



Lincolnshire Fostering Service

QUARTERLY REPORT
APRIL – JUNE 2021

Quarter One Fostering Report–2021/2022

The Annual Report for 2020/2021 was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in September 2020. The statement of Purpose was revised and was ratified on the same day. This is the first quarterly report for 2021/2022.

Introduction

In 2021/22, the Fostering Service has an annual budget of £9,100,233. 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. This has been compounded by the ongoing effects of the Covid 19 pandemic which has resulted in an increase in numbers of children in care and diminishing foster carer availability owing to health and social factors.

All foster carers were afforded priority for the completion of the Covid 19 vaccine programme and this was well received in terms of the value placed on them by the Council. The take up was encouraging and supported carers in gaining confidence to continue taking placements.

The budget also 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. During the last financial year the continuing Covid crisis has required the service to continue to be flexible in its response to foster carers and the children in their care. The development of the virtual foster care community, via Caring2learn, has created a model for the future and additional payments have been made to value the work of foster carers.

The impact of the pandemic remains and there has been a marginal decline in the placement stability figures which stand at 69.7% and the effects upon this indicator are significant. This is largely attributable to some longer term placements ceasing at the carers request given their change in circumstances or as a result of breakdown. Likewise, the increased demand on placements has made the choice of the right placement upon admission into care more difficult.

Despite the constraints of the pandemic, recruitment has started well this quarter with an increased level of interest and this will need to be carefully monitored and reviewed given the gradual easing of government Covid 19 measures.

At the end of the last year, the number of children in care had continued to rise to 680. Those placed with Independent Fostering agencies were 29, 5 of whom were unaccompanied migrant children. The percentage of children in foster placements has remained steady at 72%.

During this quarter the number of children coming into care has increased by 76 with 41 of these being placed within foster care

Owing to the continued increase in the children in care numbers, the rise in the number of children placed in Independent Non-Maintained provision (Independent Fostering/Residential Providers) and the resultant increase in costs in the past few years the Council commissioned transformation work relating to children in care. The fostering service has been engaged in various aspects and strands of this work with a strong focus on the core offers to foster carers and developing the Valuing Care Toolkit as a further measure to match foster carers skillset and children's needs.

Recruitment and Retention:

The Recruitment Service continues to adjust and respond to the effects of Covid 19. Recruitment is developing into an area that is seen as everyone's responsibility with a wider pool of Supervising Social Workers completing initial visits. The team has fully embraced the use of technology to provide a full service of information sharing, initial visits and community and learning engagement. As restrictions have eased the service has adopted a smarter way of working through the use of both face to face and online interactions.

Online activities have brought many benefits and so the fostering service will continue to include online options to increase capacity, accessibility and convenience for Foster Carers in the future.

The Preparation to Foster Courses continues to be delivered virtually at a frequency of 6 per year in order to support the progression of applicants as quickly as possible. The ambition for 2022 sees 50% of courses taking place virtually and the other half is taking place face to face. Each course is facilitated by a Supervising Social Worker, C2L representative and at least one Foster Carer Champion. Fostering Information Events take place on a monthly basis and are held virtually. Those making formal or informal enquiries to foster are encouraged to attend these events.

The service has continued to see an increased number of initial expressions of interest (IEI's) compared to 2019-2020. More work is planned to understand the conversion rates from IEI to approval. A recruitment audit and review is planned to look at each of the different stages to establish current strengths, room for improvement, trends and establish performance indicators to maximise production and improve the conversion rate of IEI to approval. The work continuing will closely monitor quality with a strong emphasis on good customer service.

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.

Caring2Learn has proven to be a great strength and resource in its application of key principles and models of support and learning for foster carers and the wider service. This has been acknowledged and so Caring2Learn has been further embedded within the Fostering service to take Caring2Learn from project to business as usual model.

The Caring2Learn Practice Supervisor has been integrated into the team and takes a lead on those elements that fit within the model; these include recruitment, retention, training, development and support.

Reassuringly, the continued links with the Virtual School continue to support the fidelity of this global approach in shaping the work in order to support the Learning Homes and Caring Schools to support and drive forward the good practice for all children in care in Lincolnshire.

Work continues to develop a Community Hub approach 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 Service's 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 continues to be supported by the Foster Carer Champions who have roles that cover responsibilities as 'Hub Links'. This replaced the Fostering 'buddy' system and feedback has been positive from both carers and staff.

All new carers continue to be allocated a 'hub link' within the first 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 and Special Guardians where they are experiencing challenges and require additional support. 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. Some carers have welcomed the return of face to face support whilst others have remained happy with virtual, arm's length support.

Feedback from carers is to the most part very positive with regards to their feeling really supported.

The challenges highlighted within the annual survey identified that carers experience challenges which impact on carer retention. It is important for Foster Carer retention to be seen as everyone's business within the wider children services context. The hub approach is creating and recruiting to the role of Caring2Learn Champions, a group made up of Foster Carers, Residential Support Workers, Designated Teachers and Children's Services 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 Lincolnshire children.

A retention audit will be completed in quarter 2, this will involve an in depth analysis of the carers circumstances that led to a resignation or long periods off line. It is important that we are able to identify clearly the trends and complicating factors surrounding these over recent years to help inform retention and recruitment planning in the future and set targets and predictions.

Marketing:

The high level of interest in fostering has continued into quarter 1 of this financial year with 74 IELs being received during this period.

There have been 4 newly approved households during quarter 1 providing the following beds:

Fostering Type	Number of beds
Respite / Task Centred / Permanence	1 (2 if siblings)
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Respite / Task Centred	1
Task Centred / Permanence	1 (2 if siblings)

As of the end of June there were a further 30 applications in stages 1 or 2, with 13 of these having a panel date booked before mid-December.

Foster Care Fortnight:

Lincolnshire Fostering Service took part in the Fostering Network's annual Foster Care Fortnight campaign which was held between 10th–23rd May 2021 with a theme of #WhyWeCare which aimed to highlight and raise the profile of fostering to the general public.

In Lincolnshire, we ran a campaign to reach as many people as possible across the county including:

- Google Adwords campaign running from 1st April-30th June 2021 alongside remarketing adverts.
- Article in the spring issue of County News about permanence from the point of view of two children in long-term care and why it's important to them.
- Q&A double page spread in the May issue of Lincolnshire Today magazine about how to become a foster carer in Lincolnshire. This is also on their website alongside an online advert.
- Half page advert and half page editorial in the May issue of Lincolnshire Life magazine, as well as a skyscraper advert on their website.
- Paid-for Facebook campaign running from 3rd-19th May 2021.
- Advert in the May issue of Lincs and Wolds Scene magazines.
- Full page advert in Primary Times magazine.
- Advert in Simply Spalding and Simply Boston magazines.
- Advert in the Local Advertising Group.

- Foster Carer Viewpoint for May features one of our foster households explaining why they care and what fostering means to them which went live on the LCC's news section of the website on 4th May 2021.
- Email marketing campaign to those who have signed up who may have enquired about fostering/visited our website but not yet filled in an IEI with links to May's Foster Carer Viewpoint article, the permanence feature which appeared in County News (and is also online), and promoting the information evening in May sent out on 6th May with the aim of progressing them to filling out an IEI or attend the information evening.
- Generic Facebook posts (LCC and Fostering Service pages) relating to the #WhyWeCare theme for Foster Care Fortnight from 10th-23rd May 2021. This includes photos of foster carers holding a placard stating why they care about fostering, as well as one from the Executive Director of Children's Services, Ellie's Story animation, video clips from the Fostering Network, and links to the Foster Carer Viewpoint for May as well as the County News article about permanence.
- Press release to local media on 10th May 2021.
- Internal communications on 12th May 2021.
- Fostering advert on Lincs FM from 13th-19th May 2021.
- Online Information Evening via Teams on Thursday 20th May 2021 at 6:30pm.

Other advertising:

Additional advertising promoting the need for more foster carers also took place throughout Q1 as follows:

- Foster Carers' Monthly Viewpoint in April and June whereby a different foster family writes about their experience of fostering and is put on the LCC website as well as on social media channels and in email marketing campaigns to prospective foster carers.
- Digital adverts across Iliffe Media websites (including News and Homepage Takeovers as well as 20,000 views of audience targeted adverts) in June

Permanence campaign:

The permanence campaign continued with a wide range of advertising as follows:

April

- Digital advert on Lincolnshire Today website
- Half page advert in Lincs and Wolds Scene magazine
- Targeted paid-for Facebook adverts
- Advert in Gainsborough Life magazine

- Email marketing campaign to prospective foster carers
- Piece on Int Comms

May

- Radio advert specifically for permanence running on Lincs FM

June

- Radio advert specifically for permanence running on Lincs FM
- Digital advertising on Lincolnshire Today website
- Half page ad in Lincolnshire Life magazine and skyscraper advert on website
- Targeted paid-for Facebook adverts
- Email marketing campaign to prospective foster carers

The service continues to actively review and develop all marketing strategies in terms of keeping Lincolnshire's edge in the market place. The continued efforts are to increase the cohort of local carers for local children given the obvious benefits for the children and families concerned and the efficiencies within the Council.

Family Finding:

During the first quarter of this year Family Finders has continued to meet on a monthly basis to consider all children with a care plan for long term fostering who do not already have a placement identified. In light of the on-going restrictions in place around Covid 19 these meetings continue to take place virtually.

Over this quarter 7 children have been considered a sibling group of 3, a sibling group of 2 and 2 single placements.

During this period one out of the 7 children has been removed from Family Finders who has been placed with task-centred carers with the view to her remaining with them long term. The sibling group of 3 are currently transitioning to a family member but we are still looking for placements for a sibling group of two and 1 child. We are also aware of another child looking for long term fostering but the referral to family finders has not yet been completed.

The Permanence Campaign is on-going and includes a variety of advertising on social media, radio and local publications.

Profiles for all children on Family Finders continue to be shared monthly with all Supervising Social Workers in the fostering service sharing these with existing and/or newly approved foster carers as appropriate. Anonymised profiles are also shared with prospective Foster Carers on the preparation training and during the assessment process as well as being posted on social media (Facebook).

Information regarding children needing long term placements continues to be shared in the Monthly Foster Carer Newsletter and has been featured in the new foster carers' magazine,

'Our World'. An addition of 'County News' included a feature story on the experiences of two children currently in long term foster placements.

The Lincolnshire County Council Fostering web page continues to provide information on long term fostering and the support available to foster carers.

During this first quarter of the year there has been one set of carers who were approved for permanence as well as task-centred.

On 24th February, Lincolnshire County Council held its first Independent Fostering Agency marketing event as part of the Children in Care Transformation work. This pilot and approach was used to test what the independent foster care supplier market could offer and take an opportunity to build relationships with them. Building on this first event, the council want to further work with providers to increase the availability of foster carers in the area and support the vision of Lincolnshire placements for Lincolnshire children.

The Permanent Event and training took place virtually on 29th June 2021. The session was separated into 2 sessions, the first session focused on social workers sharing information on 3 children who are currently in residential placement but looking to identify long term foster placement for them. The second session was training on permanence and sharing further profiles/information of children who are currently on Family Finders. We had 6 sets of carers attend the first session and 5 sets of carers attend both. There was only one set of carers who had availability to take a long term placement at the time of attending the course, however since then have taken a task-centred placement.

As with the monthly Family Finders meetings Family Finders Review meetings, chaired by senior managers, are also taking place virtually to consider children where no suitable match has been identified after a three months period.

During this first quarter just one child has been referred to Family Finders Review. During this quarter we have had very few children on Family Finders which is unusual. Unfortunately it continues to remain a challenge to identify long term placements which carers approved for permanence with many children remaining with their task-centred carers on a long term basis.

Training:

In this quarter due to the on-going Covid 19 Pandemic all face to face training apart from First Aid has been postponed.

The monthly virtual training schedule has been circulated to all households.

29 courses were delivered this quarter
312 attendees have taken part from Fostering Households.
Courses delivered via Zoom or Teams - 26

Training:

- First Aid training

- Restorative Practice
- Kid Skills
- Safeguarding

Practice Workshops:

- Introducing Social Pedagogy
- Introduction to Restorative Practice
- Introduction to mindfulness, Creating Calm
- Kid skills
- Compassion fatigue and Managing Stress
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Supporting sleep, nightmares and night terrors.
- Supporting autism, A carers perspective
- Supporting ADHD and FASD, A carers perspective
- Supporting grief and loss
- Relational repair
- Time2talk
- Fostering Weekly Programme (Caring2gether, 6 weeks)

E-Learning:

LSCP courses are still being accessed and Foster Carers 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 Standards Development (TSDs) 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 3 years to ensure on-going personal and professional development.

We currently have 66 foster homes and 4 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 continue to rise significantly over the next 12-24 months.

Celebration Event:

The Foster Carer Celebration will take place over Zoom on the 19th October 2021. The event recognises the contribution and achievements of our fostering community. Foster carers will receive their long service awards, a voucher and lapel badge. The voucher and lapel badge are given to carers as a token of gratitude and was positively received at last year's event.

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

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 have attended Team Meetings to provide information and support other teams regarding the kinship processes. Practice Supervisors are building really good working relationships between Fostering and the other teams; this has shown to be effective as conversations are being held early on and consultations are taking place prior to viabilities being concluded and placements being made.

At the time of writing this report we are slowly easing from the pandemic however these working relationships and conversations have remained strong and consistent on a virtual platform. We have seen a rise in enquiries regarding kinship placements in this last quarter.

Number of Referrals	SGO	Private Law SGO	Reg.24 to SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering
35	5	9	8	8	5

The first quarter of 2021 year continues to show Kinship is a busy and in demand service. This is particularly in the case of Reg 24 and SGO assessments with changes occurring during the life of the case; for example if an SGO assessment is positive this may then progress to Reg 24 and vice versa.

Early discussions are taking place between the children's teams and Kinship which are enabling better decision making when kinship placements are being considered and ensuring the regulations are met. In addition close joint working is taking place between the teams which has been beneficial in identifying changes in care plan and any issues early on.

This has impacted positively on decisions being made in a timely manner, preventing further delay or drift for children, and ensuring good outcomes and permanence, where possible, is secured for children. Joint supervisions are taking place prior to referrals / allocations being made, at the start of kinship assessments, during the life of the case and nearing the end when conclusions are being drawn. Social workers are undertaking joint visits and a collaborative approach is being more commonly used than in previous years.

The following is a breakdown of the assessments in the last quarter:

Of the 5 x SGO assessments:

3 x No further action due to applicants' withdrawing
2 x On-going

Of the 9 x Private Law SGO:

1 x Withdrew as children returned home to parents

8 x Applications are on-going with the child's Social Worker completing the Schedule 21 report and the fostering service undertaking the statutory checks.

Of the 8 x Reg.24 / SGO placements:

8 x are on-going within public care proceedings; children are placed under Reg 24 / connected persons and SGO assessments are being completed as part of long term decision making re permanent childcare arrangements.

Of the 8 x Reg 24 assessments:

8 x children remain within these connected person placements as Children in Care.

Of the 5 x Private Fostering Arrangements:

1 x Private foster carer withdrew and child now a child in care
1 x Assessment has been completed and the Private Fostering arrangement is on-going with Social Care support.
3 x Assessments are underway and the Private Fostering arrangement is on-going with Social Care support.

Since last year and being in a pandemic, this last quarter has seen the rules and restrictions relaxed and has enabled more face to face working to take place whilst embracing some of the benefits brought about by Smarter Working. The benefits and limitations/challenges within this are outlined below:

What has worked well?

Earlier conversations between Kinship and Children's teams are being held virtually over Microsoft Teams. The ease of being able to hold a video conversation has removed the barriers that we previously faced in terms of location and travel. This has resulted in an increase in these conversations taking place and improved decision making as a whole.

As above this has also worked well with joint supervision between Kinship and children's teams. There has been an increase in joint supervision taking place over Teams and this has removed the previous challenge of everyone having to travel in order to have a face to face

conversation. This has also reduced time spent travelling for such meetings and costs such as workers' time and mileage.

Due to the pandemic there have been instances where workers have been told to isolate, or their children have been advised to isolate which has revoked their childcare arrangements. By using the Smarter Working workers have been able to continue working from home in these situations which has prevented disruption to service delivery.

Supervising Social Workers have been able to safely visit foster carer households again; we have seen an increase in face to face visits resuming which is always more beneficial in terms of relationship based practice and safeguarding. SSWs are following the guidance in terms of social distancing, wearing PPE and completing the Covid risk assessments on Mosaic. Where face to face visits are not safe to undertake due to households or workers isolating workers have then used the smarter working strategies and virtual visits and support are being completed.

Team meetings, practice workshops, training and group supervision are continuing to take place virtually. These are scheduled in workers' calendars and although are not the same as face to face; they enable team working and development to continue in a safe way.

The team has continued to work closely with Fostering Panel in terms of ensuring applicants are present and contribute to Panel Meetings.

There are core members of staff being allocated and working kinship cases. This has enabled workers to develop an expertise in skills and knowledge in the kinship side of fostering.

What are we worried about?

Owing to Covid there has been a back log of cases within the court which has caused delay in care proceedings being concluded. Care proceedings and cases are drifting and remaining open longer than necessary. This is resulting in assessments that have been filed and completed going out of date, and workers having to complete addendum and updating reports and assessments thus increasing their work load.

Kinship carers are undertaking training courses, such as the Prep course, virtually and this has reduced engagement. Carers are turning their cameras off and are not getting the same output from training as when it is in person.

A one minute briefing has been shared with Children's teams setting out how referrals are to be made and what information needs to be included to ensure accuracy from the outset. Additionally Practice Supervisors are communicating closely with the area teams to ensure the relevant information comes through and working together to reduce the amount of times this is happening.

What needs to happen?

Enquiries are being made as to how Kinship courses for carers can return to in person in a way that is safe.

Close working is taking place between Kinship, Children's teams and Legal to improve the quality of assessments, to reduce the impact of court availability on case work and children, and to ensure effective and realistic timetabling.

Staying Put:

This quarter has seen a decrease of young people on the Staying Put Scheme from 47 to 42. This is as a direct consequence of Staying Put being one of several options available as a leaving care choice. Within the scheme 2 of the young people are on an apprenticeship, 8 attending university, 20 are in full time further education and 5 are in employment. The remainder are on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme and one is not in employment, education or training but this is expected to be resolved imminently.

In the quarter 8 young people left the Staying Put Scheme; with 1 young person remaining with his former carer under the Adults Shared Lives Scheme. One of the young people returned to live with family and the rest moved to independent living. In the quarter 1 young person remained Staying Put after turning 18 and 5 more will be joining the scheme in quarter 2. Staying Put has remained in contact with providers with meetings and agreements being conducted of Microsoft Teams.

The service continue to liaise with PSS the newly commissioned providers of Shared Lives who will be offering this support for young people with specific needs, for example severe or physical disabilities who will need on-going support post eighteen and twenty one. They have confirmed that any young person needing this level of on-going support will need a referral from an adult social worker prior to them turning 18 in order to commence the process. It is hoped that this service will enable a small group of very complex young people to remain with their carer's post 18.

Conclusion:

During the last year and to date the impact of Covid 19 continues. Despite the vaccination programme and gradual easing the availability of foster placements to the service remains a concern.

The recovery is yet to be fully understood in terms of longer term effects however as a service our best efforts and motivation is to remind all households of their continued value to the authority and the children they care for. Maintaining high quality supervision and support is central to this in the context of maximising and mobilising our capacity. Equally, for many households they have and continue to make the difference and have despite the enormous challenges have demonstrated their commitment to the children in their care.

As a result placement stability in this quarter has marginally impacted. In addition, we should be heartened by the sustained interest in fostering yet despite this there has also been an increased number of referrals to independent fostering agencies. The number of children placed in children's homes has only marginally increased.

The continued efforts of the transformation work will continue to address this by improving our core support for foster carers. This in tandem with the key decision to embed the Caring2

Learn Practice Supervisor into the service is already paying dividends in relation to our hub offer including training and support. The concept of Caring2Learn remains woven throughout the service and this coupled with the continued work of the foster carer champions and colleagues it remains the ambition of the service to build upon our strengths moving forward.

Deborah Crawford
Children's Head of Regulated Services