

Quarter 2 Fostering Report – 2020/21

The Annual Report for 2019/20 was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in September 2020. The statement of Purpose has been revised and was ratified on the same day. This is the second quarterly report for 2020/21.

Introduction

In 2020/21, the Fostering service has an annual budget of £9,118,082. All Foster Carer allowances have been increased by 2% for this financial year. This has ensured that allowances continue to remain in advance of the government recommended minimum rates. This is important as the foster care market place is more complex with a number of independent agencies actively recruiting in the area, and in order to retain our competitiveness, allowances are a significant factor. The budget also continues to afford flexibility to provide enhanced allowances to certain categories of carers such as those offering permanence or managing particularly challenging children. During the second quarter, the service has had to respond to the continuing Covid crisis by offering support in a range of new ways. The development of the virtual foster care community, via Caring2Learn (C2L), has created a model for the future and additional payments have been made, to both value the work of foster carers and promote placement stability. Despite this, and reflective of the demography of foster carers within the County, up to 83 foster placements have been lost during the pandemic as a result of self-isolation and vulnerabilities.

At the end of Quarter 2, the number of children in care had continued to rise to 662. At the same time, those placed with Independent Fostering agencies rose to 33, four of whom were unaccompanied migrant children. Amongst this group are two children placed who have waited for a long term placement for in excess of six months.

72 children became looked after for the first time in this quarter, of these 49 were placed in foster care.

Recruitment and Retention

The Service continues to adjust and respond to the ever changing landscape created by Covid-19. There is a small group of staff dedicated to recruitment activity but a resignation by one has resulted in assessments being dispersed more generally across the teams.

Initial visits continue to be Initial phone calls and Preparation to Foster Courses are delivered virtually via MS Teams. The frequency of the Preparation Course has been increased from two monthly to monthly in order to support the progression of applicants more quickly. Each course is facilitated by a SSW, C2L worker and at least one foster care champion. Whilst initial phone calls do not allow for a visual inspection of an applicant's property, should that applicant meet all the other criteria for progression and proceed to the assessment stage, then an early face to face visit is undertaken by the assessing social worker who also confirms the suitability of the accommodation.

Fostering Information Events take place on a monthly basis and are held virtually. Those making formal or informal enquiries are encouraged to attend.

In order to minimise any delay in progressing foster care applicants one of the team's coordinators visits County Offices at least weekly to collect completed documents

such as applications, references and medicals. The coordinator will also use this opportunity to send out application packs to those who have had an initial call and are eligible and wish to progress.

Whilst the service has seen an increased number of initial expressions of interest (IEI's) in this quarter compared to 2019, analysis of those IEI's show an increase in interest from people with insufficient bedroom space and a higher drop out of people following the information stage; reasons include being made redundant, getting new employment and ill health or no longer have a spare room due to a son/daughter/family member remaining at home. Although more difficult to confirm, it is clear that people are comparing what is on offer from the Local Authority with independent providers. The presence of the latter in County continues to grow.

Retention of foster carers remains the most effective means of recruitment. Providing individual levels of support to our carers and specifically those newly approved, remains crucial during this time of uncertainty. Some carers have welcomed the return of face to face support whilst others have remained happy with virtual, arm's length support. The challenge is ensuring each fostering family receives what they require, when they require it whilst ensuring government and local guidance is adhered to in relation to Covid-19. Feedback from carers is to the most part very positive with regards to their feeling supported and understanding the challenges that face us all.

Marketing

Figures

The high level of interest in fostering seen in the first quarter of this year has continued into Quarter 2 with a total of 103 fostering IEIs being submitted. This is the highest number of IEIs received for a half-year point for a number of years as demonstrated below:

Financial Year	Number of fostering IEIs received		
	Q1	Q2	Total
2020 / 2021	80	103	183
2019 / 2020	46	66	112
2018 / 2019	52	52	104

Virtual Information Events

Due to the continuing Covid-19 epidemic, information events have continued in a virtual format. Attendance has not been as high as those that were conducted face-to-face prior to the Covid outbreak, and it is not possible to engage with attendees as much to ensure those who are suitable and keen to progress are actually filling out an IEI; as such the approach is clearly less effective. Nevertheless, the option to attend a virtual information event has remained a recruitment tactic with events occurring as follows:

- Tuesday 14th July at 2pm
- Tuesday 11th August at 2pm
- Wednesday 9th September at 6:30pm

One of the benefits of moving to online events however is the money saved from hiring venues, refreshments etc. which has instead been used on more targeted advertising, including:

Quarter 2

- Lincs & Wolds Scene
- Paid-for Facebook targeted advert
- Lincs FM and Lincolnshire Today fostering adverts
- The Lincolnite & Lincolnshire Reporter websites (including mobile)
- Twitter feeds on main Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) corporate account
- Lincolnshire Life magazine and website
- Digital adverts across Media websites (including mobile)
- Marketing e-newsletter sent to those who have shown an interest in fostering.
- Int Comms piece

Permanence campaign

The need for permanent placements is an ongoing challenge and recruitment of permanent carers has always been difficult. The permanence campaign continued throughout Quarter 2 with advertising across a range of media. In addition, throughout September anonymised profiles of children waiting for permanence were posted onto the Caring2Learn closed Facebook page as well as the main Fostering Recruitment Facebook page.

Fostering Friendly Project

Following the successful agreement and signing off by the Executive of LCC adopting the Fostering Friendly Agenda, the Council officially became a Fostering Friendly Council on 1st September. This was promoted internally, including:

- Article in the foster carers e-newsletter about being a Fostering Friendly Council in August and September
- Press release to local media week of 24th
- Article in Children's Services bulletin
- Talk about being a Fostering Friendly Council at Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) Briefings
- Radio interview with BBC Radio Lincolnshire



Marketing materials have been developed to be given to external organisations interested in becoming a Fostering Friendly Employer.

Retention / Caring2Learn / Our World Magazine

During this quarter the foster carers' magazine, entitled Our World, was also launched. Whilst this was designed and pulled together internally for consistency purposes, the magazine is entirely written by foster carers, for foster carers.

There was a lead up to the launch beginning in August with a lead article in the e-newsletter which is emailed to foster carers, as well as social media posts going out on the C2L and LCC Approved Foster Carers closed Facebook groups once a week with the following graphics:



The magazine was launched on 7th September with hard copies posted to all fostering households, as well a link to an online version being emailed to carers and this link also shared on the C2L and LCC Approved Foster Carers closed Facebook groups. The link was also included in the September edition of the e-newsletter.

Recruitment & Retention Statistics

Despite the aforementioned increase in interest in fostering, recruitment remains challenging with conversion rates from interest to approval at about 6%.

There have been eight newly approved households during this period providing four task centred / respite beds (seven if siblings are taken), as well as four purely respite beds. This brings the total number of newly approved households for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 combined to 13, and as of mid-October there are a further 27 applications currently in stages 1 or 2 of the process with 13 of these having a panel date booked before the end of the financial year. This is a significant increase over the same period last year.

Family Finding

Children with care plans for permanent fostering are considered by the monthly Family Finding group. Over this quarter 17 children have been considered made up of four sibling groups of two, one sibling group of three and six single children. Two new single children were referred.

Of these 17 children, only one new potential placement has been identified this quarter and it's disappointing to note a placement breakdown for two children who were identified last quarter as having a long term placement with their existing task centred carer.

During this second quarter of the year there have been no new carers approved for permanence at Fostering panel. Of those identified in the last quarter as being assessed for permanence, one couple has since withdrawn and the other two couples are now looking to provide respite and/or task centred placements only at this stage. There have been however three new applications from couples who have attended the prep course recently and have expressed an interest in providing a long term placement for a child or children.

Family Finders Review meetings, chaired by senior managers, continue to consider children where no suitable match has been identified after a three month's period. In this second quarter, five children have been referred to Family Finders Review- including two sibling groups of two and one single child.

The challenges faced by the Fostering Service as a whole are clearly impacting on Family Finding activity for children with a significant number of foster carers at this current time unable to consider offering a long term placement to a child or children, many of whom have additional and/or complex needs.

Training

In this quarter, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, all face to face training apart from first aid has been cancelled. Eleven carers have accessed the training during this quarter. The monthly virtual training newsletter is being circulated

A Foster Carer Induction course was run virtually on the 29th September 2020, facilitated by C2L Champions with a welcome from Children's Services. The plan is for these to take place quarterly.

Caring 2 Learn courses have continued to be delivered remotely and have been well received by foster carers and Social Care staff. 219 foster carers have taken part.

33 courses have been delivered this quarter:

- Introducing Social Pedagogy
- Introduction to Restorative Practice
- Introduction to mindfulness, Creating Calm
- Kid skills
- Compassion fatigue and Managing Stress
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Learning Home development workshops
- Supporting sleep, nightmares and night terrors.

There has been an increase in carers accessing e-learning, with a total of 136 carers completing courses including:

- Safeguarding
- Safeguarding refresher
- Hidden harm
- Covid-19
- Think Safe be safe

Kinship

Kinship options are always considered when a child enters care for the first time and throughout their history in care. Joint work has been completed between the Fostering Service and other teams to ensure consistency with viability assessments and the referral process. Practice Supervisors are also attending team meetings to provide information and support other teams regarding the kinship processes.

Quarterly Report: July to September 2020

Number of Referrals	SGO	Private Law SGO	Reg.24 to SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering
41	9	3	13	10	6

The second quarter of the year continues to see referrals being consistent over the quarter and there is a slight increase in referrals from the previous year. The biggest difference from the previous year is the number of Regulation 24 to Special Guardianship Order (SGO); referrals have increased from four in 2019 to 13 in 2020.

Of the 9 x SGO assessments as follows:

1 x plan changed to CAO so referral changed to Statutory Checks only
2 x applicants withdrew
6 x on-going

Private Law SGO

3 x Private Law SGO applications with Social worker completing Schedule 21 Report and statutory checks completed by fostering service as these are private applications with 3 on-going and remain in Court Proceedings and waiting Final Hearing for decision to be made.

Reg.24 / SGO placements

1 x case closed as different Local Authority took over the proceedings
1 x ended as child moved to alternative family member
11 x are on-going Reg.24 placements with a SGO also directed within proceedings

Reg.24 assessments in this quarter:

1 x ended as child moved to alternative family member
9 x are on-going Regulation 24 assessments

Private Fostering Arrangements as follows:

1 x child returned home
5 x on-going

Since March 2020, Covid has had an impact on kinship work and the way in which assessments are undertaken. There have been some advantages and some challenges with this:

What has worked well?

- Up until the 25th September 2020 workers have been given the opportunity to complete Regulation 24 assessments up to a 24 week timescale. This has allowed Supervising Social Workers (SSW) additional time to plan in virtual assessment sessions and some home visits whilst adhering to social distancing and safety rules.
- Joint Supervisions by Microsoft Teams rather than face to face have meant all relevant professionals across different service areas have been able to participate in Joint Supervisions and Care Planning. Prior to Microsoft Teams there were challenges in terms of travel and distance between teams. This has been a positive change with an increase in the amount of joint supervisions taking place and ease of making such arrangements.
- The team has continued to work closely with Fostering Panel in terms of ensuring applicants are presented and contribute to Panel Meetings.

What are we worried about?

- Workers have expressed one of the challenges has been relationship based practice, particularly when areas of the assessment have been of a sensitive or challenging nature.
- Decrease in the amount of unannounced home visits taken place owing to restrictions in visiting. This is under continuous review in line with government and LCC guidance.

Staying Put

During the second quarter of 2020/2021, there was an increase from 52 to 58 young people on the scheme. Of this number, 29 are in full time further education with seven attending university and one attending Army College. The remainder are in employment, on an Apprenticeship (four of these on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme) or Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). There has been a decrease in relation to NEET with there now being three young people who are not accessing education/training and are not employed. In relation to referrals into the scheme there are 14 referrals for the period October 2020 – March 2021.

Staying Put is discussed at the first review following the young person's 16th birthday with the decision being recorded on their pathway plan; which is then followed up at each review. Discussions around expectations and finances are undertaken with the young person and foster carers with a license agreement being completed prior to them turning 18. This ensures the transition to Staying Put is smooth with young people remaining informed about the process having support and stability to transition into adulthood. The service has continued to work with Shared Lives to ensure their understanding around the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 and the necessity for all adult household members requirement for a DBS.

Due to the continued situation relating to Covid-19 the service has adapted and continued to offer support and guidance to existing and potential Staying Put providers. A range of methods have been used to convey and discuss information relating to Staying Put using the telephone and video calling. Working together across

Children's Services and with Barnardo's Leaving Care Service, Staying Put arrangements have continued to be progressed with licence agreements and support around benefits being completed remotely.

Caring 2 Learn

The established priorities for the fostering service are:

1. Developing a community based support network for foster and residential carers.

A Community Hub approach has been developed across the County. This has included the development of multiple forums and ways for Foster Carers to access support from other Foster Carers, Children's Services teams, and schools. This is providing a more integrated approach to support. The forums have been developed according to feedback from Foster Carers. All support mechanisms make up a single community hub for all Lincolnshire Foster Carers.

The Hub originally consisted of various access points throughout the county to resolve the geographical issues faced by carers and build a strong sense of community with a consistent offer. During the current pandemic it has been possible to explore a virtual offer that ensures carers can access their community more easily. Feedback from the foster carers strongly indicates that virtual platforms have helped carers overcome challenges to attending events, such as childcare.

The Hub largely is being supported by the Foster Carer Champions who have roles that cover responsibilities as 'Hub Links'. This has replaced the Fostering 'buddy' system. All new carers are now allocated a 'hub link' within the few month of their fostering journey. Hub Links are allocated thoughtfully to promote relationship and connections between carers and their support network. Hub Links have also been allocated to existing carers where they are experiencing challenges and require additional support. This quarter the champions have supported 52 fostering households. Although this is going well, the level of support that can be offered is impacted by carers being unable to actively meet and get to know each other through shared activities.

Children's Services teams are starting to consider where in the model they fit and what the support they offer to the fostering community looks like. Participation in the different areas of the hub continues to increase; all platforms despite the current restrictions remain in place. Need is monitored to ensure that the right kind of support is identified and delivered.

During the period July to September 2020, we have continued to offer only virtual forums and events. The sharp increase in those accessing virtual platforms including our training events has continued. This difficult time has clearly indicated that the sense of community and strength of a relationship based model is crucial to a developing a successful fostering service.

The Community Hub model opens the gateway to Foster Carers to be included in service forums and developing and connect with staff. Foster Carers feedback is that this has helped them feel like a valued member of the whole team.

2. Creating and recruiting to the role of Caring2Learn Champion, a group made up of Foster Carers, Residential Support Workers, Designated Teachers and Children's staff. They will provide peer support and challenge to advocate and support good practice by bringing all services and professionals together to promote how best to support each other and our children.

The Foster Carers Champion role has been divided into three main areas: Training and development: Supporting learning and Education and Learning; and Foster Carer Hub Support. The priority for all the Foster Carer Champions remains Foster Carer community engagement and development which will be important for long term progress. All Champions have clear performance targets around their lead area and this has certainly increased productivity. Each Foster Carer Education Champion has a clear development plan which they have developed and with support will review.

There are 21 Foster Carers with a champion role. There are also identified champions within the Fostering, Early Help, Futures4me and Residential Teams who are supporting the project and integration within their own services. There are plans to develop these roles within other Children's Services areas and recruit four more Foster Carers in the south and east of the county to support the development and demands within the Hub model. The Practice Supervisor is key to the maintenance and development of Foster Carer champions and their roles within the Hub.

The Social Pedagogy Champion group has developed with Caring2Learn to be a workshop around all practice, broadening its focus and inviting representatives from other service areas, schools and Foster Carers. The last workshop welcomed 62 participants. The workshops are themed and consider how theory is transferred to practice. This forum also gives those attending the opportunity to share practice and resources.

3. The development of Learning Homes and Caring Schools, which will assess, celebrate and drive good practice for Lincolnshire Looked after Children.

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

We currently have 37 foster homes and three residential settings that have achieved their Learning Homes Award. Due to the number of toolkits collected over recent months and the expectations that all new carers complete the award within 12 months of approval; we expect the number of awarded homes to rise significantly over the next 12-24 months. The Learning Homes Award has been achieved by three residential homes that took part in an initial pilot. The completed Residential Toolkit has now been developed and the first home to work through this is expected to submit by Christmas 2020. The main development has been around the therapeutic practice to be embedded within the direct care of children within best practice guidelines.

School participation since the conference has risen to 170 providers. 46 schools have already been awarded Caring School Awards.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has presented challenges to us all. Within the fostering service we have seen foster carers take themselves off line due to their own health vulnerabilities whilst at the same time we have seen others who have shown total commitment to the children in their care. As a result placement stability in this quarter has continued to be strong but placement availability has resulted in an increase in placements sought within the independent sector. The increase in care plans for permanent fostering has continued and represents one of the most significant challenges for the Directorate as the number of plans continues to grow whilst the recruitment of permanent foster carers remains worryingly low. Caring2learn continues to create the Foster care community and has established itself as a core framework for delivering the fostering service.

John Harris
Children's Head of Regulated Services