an integrated approach to support. 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 service hopes to see the same response in the annual survey which will be distributed in February 2024.

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 have been arranged across the county and are facilitated by the foster carer champions and informal meets and greets in public.

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

In October 2023 half term, the Fostering Service hosted an activity day for Birth children as part of the Supportive superstars offer, bringing the birth children of foster carers together to share experiences and meet each other. With an autumn theme children carved pumpkins, completed arts and crafts, played games and ate lunch together.



In December, the North and South Teams hosted two Christmas Parties, welcoming foster carers and their families to join the team for organised activities, a buffet, and a present from Santa. The annual event is well received and enjoyed by fostering households. Feedback from the community was positive.

Marketing:

During the months of October, November and December 2023, 32 Initial Enquiries of Interest (IEI) were received from the public enquiring about becoming a foster carer. The total for the year to date is 130.

During this quarter there has been 7 approved fostering households. The service currently has 13 assessments in progress. Currently 9 are in stage 1 and 4 assessments at stage 2, 3 potential foster carers will be attending Panel in January 2024 and 1 in March 2024. All assessments have an allocated Supervising Social Worker.

Since April 23 to the end of December 23 there has been 12 fostering household approvals.

Advertising:

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

The short break (respite) campaign ended on 30th November 2023 and the permanence campaign started on 1st December 2023, with the introduction of a new paid advert.



The research sets out and it is widely acknowledged fostering is something families will think about over a prolonged period before applying, the service currently has 4 adverts on Facebook 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:

October – December 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 in the foster carers WhatsApp groups and features in the fostering monthly newsletter. Linked to motivations to foster the service has seen an increase of foster carers referring their friends and families.
- Lincs FM and Greatest Hits radio play 3 adverts. This includes a general fostering advert, a respite/short breaks advert and a long-term fostering advert.
- Int Comms for Lincolnshire County Council have shared monthly updates including details of information events about fostering to staff across the organisation. In December an article appeared on the Lincolnshire County Council website and in County News online.
- Lincolnshire County Council have shared posts about fostering on their social media pages weekly.
- Lincolnshire Fostering Service staff have visited coffee shops in Lincoln and Sleaford, a two-day Christmas market event at Marshalls Yard in Gainsborough, and commenced a new initiative with Little Children's Market.
- The Marketing campaign at Marshalls Yard in Gainsborough was renewed for this new season, a digital display on their 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:

The number of children requiring a long-term foster home is at its highest rate with the foster service in partnership seeking forever homes for 36 children. Although many children moving onto permanence see these arrangements secured through their task centred foster carers where lasting relationships have been built, for some children permanence hasn't been made possible in their current arrangements. Finding new carers remains a priority from both within the fostering service's current pool of carers and through targeted recruitment activity.

Personalised profiles and campaigns are created for children seeking permanent foster homes, this includes anonymised profiles which are shared online, bringing children to life to create connection between adults and children they may be able to care for. Anonymised profiles are used for public use, allowing them to be shared on the Council's social media

platforms as part of the marketing campaigns to attract members of the public and raise awareness amongst Lincolnshire's communities about permanence and the need for long term carers in their area. A campaign ad is played on Lincs FM and Greatest Hits Radio and there is a dedicated page on the councils.gov webpage.

Early in the fostering assessment process, children's profiles are shared with applicants, supporting people to consider permanence as a type of fostering they may want to consider, to attract people to attend family finders' events or start matching early in the assessment process. Consideration for potential matches allows the Supervising Social Worker to consider this as part of the assessment and recommendations for skills and knowledge development.

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 during annual reviews and supervisions. Long-term fostering events are widely advertised, and carers are encouraged to attend family finding events.

Following last year's successful campaign for permanence a similar campaign will run throughout December 2023-January 2024. It is thought this time of year is a suitable time to advertise this type of fostering.

Below is an example of our permanence advert played on social media.



Family Finding:

The third quarter of Family Finders has continued to be a busy and productive time for the service. Family Finders continues to meet monthly to assess the potential plans for the children and consider matching with potential carers. Joint working with the Children in Care Team, residential providers and placement support workers continues to ensure that all the needs of a child are considered.

This quarter, nine additional children have been referred to Family Finders. This includes two sibling groups of two and five singletons. In total there are now thirty-six children referred to Family Finders all of whom require long term, stable homes. This includes twenty-four individual children and six sibling groups (all in groups of two). Of these children eight are currently placed in residential settings, seven are placed in Independent Fostering Agencies and the remaining twenty one remain living with council Foster Carers.

In this quarter sibling assessments have been completed on two sets of siblings which means Family Finders have updated the children's profiles to demonstrate we are now seeking singleton placements for these children in question.

The children's profiles are regularly updated, and anonymous versions shared on social media, these are also distributed to existing foster carers. A specific permanence campaign has been in progress for one child in particular that has been with Family Finders for some time though yet there have been no appropriate matches. This quarter two sets of carers have come forward to offer to care for children currently in their care permanently and further discussions are taking place regarding this.

In December 2023, the Fostering Service held a Family Finding Event at Lincoln Golf Centre to raise awareness of some of the children needing permanence. The event was opened and closed by Head of Service, Deborah Crawford and several social workers, foster carers and support workers attended. In total fifteen carers interested in permanence attended from nine households.

Three of the households were still in the assessment process and six households were already approved foster carers. There were twenty-one information points around the room pertaining to individual children or sibling groups. There was a specific focus on seven children, five singletons and a sibling group and their foster carers, social workers, placement support workers and residential staff all presented information about these children. This included photographs of the children, videos, anecdotes of them and their Valuing Care Tool was presented and discussed. Thirteen children received expressions of interest with carers wanting to know more information about them and these are currently being explored with the hope of finding some potential matches.

The next Family Finder event is already being organised for May 2024 with a focus on children aged ten and over who need permanence and stability. Despite trying for an earlier date in February 2024 this did not generate the level of interest that we would have wanted. Aside from usual methods of making carers aware of the event (which includes emailing them/ information included in the Newsletter and posted in the WhatsApp group) a personalised

letter has been created to target certain carers that have the skills and knowledge to care for such young people.

Molly

I am 10 years old and
I live in Lincolnshire.

People often describe me as a clever, capable and independent young person who knows her own mind. I am very kind-hearted, loving, thoughtful, compassionate and I have a playful side too.

I love playing all sorts of games and sports and I enjoy being busy. I love being outdoors, going to the park, riding my bike and making dens. I go to street dance club and I support Man City! I like doing arts and craft, playing board games and baking.

I have experienced significant trauma and loss, not only from when I lived with my family, but because of two unsuccessful introductions to carers. I have some attachment needs which means I do not trust adults easily. I sometimes find it difficult to form meaningful relationships. At the moment, I am developing my identity, and finding out where life is going to take me.

I need experienced and resilient carers who have perhaps cared for children with similar needs. I need carers who can implement routine and boundaries but who are also flexible and can adapt to my needs. In my forever home I need consistency as I can find change difficult. My relationship with my family is important to me, so it is important that my carers are able to support current arrangements and adjust to any future changes to family time.

If you would like to speak to us about creating a forever home for Molly, email Fostering@Lincolnshire.gov.uk

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Libby

I am 10 years old, I am in year 6 and I live in Lincolnshire.

I like watching YouTube videos, doing arts & crafts and most of all playing with my LOL dolls, barbies and baby dolls! I also like listening to music and going out to play on the trampoline or ride my bike.



I am described as a lovely little girl and am happiest when chatting, singing or dancing. I am eager to please which can result in me needing extra support to tell the truth in difficult situations. I've recently developed a love for dogs and have been actively involved in feeding, walking and playing with my foster carer's dog.



I go to after school and breakfast club and have been known to enjoy helping my teachers as I get 1:1 time with trusted adults. I have been known to prefer adult attention in preference to other children and love going to school. I've been going to swimming lessons and I particularly enjoy cheerleading club!



I am currently working to build my vocabulary to form more complex sentences. I am presenting signs of global development delay however am always happy to give a good go at any work that is presented to me.

If you would like to speak to us about creating a forever home for Libby, email Fostering@Lincolnshire.gov.uk


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Training and Development:

All foster carers receive training prior to approval. Children and young people need foster carers with a wide range of skills, knowledge, and experience that will develop over time. All foster carers are provided with ongoing training and support to support their personal and professional development, developing the skills they need to help children thrive. Ongoing learning and development also ensure foster carers remain up to date with fostering practices and policy.

Foster carers commit a huge amount of time and energy to caring for the children in their care, special attention has been given in the services training offer to carers in supporting fostering families to develop patience, resilience, and confidence in dealing with situations which do not always go as planned. Lincolnshire believes well prepared households will experience a smoother transition and are less likely to leave fostering owing to being dissatisfied.

Foster carers are also encouraged to reflect on their actions to learn from experiences and continuously develop their skills through supervision and their annual review with their Supervising Social Worker. A training package offering progression supports even the most experienced carers.

The fostering training offer is currently under review, the fostering Service will dispatch a new offer in January 2024, which considers themes identified from quality audits, exit interviews and feedback from the fostering community. 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 provided inhouse, avoids duplication and helps to build relationships across services.

Between October-November 2023 there were 16 courses delivered with 361 attendees taking part from fostering households.

Accredited Training Courses:

- First Aid/ paediatric training
- Safeguarding
- Safe Care
- Fostering Preparation Course
- Foster Carer Induction

Practice Workshops:

- Introducing Social Pedagogy
- Introduction to Restorative Practice
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness

- Relational repair
- Fostering Weekly therapeutic parenting Programme (Caring2gether, 6 weeks)
- 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 Learning Home toolkit continues to be completed and the values, models and theory underpin the training and practice model for supporting foster carers.

The principles and actions set out as evidenced based practice is advocated to all foster carers to encourage them to champion education in its widest sense for the best outcomes for children and young people.

All foster carers are also required to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (TSDs) as part of the requirements within the first 12 months (mainstream carers) and 18 months (kinship carers) of approval. This ensures they have the skills, knowledge and are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities and the policies and procedures they are working within as foster carers.

The TSDs sets out for each foster carer the minimum that is expected, in Lincolnshire the Fostering service strives for the best outcomes for its children and therefore with the combined Learning Home criteria developed in partnership with the Institute of Education, through the Caring2Learn Project it ensures that children live in homes where expectations for carers learning and development is high, supporting better outcomes for their children and young people.

The services continue to support the development and awarding of Learning homes.

Celebration Event:

The Foster Carers Celebration planning for 2024 is now underway and due to take place on 19th April 2024. With the success of last year's face to face event following two years of celebrations online during the pandemic this year's event will take place in the south of the county at the Old Barn, in Marston near Grantham.

The event will mark Lincolnshire foster carers recognition for long service, this year celebrating long service up to 30 years!

In 2022 Lincolnshire fostering service introduced recognition awards, although foster carers appreciated the long service awards they deserve to be recognised for their contributions and dedication to outcomes and the differences they make to the children in their care. This year recognition will be awarded in the following areas from a range of Children Service areas:

- **Fostering-** Support to Service

- **Fostering-** Community Support

- **Fostering-** Outstanding Achievement

- **FAST Award-** Outstanding practice and outcomes for children

- **Children in Care Award** - Outstanding practice and outcomes for children

- **Adoption** – Outstanding practice when supporting transitions to adoption

- **Residential** – Partnership Working and continued commitment to children in residential care

- **Virtual School-** Outstanding practice and outcomes for children

- **IRO Award-** Advocating on behalf of children, outstanding practice, and outcomes for children

- **Leaving Care-** Supporting Independence and young adults

Kinship:

“Kinship carers are often a lifeline to vulnerable children who can no longer live at home”.
(Championing Kinship Care, The National Kinship Care Strategy, 2023)

“In 2021, there were more than 130,000 children living in kinship care in England. Children who grow up in kinship care often have better outcomes than children who grow up in other types of non-parental care.

Evidence shows that, compared to these groups, children in kinship care:

- *are more likely to have stable, permanent homes*
- *achieve higher levels of employment later in life*
- *have better social and emotional wellbeing*
- *and better long-term physical health compared to children in foster or residential care*
- *are more likely to be kept with their siblings compared to those in foster care*
- *are more likely to report that they feel loved.”*

(Sacker et al 2021. The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care. Cited in Championing Kinship Care National strategy 2023)

As both Childrens Services and a fostering service we fully recognise and welcome the Governments Strategy in respect of Kinship Care and the further opportunities this will bring to support both our young people and their carers.

Every child deserves to thrive and to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. A key principle of the Children Act 1989 reminds us that children are best looked after within their families, with their parents playing a full part in their lives unless this is not safe for them to do so.

The Kinship Care Strategy 2023 is one part of an ongoing wider systemic review of Children’s Social Care as mentioned in the introduction of this report.

In the last year, three significant reviews have been published by the government which together call for fundamental reform to children’s social care. The Independent Review of Children’s Social care set out how we can put love and the overriding importance of relationships back at the centre of what children’s social care does.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel’s review into the tragic deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson reminded us of the absolute priority that must be given to protecting children and keeping them safe. Similarly, the Competition and Markets Authority review was instrumental in highlighting that nationally more can be achieved to identify the right homes are in the right places for children who come into care.

These three reviews have provided a once in a generation opportunity to reset children’s social care and create the environment where there is further potential to transform lives for the better.

Lincolnshire County Council remains committed to exploring family networks at the earliest opportunity and in conjunction with the fostering service we are committed to supporting all of children who have experienced trauma to be safeguarded and to grow and develop within their family networks, to have their health needs met and supported, to achieve their potential, to have aspirations, to develop healthy relationships and be nurtured through loving families who support and care for them.

The Kinship Strategy is focused on improving the support and service provision for kinship families, and this is in line with Lincolnshire’s values and practices. Upon reflection the recommendations and from the reform outlined in the strategy, it is evident that much of what is set out is already in place or developing within Lincolnshire.

Turning to the performance for this quarter, the service has continued to see a steady pace of referrals and kinship work in line with previous quarters. This quarter (quarter three) has seen the allocation of 47 pieces of kinship work, which is consistent in comparison to work allocated earlier this financial year; with 42 pieces of kinship work being allocated in quarter one, and 54 pieces of work being allocated in quarter two. The figures for this quarter are broken down in to types of work below:

Number of Referrals	SGO Only	Reg.24 / SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering	S38(6) assessments	Statutory Checks/CAO
47	9	16	9	4	2	7

When considering the total number of kinship placements being made under temporary approval Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations 2010 the service has a total number of twenty-five in quarter three. This is consistent with quarter two which saw a total number of twenty-seven kinship placements under Regulation 24. The figures for Special Guardianship Order assessments (SGO) also remains consistent with twenty-five SGO assessments being allocated in quarter three, and twenty-five being allocated in quarter two.

Overall, our commitment and exploration of family networks remains high and is encouraging. The service is committed to children being placed and supported in kinship care arrangements where it is safe to do so. The kinship carers benefit from having dedicated support from experienced Supervising Social Workers from the fostering service who will work alongside them often at particularly challenging times.

Those Kinship carers are eligible for the current rate of fostering allowance, training opportunities and are regarded in the same way as other carers from a fostering allowance and service delivery perspective.

Staying Put:

The 'Don't Move Me' campaign led by the Fostering Network promotes the Staying Put scheme to enable young people to be able to remain in their foster placement post 18. It is known that this arrangement provides more stability for young people into early adulthood, and a scheme Lincolnshire is passionate about. As part of promoting the scheme's success it is embedded in Lincolnshire's practice to be introduced early in the planning process for the young person, making foster carers and young people aware of the scheme, and involving the young people and their carers in the discussions and decisions about their next steps.

During quarter three the total number of young people in Staying Put arrangements stood at thirty-five. Of these thirty-five young people;

- Five were in university,
- Seventeen in further education,
- Five were in employment,
- One was on an apprenticeship,
- One was on was on a Care Leavers Apprenticeship,
- One was being supported into self-employment and,
- Five young people were temporarily not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

Of the five NEET young people, one was awaiting their asylum status outcome and therefore unable to be in education or employment, two had been made redundant and were proactively seeking employment, one was gaining employability skills through volunteering and one young person had left their college course. The Leaving Care service is supporting all these young people to actively seek appropriate employment or learning opportunities.

Staying Put continues to receive a steady flow of referrals from Children in Care Social Workers. There are currently sixteen young people waiting to join the scheme when they turn eighteen years of age.

During quarter three the service had five positive 'move ons' from the Staying Put scheme. This is as follows:

- Two turned 21 years old and remained with their Staying Put provider on alternate arrangements.
- One moved into accommodation with their partner.
- One moved into their own property with their young child.

- One moved into supported accommodation in an alternative area of Lincolnshire.

One young person had expressed a firm intention to move on from Staying Put into independent living, however decided against this due to the quality of accommodation and support they received on the Staying Put scheme. As part of Pathway Planning with young people are informed of all their options for when they turn eighteen; this includes the Staying Put scheme and moving on to other types of accommodation. The young person is supported to explore these options, and in this case the young person had visited other accommodation providers and following this felt that Staying Put was the most suitable option for them.

The number of external Staying Put arrangements remains static at seven in quarter three with arrangements in Leeds, Mansfield, Brigg, Peterborough, Ilford, Birmingham, and Leicester.

Staying Put actively supports young people's ambitions to move into higher education with Staying Put retainer arrangements in place for five young people attending universities across England and Wales.

The Staying Put scheme continues to successfully provide Lincolnshire young people with time, security, and a caring home in which to develop the skills to transition successfully into adulthood. It also offers stability and continuity to young people as they enter adulthood allowing them to concentrate on their learning and employment.

Raising awareness of the Staying Put scheme remains a priority to ensure as many young people as possible have access to the scheme. This has involved the scheme being published in the Fostering newsletter and being a standing item on new staff inductions.

Conclusion:

During this third quarter of the year there have continued to be pressures on fostering placement capacity yet despite this most children are placed within the Lincolnshire County Council approved foster carer 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 has seen positive and encouraging events in July 2023 and December 2023 with plans in place to host an event in May 2024.

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 and is impacted by the national challenges, the predicted shortfall of carers by 2025, the economic climate, yet focuses on securing carers that can 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 takes nothing for granted and the rate of increased payments in April 2023 and the announcement of the national minimum allowance by the government in December 2023 will be received positively. Any decision to review payments for the new financial year and retain the retention payments would be warmly welcomed.

During the year to date 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 wholeheartedly appreciated.

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 anticipated visit from Fosterlink in the new year is an additional opportunity to review our recruitment activity, review our fostering schemes and consider what additional efforts the service can make to build our resources for Lincolnshire children.

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.

Deborah Crawford

Children's Head of Regulated Services