



Lincolnshire Fostering Service

QUARTERLY REPORT
JULY – SEPTEMBER 2021

Quarter Two 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 second 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 marketplace 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.

Foster Carer availability has been compounded by the on-going 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 other social factors. The budget also continues to afford flexibility to provide enhanced allowances to certain categories of carers such as those offering permanence or managing children with distressed behaviours that otherwise would be hard to place.

During the second quarter of this year, the service has continued to respond to the continuing recovery phase of the Covid 19 Pandemic crisis by continuing to offer support in a range of ways. Alongside face-to-face supervision and support, the development of the virtual foster care community continues to model the wraparound support services available to all fostering families. This is critical in securing their wellbeing in the invaluable role they undertake in caring for children and promoting placement stability.

Despite the initial challenges of the pandemic regarding placements lost to the service as a result of self-isolation and health vulnerabilities the numbers of carers more available to fostering has increased during this quarter. At one point the service had lost 133 beds but the pressure has eased with the number falling to 96 however this continues to add significant pressure to the service.

At the end of Quarter 2, the number of children in care had continued to rise to 688. At the same time those placed with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) rose to 39, 5 of whom were unaccompanied migrant children.

During this quarter 65 children became children in care for the first time in this quarter, of these 49 were placed in foster care. The percentage of children in foster placements has remained steady at 72%.

The aftermath of the pandemic remains, and the placement stability figures (children who have been in care continuously for at least 2.5 yrs. who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years) stands at 73% which is an increase in this quarter and above target.

Likewise, the percentage of children in care with 3 or more placements during the year stands at 2% which at this stage in the year performance remains good, but this is a cumulative

indicator and may change at year end. Despite showing promise this continues to be a difficult year yet foster carers have proven to be very resourceful and committed to the children they care for. However, placement availability has been negatively impacted as some foster carers have chosen to concentrate on the children already in their care and declined to take additional placements.

For all placements, the service continues to ensure that foster carers are well supported and that potential problems/issues are identified early. This has been further reinforced by the success of the caring2learn project which has encouraged foster carers to share and find solutions to problems and developed a whole range of tailored training and community support.

All foster carers will be afforded priority for the completion of the Covid 19 booster vaccine programme once available and this will further reflect the value placed on them by the Council. It is anticipated that the take up will be as encouraging as the primary and secondary programme

Within this Covid recovery period recruitment activity continues to show promise. This will need to be carefully monitored and reviewed to ensure that any surge in interest is capitalised upon. The service continues to find innovative ways to reach out to potential foster carers by continuing to make the most of online and social media platforms.

During this period and 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 continues to be engaged in various aspects and strands of this transformational 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 recover from the impact of Covid 19, we have seen recruitment activity return to a more stable place that matches previous activity data. Recruitment has developed into an area that is seen as everyone's responsibility with a wider pool of Supervising Social Workers completing half of initial visits. 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. This has included online recruitment events and the preparation course.

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, Caring2Learn 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. Virtual events have seen a substantial rise in people attending, recent changes to encourage participation has also made these sessions much more interaction and relational. This is supported in the feedback and improvement of conversion to people going on to stage 1.

A recruitment audit and review has been completed to look at each of the different stages to establish current strengths, areas for improvement, trends and establish performance indicators to maximise production and improve the conversion rate of initial enquiry to approval. The work continuing will closely monitor quality with a strong emphasis on good customer service and community. Initial results from the impact of changes in practice and processes can be seen through key performance indicators.

Recruitment activity and forms will have an online system for applicants; this has now been tested and will go live in quarter 3.

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 and its application of key principles and models of support and learning for foster carers and the wider service have proven the impact these have on foster carer retention and outcomes for children. Caring2Learn has been further embedded within the Fostering service from project to business-as-usual model. Applying these principles within foster carer recruitment has already started to impact on performance in this area.

The Caring2 Learn Practice Supervisor is now fully integrated into the fostering team and takes a lead on all fostering matters including recruitment, retention, training, development and support.

The 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.

A retention audit will be completed in October–November 2021, this will involve an in-depth analysis of the carers circumstances that led to a resignation or long periods offline. 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:

Figures

During this quarter 61 Initial Enquiries of Interest (IEI) were received.

There have been 3 newly approved households during quarter 2 providing the following beds:

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

As of the end of September there are 33 open applications in stages 1 or 2, with 3 of these having a panel date booked before mid-December.

Advertising

July

- Information Event on Thursday 15th July 2021 at 6:30pm
- Fostering advert running on Lincs FM
- Content article and Facebook remarketing via Reach
- Online advert on Lincolnshire Today website
- Half page advert in Lincolnshire Life magazine and online skyscraper
- Advert in Simply Boston and Spalding magazines

- Paid-for targeted Facebook advert
- Advert in Gainsborough Life magazine
- Article on Int Comms advertising information event
- Foster Carers' Viewpoint focusing on caring for teenagers
- Homepage takeover on Grantham Journal website and 20,000 audience targeted ads across Stamford, Grantham, Spalding, Bourne and Newark websites belonging to the Iliffe Media Group.

August

- Advert and editorial in Lincs and Wolds Scene
- E-newsletter campaign to those who have signed up to the front door newsletter on the website but haven't made an enquiry / filled out an IEI yet with the aim of gaining conversions.
- Foster Carers' Viewpoint focusing on the first placement of some relatively new foster carers
- 20,000 audience targeted ads, HPTO (Grantham Journal and Bourne Local websites) and NPTO (Stamford Mercury, Spalding Today and Newark advertiser websites).
- Article in summer issue of County News magazine addressing fostering myths.

September

- Information Event on Thursday 9th September 2021 at 6:30pm
- Fostering advert running on Lincs FM
- Online advert on Lincolnshire Today website and half page editorial in magazine
- Half page advert in Lincolnshire Life magazine and online skyscraper
- Advert in Lincs and Wolds Scene magazines
- Advert in Simply Spalding and Boston magazines
- Paid-for targeted Facebook advert
- E-newsletter campaign to those who have signed up to the front door newsletter on the website but haven't made an enquiry / filled out an IEI yet with the aim of gaining conversions.
- Article on Int Comms advertising information event
- Foster Carers' Viewpoint focusing on caring for children with FASD

Permanence campaign

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

July

- Half page advert in Lincs and Wolds Scene magazines

August

- 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

- Article on Int Comms

September

- Half page advert in Primary Times
- Advert in Gainsborough Life Magazine

Parent & Child Campaign

During this quarter a campaign to recruit more Parent & Child (P&C) Foster Carers began. As this is a specialist fostering arrangement, the recruitment campaign is focused on the professionalism and skill set needed by the applicants in order for them to be successful Parent & Child foster carer. Our target audience includes (but is not restricted to) child minders, retired professionals, Early Years workers, health / paediatric workers, schools etc. Adverts clearly identify the skills we are asking for and sell our specialist offer, support and training in place for our Parent & Child foster carers.

The campaign is in 3 stages with stage 1 occurring in Quarter 2 and focused on the planning of the campaign and the soft launch to in-house foster carers. Activities included:

- Job description composed
- Information leaflet written and designed
- Engaged with current P&C carer to write case study
- Build a dedicated P&C webpage which adverts can directly link to and an enquiry form for more information
- Weekly adverts for a month on closed Facebook page to in-house foster carers about the need for more P&C carers and the offer in terms of allowance, training and support
- Article in September newsletter to foster carers
- Advert and article in Issue 3 of Our World magazine which went out to foster carers in September.

Stage 2 which targets new Parent and Child carer households externally begins in October (Q3).

Our World Magazine – Issue 3

During this quarter issue 3 of the Foster Carers' Our World Magazine was put together and distributed to carers at the beginning of September. This continues to be a carer led initiative that is beneficial for the fostering community which is written by fostering families for fostering families. The magazine includes sharing experiences, advice, personal tributes, top tips on key issues, recipes and much more.

Instagram

Following on from Facebook, a new Fostering Instagram page was launched at the beginning of September and will focus on the community spirit of fostering in Lincolnshire. The page is still very much in its infancy but as Instagram is very imagery driven having real photos of our fostering community will be important in driving its success moving forward.

Family Finding:

During the second 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 gradual easing concerning Covid 19 these meetings continue to take place virtually but will revert back to face to face going forward.

Over this quarter 6 children have been considered a sibling group of 3, a sibling group of 2 and a singleton.

During this period four out of the six children has been removed from Family Finders. The sibling group of three have been placed with a family member following a transition period and the single child has been placed with an independent fostering agency (IFA) following introductions.

The group of two siblings had been placed with an IFA however sadly they could not maintain the placement for both children and one of them has temporarily returned to his previous local authority foster carer. Their social worker is completing a together or apart assessment of these children to determine the best future living arrangements going forward. At this point the service will have a clear understanding of what nature of placement should be resourced.

The Permanence Campaign is on-going and includes a variety of advertising on social media, radio and local publications. In the second quarter this has included, Lincs FM, Lincs Today, Lincolnshire Life, Gainsborough Life, E-newsletter, Int Comms, County News, Lincs Scene, Wolds Scene and Primary Times.

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

Another permanence event (similarly to what took place in July) will take place on the 26th of January 2022.

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-month period. This ensures robust oversight in an effort to avoid drift and delay for children.

During this second quarter it has not been necessary to refer any children to Family Finders Reviews

During this quarter, similarly to the first we have had very few children on Family Finders which is unusual. Unfortunately, it continues to remain a challenge to identify long term placements with 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. Some face-to-face events will return in March 2022. In light of this virtual training has been offered to support carer's initiation to fostering and their continued development.

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

18 courses were delivered this quarter

312 attendees have taken part from Fostering households.

Courses delivered via Zoom or Teams - 16

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
- Introduction to Trauma Awareness
- Supporting sleep, nightmares and night terrors.
- Supporting autism, A carers perspective
- Supporting ADHD and FASD, A carers perspective
- 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, Support and Development Standards (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.

Currently there are 75 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; the service are seeing the number of awarded homes to continue to rise significantly.

Celebration Event:

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

This event is fully supported by a wide range of personnel from Lincolnshire County Council and associated Partnerships. All of whom who are committed to achieving the best outcomes for our children and young people in Lincolnshire.

This event seeks to celebrate, show and share amongst the community the wide and varied ways in which foster Carer's support children, young people and their families across their journey. The service will be presenting a number of new awards this year which include the following areas:

- Virtual School
- FAST
- Children in Care
- Residential
- Adoption
- Support to the Fostering Service
- Community Award

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

Kinship:

Kinship continues to be considered for all children when they first enter care. This consideration continues to be looked at throughout their care journey. The work with area teams continues to take place in order to maintain and improve consistency in viability assessments and referrals. Regular discussions take place with children's social workers and their practice supervisors at an early stage in order to highlight good practice and work collaboratively to formulate plans for the completion of work.

Number of Referrals	SGO	Private Law SGO	Reg.24 to SGO	Reg. 24 / Connected Person	Private Fostering
47	19	4	9	12	3

The second quarter shows a growing trend in the number of kinship referrals received by the service specifically in the number of SGO's and Reg24/Connected person assessments counting for more than half of all referrals. The service has seen a steep increase in SGO assessments; with only 5 being completed in the first quarter and this almost being quadruple at 19 in this second quarter. Private Law SGO assessments have almost halved; with 4 being referred this quarter and 9 being referred in the first quarter.

Referrals for Reg 24 and SGO assessments have remained steady with 9 referrals being received this quarter, and 8 referrals in the first quarter. The number of Reg 24 / connected person assessments and placements, which are not progressing to SGO assessments, has also increased from 8 in the first quarter to 12 in this last quarter. And finally, in regard to private fostering referrals we have seen a slight decrease with only 3 referrals this last quarter, whereas we received 5 in the first quarter. In regard to the total number of referrals and assessments allocated within kinship this has increased from 35 in the first quarter to 47.

There remains a strong focus on joint working between teams. Early discussions with the area teams continue to take place to identify referrals and any issues early on. This allows for the sharing of information relating to the referral to be done at an early stage resulting in clearer and quicker decision making.

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

Of the 19 x SGO assessments:

17 x are on-going at the time of writing this report

3 x ended due to the applicants withdrawing

Of the 4 x Private Law SGO's:

3 x on-going at the time of writing this report

1 x has ended due to the applicants withdrawing

Of the 9 x Reg 24 to SGO assessments:

All are on-going at this time.

Of the 12 x Reg 24/Connected Person assessments:

All are on-going at this time.

Of the 3 x Private Fostering assessments:

1 x has been completed

2 x are on-going

What's working well?

The use of virtual platforms such as Microsoft Teams mean early discussions can take place and speedier decisions made.

More joint supervisions are taking place as a result of the above.

Face to face visits to applicants and carers are taking place as the pandemic restrictions ease.

Joint visits are being undertaken to applicants / carers and children by the Supervising Social Worker and the Children's Social Worker due to the restrictions easing as above.

There is open communication between the Panel booking team and Kinship to ensure a smoother and more effective panel booking system, and to support panels run as best as they can.

Legal Services copy Kinship into all legal memos which inform Kinship of any incoming Kinship work.

What are we worried about?

The fostering service are keen to ensure that the quality of the viability assessments is received timely and are of sufficient quality to aid assessments and determine placement options for children

The service has seen over the past quarter an increase in multiple viability assessments for the same child or children. On discussing these with the relevant area team social workers are

completing primary and secondary viability assessments in case just in case their first choice is not viable. This is placing significant pressure on the service.

There are concerns regarding the court timetabling for SGO assessments is at times insufficient to do quality assessments including statutory checks. There has been reduced timescales to as little as 4 weeks from referral to court filing.

The impact in delay of receiving referrals from area teams is an ongoing concern. In an effort to address this all-social care teams have received a One Minute Briefing which is to be recirculated to raise practice standards. The Practice Supervisors do continue to offer feedback and are planning sessions with all teams to share feedback and help with solutions to ease any pressures.

The service has seen an increase in referrals whereby the viability assessment is negative however the Court / Children's Guardian is over ruling the local authority and ordering SGO and / or Reg 24 assessments despite the negative viability. This has resulted in some connected person placements being made that do not meet the fostering national minimum standards and therefore cannot be regulated and are then being managed under s38(6) Children Act 1989.

What needs to happen?

Joint supervisions to continue to be booked for each kinship referral at the point of allocation.

Communication to be sent to Children's teams regarding the importance of timely referrals to ensure that the process for referral is familiar to all staff including new starters.

Staying Put:

Staying Put continues to be 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.

With regards to the number of Staying Put arrangements in the second quarter of 2021-2022 reporting period there was a slight decrease from 41 to 40 young people on the scheme. Of this number 1 of the young people is on an apprenticeship, 8 attending university, 26 are in full time further education and 2 are in employment. The remaining 2 are on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme and one has an offer of employment.

In this quarter, 1 young person left the Staying Put Scheme. In the quarter 6 young person joined Staying Put after turning 18 and 7 more will be joining the scheme in quarter 3. Staying Put has remained in contact with providers with meetings and agreements being conducted of Microsoft Teams.

The service has also been working with Shared Lives to ensure that young people with disabilities who are eligible for adult services are able to transition into the most suitable longer term accommodation provision; with there been three successful foster carers/staying put providers taking on the role of a shared lives provider

Due to the 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 a mixture of telephone, face to face visits and IT platforms. Working together across Children's Services and with Barnardo's Leaving Care Service staying put arrangements have continued to be progressed with license agreements and support around benefits being completed remotely. It is envisaged that more face-to-face visits will resume which coincides with the gradual easing.

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 remain a concern and an ongoing challenge that sits within the local and national context.

During this quarter placement stability has continued to be strong but placement availability has resulted in an increase in placements sought within the independent sector. This combined with the overall 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.

The service continue to use creative and innovative approaches to reach out to potential foster carers, including making the most of online and social media platforms yet it is envisaged that face to face events will safely to resume to aid our efforts and overall strategy.

The covid recovery is still 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.

Foster carer's engagement within the virtual fostering community has continued to be a real strength and results in many carers sharing experiences, supporting others and drawing upon their experience in mass. It is a community that is going from strength to strength and for many is a further layer of support to the support and supervision from the service which is a statutory responsibility.

The continued efforts in the areas of recruitment, retention and the broad ranging support offered to fostering families is at the heart of what is delivered in Lincolnshire. This alongside fostering's engagement in the transformation work is where the ongoing support to carers will also evolve and will help shape the service going forward.

Deborah Crawford
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