

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021





OUR SERVICE

The Fostering Service is a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act, 2000.

Leicestershire County Council's carers are part of our "Fostering Family", an ethos we have continued to build upon over the last three years by listening and responding to our carers, being transparent in our decision making and policies and procedures.

The Fostering Service has two functions – recruitment and retention.

Our successes for 2020/21 have included:

- Maintained Placement Stability during Covid19
- Strengthened our Support to carers to promote placement stability
- Ensured we continued to provide high quality training by switching to virtual forums
- Reviewed and revised our Fostering Annual Reviews / Reviews following concerns to ensure all voice work is captured
- Engaged with the Defining Children and Families Services for the future Programme to redefine our services to children and Families, focusing on recruitment and utilisation of carers
- Continued to develop our Mentoring Scheme for new and inexperienced carers.
- Increased the capacity of the Dedicated Placements Support Team to offer more advice to foster carers and children who have more complex needs.
- Increased our numbers of Independent Visitors to provide support to our children and young people
- Maintained excellent staff retention

The Fostering Service is led by Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and Virtual School, managed through a Service Manager for Retention and Recruitment with an Assistant Service Manager to support the Service. This role ensures that both recruitment and retention receive the same high-quality management oversight, development and to be inspirational and aspirational for the Fostering Service.

In September 2019 Leicestershire's Children and Family Service was inspected by Ofsted. Whilst the Fostering Service was not subject to its own inspection the feedback for the service was exceptional. The overall judgement for services for children in care, was Good.

At the time of reporting on our performance last year we as a country were just going into a “Lockdown” environment due to the raising pandemic of Covid19.. The service had to respond quickly to ensure we found different ways to recruit, assess and support our carers.

We responded quickly, embraced the new technology afforded to us at this time and ensured we remained “present” for our carers. On the day England went into lockdown we introduced a private Facebook account for our carers. This ensured that we were able to get key messages out to our carers as the guidance was updated. This has remained an important tool to date, updating carers on Government and local guidance.

We have also used the private group to share good news stories, support, and photos / videos of our children’s artwork, cookery skills and artistic talents.

We held online support groups and a very successful “Leicestershire has Talent” where our young people entered a virtual Talent Show.

We are very proud that our placement stability remained high during this year, across our Children in Care Placement Stability has reduced to 3% (low is good).

Since our last report we have seen several older young people entering care and a growth in requests for placements larger sibling groups coming into care. This is not without its challenges when matching against carer availability, Terms of Approval, and carers skill sets. This has been a particular challenge when many carers ‘paused’ taking new placements due to vulnerability within their own homes or networks. They have taken the time to review their personal circumstances. Some who we anticipated would retire have now done so, and others decided to move on from fostering to care for family members.

We have also seen a rise in Court Ordered Placements (38.6) where the Kinship Team have identified that they would not meet Fostering Regulations and have worked closely with the fieldwork social work team to ensure subsequent care planning decisions have been informed and in the children’s best interest. We are pleased to have recruited to the Kinship Team Manager post, which has inherent pressures and challenges. We look forward to developing this role moving forward.

The Annual Report will provide feedback from the whole service, highlighting how we progressed our plans from last year and new targets for the forthcoming year.

This report should be read alongside the Market Position Sufficiency Statement for 2021-23 which provides the basis for commissioning decisions, setting out our intentions for improving life changes of children and young people in care. The statement sets out the current position and our objectives for placements for children and young people from within our internal services and those we source from the external market.

Other key documents include:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2017 – 2021
- Care Placement Strategy 2018-2021
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to excellence 2021
- Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2017 – 2021
- Permanence and Adoption Strategy 2017 – 2021
- Ofsted report 2019 (Inspection of children’s social care services)

Principles

LCC Children and Family Service works to a key set of principles that underpin our work with children and families. These are :

- Where it is right to do so, all children will be supported to remain within the care of their families or communities with connected carers
- Where this is not possible, early permanence with adoptive families or foster carers will be sought to promote a sense of emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging
- Children and young people's voice will be respected, and we will actively seek their engagement in decisions about their needs, their future, and the provision of services
- High quality placements and provision of support to parents and carers to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Where possible and right to do so, children and young people should be placed within Leicestershire with Leicestershire carers to maintain a sense of connectivity with their community.
- Parents and carers are an integral part of the service, to be involved in planning for the child and service provision to ensure that the very best care is provided to our children and young people.

Objectives

- Create sufficient placement options to enable choice of placement for looked after children in Leicestershire County Council, which will meet needs, and support good outcomes, now and into the future.
- Meet the recruitment targets agreed on an annual basis
- Contribute to the overall Council savings through sufficiency and utilisation of carers and reducing the amount of time children spend in care.
- For all Children and Family Services employees to recognise their contribution to supporting the recruitment and retention of foster carers, and recognising their value as part of the professional service delivered to our children in care

The Service reports directly to the Service Manager who attends performance improvement meetings chaired by the Head of Service and Assistant Director.

Our Identified Tasks from 2019/20 Annual Report

- Continue to use all forms of media in our intensive recruitment campaign to achieve:
 - 25 mainstream carers (net 14)
 - 2 Specialist carers
 - 3 Supported lodgings Placements (later increased to 5)
- We will continue to look for further opportunities to develop our carers and introduce the therapeutic model to all our carers
- Introduce forums to support our carers through Covid 19 pandemic.
- Where it is safe and right to do, we will continue to visit our carers face to face.
- Develop our Supported Lodgings Scheme, we recognise the wealth it brings to the service for our older children who continue to need support when coming into care at an older age
- Develop our Staying Put processes to ensure we capture all arrangements and provide the necessary support
- Welcome the UASC foster scheme "A Place to Call Home", as the hosting authority and look forward to the scheme going live in July.
- Increase our Reviewing Officer capacity as a net growth of foster carers continues.
- Continue to develop our Signs of Safety Approach to all areas of our service, including reflective supervision and embedding PODS.

What we did to achieve this

- Nationally there was a significant decline as potential carers stopped making contact, and this was the initial experience of Leicestershire. We still had carers progressing through the recruitment and assessment progress. Due to lockdown we had to change our method of assessing in line with Government revised regulations and for some carers there was a delay as we / carers responded to pandemic meaning their panel dates were delayed. Subsequently that meant their approval moved into the next reporting period.
- We approved 12 foster carers (including 5 IFA carer transfers who had made an active choice to be part of our fostering family, recognising the level of support our carers receive, 1 specialist carer and 12 supported lodgings carers, giving us 25 new foster placements.
- In terms of foster carers leaving the service we lost (10) mainstream foster families. This was due to having the time to reflect on their personal circumstance. None expressed dissatisfaction with the service and support they had received.
- We engaged with Leicestershire County Council's transformation programmes - Defining Children and Families Services for the Future (DCFSF) and Children's Innovation Partnership (CIP), with a particular focus for the Fostering Service on placing more Leicestershire children with Leicestershire's carers and utilising internal capacity, reviewing and removing any barriers that prevent increasing internal capacity.
- For supported lodgings we had a target of 5 approvals. We exceeded this target, approving 12. We had seen some excellent outcomes for our young people within the scheme.
- 1 supported lodgings carer retired.
- We presented our request to increase our reviewing capacity due to growth of carers and gained agreement to increase the post to full time. We appointed a second part time reviewing officer in November 2020.
- We went live with our UASC Foster Scheme hosted by Leicestershire on behalf of the region in September 20.
- We reviewed our Staying Put Process and now hold this within the Supported Lodgings Team to ensure that all Staying Put Providers receive the right support at the right time and that there is additional oversight to support Personal Advisors (PA) who are the young people's allocated key worker.
- We transferred much of our recruitment activity to online, using the forums of Facebook and the dedicated Leicestershire County Council website for fostering.
- We retained our dedicated recruitment team to respond to any requests for information or enquiries.
- We conducted our initial visits as virtual visits during lockdown, using WhatsApp videos to meet the carers and discuss their motivation to foster and see their properties remotely.
- We used the revised Assessment Guidance from Coram BAAF / Revised Fostering Regulations to assess our carers and returned to face-to-face assessment based on risk assessments.
- We implemented Panel Practise Standards to ensure consistency for all cases coming through to panel and improve the experience of panel and attendees.
- We used the revised regulations to implement Virtual Fostering Panels from April 20.
- In addition to our private Facebook account we also developed mentoring opportunities, held our locality support groups virtually and other opportunities to engage and support carers.
- All of our foster homes and the children placed were RAG rated in a risk assessment. Placements with worries regarding stability during the pandemic received both supervising social worker and support from the Dedicated Placement Support Team. PPE was used in line with government recommendations and local advice from Public Health.



- Despite some initial delay due to the pandemic our “Place to Call Home” project for unaccompanied asylum seeking children went live in September 20. The project is still active.
- Our Dedicated Placement Support Team, our service’s unique selling point, has continued to develop and has continued to support placement. The team has supported 74 placements during the year, stabilising care, stepping 5 young people into family-based care or into independence from residential placements, and returning 4 young people to their birth families
- We have also started to develop our Review Practise Standards by asking partners for feedback and by capture the voice of both birth and foster children.

Summary of Recruitment:

Recruitment Targets for 2020/21:

25 Mainstream Foster Carers	2 Specialist Carer	5 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 32)
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Recruitment Activity for 2020/21:

12 Mainstream Foster Carers	1 Specialist Carer	12 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 23)
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30 Kinship Carers

ROLES WITH THE FOSTERING SERVICE

Our Fostering Service consists of six separate teams

- Recruitment – fostering and adoption
- Assessments – Fostering
- Team around the Child
- Kinship
- Dedicated Placements Support – Placement Stability, Independent Visitors, Supported Lodgings Scheme, Staying Put, Specialist Foster Carers
- UASC Carers recruitment and Assessment Team

THE FRONT DOOR OF OUR SERVICE – THE RECRUITMENT TEAM

Welcoming – Informative - Efficient

The Recruitment Team are the ‘Front door’ to our Service and as such, play a vital part in attracting, filtering and processing enquiries from members of the public who are interested in becoming foster carers and adopters with Leicestershire County Council.

The team provides a dedicated resource which manages all forms of contact, including contact by telephone, mail, website, text message enquiries. Regular public events are held to welcome members of the public to find out more about fostering and adoption which are also the responsibility of this team.

The team manager works closely with colleagues in the Communications Team to create appropriate and cost-effective recruitment campaigns, based on projected Service requirements, using various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. They also utilise more traditional methods of posters, postcards, and banners as well as Radio campaigns and adverts within Leicestershire publications and local business staff intranets.

It is vital that the service we provide is Welcoming and friendly, swift and efficient, informative and honest as well as ensuring that every enquiry is dealt with in a fair and non-discriminatory manner, representative of the key values and behaviours of Leicestershire County Council.

The Recruitment Team consists of:

1 Team Manager
1 Recruitment Enquiry Co-Ordinator
1 Recruitment Support Co-Ordinator
2 Initial Assessment Workers plus 1 temporary worker for Kinship
1 Initial Assessment Worker (Casual)

Our digital strategy continues to support our recruitment having the flexibility to develop as our recruitment challenges change.

This approach includes:

- A largely digital marketing strategy
- A new website geared towards the customer needs and experience for prospective foster carers
- Surveys and “keep in touch” mechanisms via electronic communications, to provide excellent customer service, and manage feedback.
- Use of Egress Secure Workspace to share information about fostering, and about what to expect, at each stage of the journey, including access to forms and training information.
- Use of Egress Secure Workspace to upload documents, for safe and confidential access, storage, and visibility.
- Use of Egress Secure Workspace to read the Final Form F and confirm amendments and agreement.
- Use of Egress Secure Workspace to become part of the Fostering Community in Leicestershire County Council, with access to information, events, policies, procedures, and forms.
- Online Portal, after approval all our carers recordings can be sent and uploaded securely.
- Virtual memory box, we are very proud that our foster carers can upload all the child’s memories – photographs, school certificates, and videos.

We are proud members of:



We received 549 Requests for Information of which generated:

365 Fostering enquiries received & serviced of which:

We undertook 70 Initial visits in applicants' homes
53 applications progressed to Stage 1

Approvals:

13 assessments resulted in approval of fostering households. (Including 5 x IFA and 1 x OLA transfers)
12 Supported Lodgings providers:
1 Specialist Carer
11 Independent visitors

What have we done?

Outcomes:

The Recruitment team communicate with potential applicants at the earliest stage and gain sufficient information to consider whether or not to progress to assessment.

This is a cost-effective method of 'filtering' enquiries at the 'front door' of the Service. It means less delay for applicants, with clear, swift, consistent, and fair outcomes to their enquiry.

This allows us to increase time spent on enquiries with a higher likelihood of progressing further.

Improved value for money due to the costly filtering of high enquiry numbers carried out at the beginning of the process, making better use of the availability of assessment capacity of the service.

In 2020-21 we welcomed 5 x Independent Fostering Agency carers and 1 x Other Local Authority Carer to Leicestershire – all chose to transfer to us via the foster Carers Transfer protocol.

Improved 'filtering' of applicants at the enquiry and initial visit stage has added to the reduction of applicants leaving the assessment process.

Our Fostering Events 2020-21

Our physical 'Find Out About Fostering' events were paused from February 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. In January 2021 we were able to convert to online events. As a service we felt it important to be able to offer any potential carers the opportunity to find out more. After recommencing our events in January 2021, we held a further four, with a total of 41 people attending. The events are held every 3 weeks virtually at 6:30pm in the evening and are advertised to the public. Our events are relaxed and informal and provide an opportunity for people to come along to find out about fostering and hear from some of our foster carers, what it's really like to be a foster carer. Our current foster carers also engage in our information evenings to speak about their own experiences. We publicise our events through our social media and contact individuals who have enquired with a text message reminder.

The event provides an opportunity for us to showcase the benefits of fostering with Leicestershire County Council, allowing us to focus on our 'unique selling points' for example, 'Leicestershire people caring for Leicester's children & young people' which emphasises that opposed to fostering for an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) who may be placing children from all over the country with their carers, fostering with us means you will look after Leicestershire children – meaning local school and contact visits – not in different counties.

Our Find out about Fostering events – have gone Virtual!





we
LOVE
our
**FOSTER
CARERS**

Thank you, Cards & Hampers:

In June we wanted to thank our carers for all the support and care they have offered to our babies, children, and young people during the first lockdown. We wanted them to know that they were appreciated and valued. 'Thank you' cards and 'Thank you Hampers' which were delivered to all our carers households where our children and young people were placed.

We ensured that our hampers included ingredients to suit dietary requirements (including Gluten Free/Vegetarian) overall, they provided an activity to encourage carers to spend time baking and cooking with our children. They also included colouring books for the family to encourage relaxation and mindfulness. We received many images of our children baking and enjoying the contents as well as an overwhelming number of thank you messages to the service for the 'thoughtfulness of the hamper' during what was a very stressful time for many of our carers.



Leicestershire
**Fostering
& Adoption**

In July 2020, we created a new brochure 'Welcome to our family' which explains the benefits of fostering with Leicestershire. This was part of our campaign to encourage people who were already foster carers to join us.

We focused on ensuring that our foster carers felt supported throughout the stressful times of the Covid-19 Pandemic but also shared this with potential carers to showcase Leicestershire's culture of caring for our carers.

We created fresh images that we shared on our social media platforms and added these to email signatures for all staff correspondence.

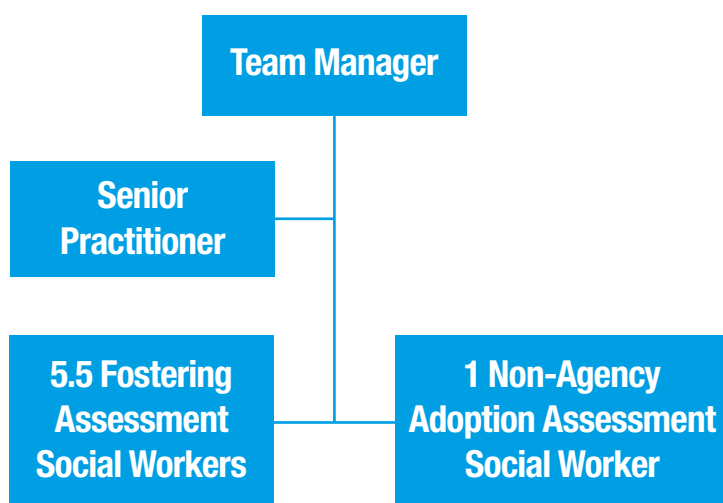


THE JOURNEY HAS STARTED - THE ASSESSMENT TEAM

Our Fostering Assessment Team works very closely with the Recruitment Team to bring the right carers through at the right time to be assessed. The Assessment Team are responsible for:

- Mainstream Fostering Assessments
- Private Fostering Assessments
- Non-Agency Adoption Assessments
- Leading on the delivery of Skills to Foster Training
- Jointly overseeing the Mentoring Scheme (for new Foster Carers)

Assessment Team Staff Structure:



Assessment Team Update:

The Assessment Team have been influenced by some key trends and events in 2020-21. It perhaps goes without saying that the Covid pandemic has had a significant impact upon the way the teamwork, and they have worked hard with each other and with their colleagues in other areas of the service, to overcome the challenges that such an extraordinary situation has caused. The team have also coped well with the fluctuations which we have seen in recruitment and the impact of this on assessments and approvals, which is touched upon again below, and they have also engaged enthusiastically with the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future Programme.

The Assessment Team experienced a quiet period in late spring and early summer (2020) in terms of mainstream assessments coming through the pipeline from the Recruitment Team, which ultimately impacted upon our ability to meet approval targets for the financial year. This quieter period coincided with the team running with three vacancies and a worker off on long term sick leave, and the other workers – whilst they were not as busy with mainstream assessments - supported the Connected Team and completed some assessments for them. The team has seen the introduction of 3 new members of staff over the course of the last financial year.

Mainstream assessment activity picked up from August 2020, which included a significant uplift in recruitment from other fostering agencies – this being one of the success stories for the Recruitment and Assessment Teams for 2020-21. The team successfully brought 5 of the 6 transferring carers to LCC Fostering Panel before Christmas 2020.

Impact of Covid

The Assessment Team have adapted to the new circumstances caused by the Covid pandemic. They have adopted a 'hybrid' way of undertaking assessment sessions, which has involved a mixture of virtual and face to face work. They have been tenacious in their approach to finding solutions and ways to continue to undertake robust assessments, whilst also ensuring that their activities fall in line with government and local guidance around public health and how to visit in a way that minimises risk of transmission of the virus (e.g. use of PPE and social distancing etc). We have also seen an impact of Covid in terms of delayed assessments, for example, applicants who want to go on hold or withdraw all together, because of things changing in their lives because of the pandemic.

The Assessment Team – along with colleagues within the Team Around the Child (TAC) and Dedicated Placement Support Team (DPST)

– worked together to adjust their training material to ensure that during lockdown, a Skills to Foster training experience could still be provided to applicants, virtually. This involved them learning new ways of working and supporting each other, and they been successful in providing training to all our applicants.

Overall, the Assessment Team would say that the pandemic has brought them closer together. They meet up virtually more often than they would have done before the pandemic and find their weekly catch ups and important time to share with each other – they know each other far better than they did before, perhaps because home working has allowed personal glimpses into each other's lives.

The team think that whilst the pandemic has not been without its challenges, that they have learned about different ways of working and are confident that many of the skills they have learned will be useful moving forward into a hybrid, flexible way of working.



Mentoring Scheme

The mentoring scheme continues to be well organised, thanks to the joint work undertaken on this scheme between the Senior Practitioner from the Assessment Team and the TAC Team.

At the time of this Fostering Annual Report, the Mentoring Scheme's Annual Report 2020-21 is in its first draft. The headlines from this report, however, are that:

- All new applicants coming through the assessment process were offered a mentor.
- 100% of those applicants who want a mentor, have been matched to experienced carers.
- A recruitment drive is required in 2021-22 to encourage more experienced carers to take on a mentoring role.

Our aims for the next year:

- Meet our recruitment target of 35 carers, an ambitious target to meet the sufficiency of our children needing fostering placements
- Reduce our carers in the assessment process to panel to 16 weeks

SUPPORTING LEICESTERSHIRE'S CARER – TEAM AROUND THE CHILD

In Leicestershire, statutory support is delivered through the Team Around the Child (TAC).

The team consists of:
Team Manager
1 x FTE Senior Practitioners (2x 0.5 workers)
7x Social Workers
1x Support Worker

We are very proud of our Team Around the Child Team, working with our foster carers to achieve the best for the children they care for.

Areas of development during 2020/21.

- Foster Carer Forum – In 2019/20 we have continued to develop our work with the Foster Carers Forum. This has been useful to discuss policies and practice with foster carers to gain carers views and opinions. We hope to include Kinship carers in this forum in the future.
- Mentoring Scheme- A joint initiative across two teams to ensure we provide our carers the right support at the right time during their journey to become a foster carer. This has been invaluable during this time as other modes of support have been initially suspended
- We quickly risk assessed all of our fostering households and RAG rated them to ensure the carers that needed support continued to receive this in person through socially distanced contact and the use of PPE, whilst other foster homes were supported virtually and through doorstep visits.
- We developed our Facebook support as a live means of contact and ensured all our carers received regular updates via our learning hub / portal.
- Our Foster Carers Forum went virtual
- Foster Carer Handbook – Our foster carer handbook was updated.
- Foster Carer Training Programme. – Our training programme for “In Person” events were suspended, but we were quickly able to transfer over to virtual. We recognise that for some carers this move proved more difficult than others. With the support of the training support team we could talk through carers how to access forums, and virtual events
- The introduction of PODS following the Signs of Safety format, to discuss cases including a broader range of professionals has been introduced.
- Our Team Manager from TAC was appointed to the Assistant Service Post.

We are pleased to report that our retention of staff has remained high, and when posts have become available, we have high interest to join the service.

What we Plan for 2021/22

- We are excited about developing all areas of practice, and returning to the practices and support we know our carers appreciated and had such a positive impact on our foster families
- Due to Covid restrictions we were unable to hold our annual Carer Recognition Event. Plans are now in progress to hold this in Autumn 2021.
- We will also be planning our Family Events for Summer, our Sons and Daughters Events and Family Picnics. We know these events provide good ways for foster carers to build networks and feel supported and recognised for the care they provide.
- We intend to continue to offer a number of training options both virtual and face to face. This will support those carers that work full time and kinship carers who live outside Leicestershire.
- This year we will be introducing a membership for all carers to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. This will offer additional emotional and practical support through listening circles, one to one consultation, trigger groups / webinars and training.
- Some carers tell us they are passionate about increasing their skills and understanding to meet the needs of complex children and young people. Whilst we have a development plan for the first three years of fostering, we intend to look carefully at professional progression beyond this and introduce an Annual Development Plan for our carers. We will be working collaboratively within the Foster Carers Forum to consider how to progress this.
- We will be introducing Kinship Locality Groups and we will invite representation to join the Foster Carers Forum
- As we have a number of kinship carers who live outside of Leicestershire, we will be taking advantage of the growing opportunities for virtual communication and we will be holding monthly virtual support group chats for kinship carers who are unable to meet in person.
- We continually hope to improve practice and an area of focus this year is the quality of the Carers Support Plans.
- Continue to develop our joint working with the Permanence Team for children requiring permanence through long term fostering
- Develop our in house duty system through working with DCFS program , by having a dedicated team who manage all in house placements.



Retention Activities

Our engagement with our carers has been very different than we would usually have, Covid gave us new challenges but also new opportunities, and certainly new opportunities for our foster families to show off their talents. We organised many online activities and celebrated many achievements of both our foster and birth children. We also used this time to capture events to be stored on the children's virtual memory boxes.

- As we commenced with doorstep visits our children would share with us pictures and prized craft work.
- Leicestershire has got talent
- Drawing competition
- Christmas card competition, the 4 winners then had their designs used as cards for the council.
- Newsletter sent every month

Engagement with carers is essential to communication – knowing what our carers think and what is important to them. We have increased our Locality Support Groups and we have a Carers forum which offers opportunities for discussion and feedback as well as a quarterly Information evening. Team Manager and Senior Practitioners stay in regular contact with Locality Support group leaders and hold quarterly virtual meetings, these will progress to face to face when restrictions lift.

The Kinship Team (Connected Carers)

The Kinship Assessment Team consists of:
1 Team Manager
1 Senior Practitioner
4 Assessing social workers
1 Family Intervention Worker – SGO specific role
2 Assessment vacancies

The Kinship team has dual roles, to assess and support kinship carers throughout their journey within Kinship. We have developed the Service to include the completion of SGO assessments where determined within the care planning, actively supporting the carers through this journey, working closely with locality partners – this work will progress further across 2021/2022 with the recruitment of the Family Intervention Worker who will support and enable carers pre and post order for a period of 6 months – following the research and learning from the recent Agenda for Change in respect to Kinship and significantly Special Guardians

Alongside the enhanced support package for our SGO carers, we have expanded the access to training and support for all carers during the assessment period, with a We are Family skills over-view training day, followed with access to specific learning and development training, this not only strengthens the assessment with carers, but most importantly ensure that carers and children do not feel vulnerable in dealing with unfamiliar situations as a result of caring for family and friends.

Covid has presented some different challenges within how assessments are completed – and whilst we have adapted practices to ensure safety for all, our families have remained at the heart of our work, with PPE being utilised and creative use of spaces to ensure we remain physically able to assess our carers, but also to provide them with the support and connection with the service.

Friends and Families Kinship Care is unique to local Authorities – within Leicestershire we have experienced a significant growth in our Kinship Carers year on Year – we currently have 87 approved and active kinship carers, 63 approvals throughout the year, which is an increase of 30, over the period of 1st April 20 – 31st March 21.

From December 2020 we have entered into a joint working arrangement with the Locality Teams to undertake (where-ever possible) joint initial viability assessments and the provision of advice and guidance in assessments where we have limited capacity. As we continue with the development of our kinship offer, we recognise the benefits this will bring to children and families and aim to have secured agreement for additional resourcing in 2021 to enable the Kinship Team to jointly complete all viability assessments.

The strengths of this provision include:

- Kinship Team is alerted to the possibility of placements at the earliest opportunity
- Support is provided to the locality to understand the processes involved
- Support is provided at the Family Group Meetings to ensure prospective carers understand the role of a foster carer and what will be expected of them and to allow for consistency consideration of Fostering Regulations in all assessments
- Robust and comprehensive Initial Viability Assessments are undertaken, strengthening the assessment processes and ensuring informed decisions are made early.

Our plans for 2021/22 include:

- Further development of our assessments using feedback from our carers, panel and ADM to improve the quality of assessments using a strengths-based model and identifying risks and vulnerabilities and how we can mitigate them
- The development of the role of Family Intervention Worker to support carers with contact through advice.
- Embedding of the joint Initial Viability Assessment model
- Completion of Declaration of Compliance completed for every assessment to ensure consistency to panel for both Form F and Form C's.
- Training in localities for the use of kinship placements and the different regulatory requirements.

The Dedicated Placement Support Team

Leicestershire's Dedicated Placement Support Team has been in operation since 2016. This team can support placements to promote stability, support our specialist One2One, Pathway carers and young people in Staying Put and Supported lodgings arrangements. The team is unique to Leicestershire in that the service can provide the right support at the right time to maintain placement stability.

The Support workers work in a holistic way with the household, recognising the importance of giving everyone a voice, and helping them to reach their own resolutions and outcomes. As each worker carries their own caseload, they can be very creative in their engagement offering support in the evenings and weekends as the case requires. They will also offer direct work to young people and be an additional listening ear to carers to support them when times become difficult. In our 2019 Inspection Ofsted recognise this as one of Leicestershire's "Unique Selling Points".



The team consists of:

The team consists of:
Team Manager
Supervising Social Workers (3)
Support Workers (5)
Independent Visitor Co-Ordinator

The team is responsible for:

- Supporting and promoting placement stability for young people living in our specialist foster care provision who most challenging behaviours
- Supporting our mainstream foster carers and young people stepping down from residential placements to return to family-based carer. This includes working intensively with families and young people and other professionals.
- Preparing return home trajectories and offering support at evenings and weekends to maintain the arrangement.
- Recruit and support Supported Lodgings Carers
- Supporting Staying Put Arrangements where there are no other foster children in placement. This includes both internal and external carers.
- Working with carers to understand the therapeutic needs using Thera play techniques
- Providing activity events to engage with both carers, foster children, and birth children.

Developments on Plans for 2020/21

- We worked with our Practise Excellence Team to use scaling and Safety Goals within our referral paperwork
- We had a recruitment target of 5 SLP, we approved 12
- We recruited one further Pathway carer and re-approved our current Pathway carer as a couple

Placement Support

- Over the last year the team have worked with 63 families and/or carers
- We have supported 7 young people to return home
- We have supported 1 young person to move into independence
- We supported 16 households who were experiencing difficulties with children's emotional needs and behaviour. All of these placements settled, and the child remains with carers
- Two young people stepped down from high cost placements in a planned manner.

Supported Lodgings

- We have 32 carers offering 46 placements.
- We have 31 young people in placement,
- We have 4 potential carers in assessment
- Ensured our supported lodgings providers have access to all training and support forums including portal, online training, and support groups

Staying Put

- We have 40 young people over 18 remaining in either their previous foster placement or supported lodgings
- Of these 22 are in Stay Put arrangements with their foster carers and 18 remained with their Supported Lodgings provider.

Specialist Foster Carers

- We have currently 5 carers under this scheme
- We have 6 young people in placement with a potential for another placement, child matched.

Throughout the pandemic the team have continued to work face to face with both carers and young people, this has helped to maintain placements and grow our resources.

We have over the last year we have gained 11 Supported Lodgings providers (approved 12, 1 retired)and one specialist carer.

Feedback from both professional and carers remain high in term of the work the team undertake.

Our Plans for 2020/21

- We have seen the evidence of the impact the team has on placement stability and we look forward to developing the design of the team moving forward, building capacity to work with more families at the time it is needed.
- To increase our management oversight by building into the staffing structure a senior practitioner role to oversee placement stability and supported lodgings.
- To work with Department of Education with the consultation regarding unregulated placements for 16-year olds
- To develop a tracking system and governance structure for our young people in residential care identifying the right time to manage step downs into family-based care
- Targeted recruitment of specialist carers within caring professions – Police, Probation, Teaching and Health Care
- Mentoring of supported lodging providers by older LAC to support potential young people by offering / guidance / befriending
- Implementing preparation training for supported lodgings providers
- Developing POD working for the team to discuss more complex cases
- Develop our relationship with the ART service ran by Barnardo's in partnership with Leicestershire so that we can make best use of our support services (ensuring that children and carers receive the right service at the right time)
- Review our Practise Standards for the support lodging providers, placement support and specialist carers
- Review LCC Staying Put Policy.

Retention Overview:

Last year we predicted a loss of 20 carers, we lost 14. The pandemic has led to some of those considering retirement or resignation due to a change of circumstances to make the decision.

During Covid we saw several carers going on hold due to health concerns. As we rolled out the vaccine to our fosters carers in January as essential workers, they felt more confidence and some have started returning to fostering. For others they confirmed their decision to stop being foster carers.

Fees and Allowances

In Leicestershire we review our fee structure annually in line with national fee structure. Any increase is implemented across allowances and fees.

Our Training

At the point of assessment our foster carers receive support and training to equip them for their tasks ahead.

In line with our “We are Family” approach, we use the skills of all our teams to ensure we prepare our foster carers through our bespoke ‘Skills to Foster’ preparation training. The Skills to Foster provides a safe space for carers to discuss any worries and seek reassurance from the service.

We have an online presence whereby video clips, online discussions and presentations which are presented to carers to give guidance and support and the tools to be able to commence their fostering journey. Our experienced foster carers and professionals also share their own experiences and support foster carers into their fostering role and beyond.

The training we provide is valued and important part of the support, preparation, and development of foster carers, including specialist foster carers. 90% of our Foster Carers identified that they were:

- Happy with training provided
- Felt training was relevant
- Training was appropriate and useful
- Supported them in their fostering roles

Leicestershire
Fostering
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FOSTER CARERS TRAINING PROGRAMME 2020/2021



Programme runs from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021

We have developed our training programme to ensure we grow the foster carers’ knowledge, skills, and development. The feedback we receive develops our training programme for the future. This year we have developed our virtual forums using Teams, Webinars and access to awards and certifications for courses with 3rd party providers such as colleges and Charities.

The service has continued to develop our eLearning through the Training Hub. This means that carers can complete training in a more flexible manner.

In addition to a set of courses offered, the Training Hub also has bi-monthly training themes where carers in their own time can develop their skills and knowledge in key areas – child development, self-harm and caring for traumatised children to name a few. We also welcome Special Guardians onto some of our training platforms.

We have a dedicated Training and Development Officer for the service supports and provides training for all our carers both mainstream, kinship and specialist carers as well as supported lodgings providers, independent visitors, and special guardians.

As part of our training offer, we have:

- 483 e-learning courses available of which:
 - 2 pre-selected specialist online courses every 8 weeks
 - 200 preventative and life skill courses for our young people in care
 - 150 wellbeing online courses to support an individual's mental health
 - Access to 800 additional specialist online courses
- Training Support and Development Standards– paper version or online assessment is available which can be completed on a tablet or mobile phone.
- Level 3 Diploma for the new Children and Young Peoples Welfare undertaken at the carer’s home
- NHS Diana training for short breaks carers



Feedback/ Evaluations on training

Evaluations are completed at the end of every training session by carers and reviewed by the course trainer as well as the Training Officer. Feedback collated from carers are noted and actioned to evaluate our current and future training courses.

We have designed a new feedback form to scale the learner's progress and knowledge from the beginning of the training to the end of the training session.

Trainers are also invited to provide feedback to gauge their overall experience with our venues /carers etc. which are also actioned and reported where necessary.

The Ofsted Inspection of Leicestershire's Children and Families Service recognised that our carers were well trained and well supported.

Our Plans for the forthcoming year

- Embed our therapeutic parenting membership offer to all our foster carers
- Develop more online opportunities for carers to learn including online forums
- Involve our experienced carers in the delivery of training
- Develop and introduce Information Technology workshops for carers
- Re-introduce face to face training safely

THE INDEPENDENT VISITOR SCHEME

The scheme supports children in care up to the age of 21. The scheme is open to all looked after children who are identified as benefiting from the service, the scheme provides positive friendships and role models for our young people placed in foster care and residential care, with many friendships being maintained after young people have moved on from care and are living independently. The scheme assists with placement support and stability for both mainstream and connected carers.

What our children say:

“ She is consistent in my life amongst lots of other changes. ”

“ Its good to see someone else who I don't live with, or who isn't a social worker or teacher. ”

What our Independent Visitors say:

“ I love making her laugh and she makes me laugh too! ”

“ It feels good to make a difference to someone else ”

What they both say:

“ We have fun days out and try new things. ”

During 2020/21 we have reviewed our Independent Visitors Scheme.

Between April 20 and March 21, the scheme has approved a further 11 independent visitors taking the total to 46. However, 5 Visitors ceased being visitors in this period, 4 to become foster carers and 1 as their matched young person no longer wished to have an independent visitor and due to personal circumstances, the independent visitor did not want to be matched with another young person. The service currently has 41 approved independent visitors with a target of 50 over the next year.

There are 10 potential applicants awaiting assessment. There has been a delay in starting these assessments due to restrictions in place due to Covid 19. Recruitment of male independent visitors continues to be a challenge nationally, but the service is working hard to try to increase numbers, by both targeted and general promotion of the scheme. During this period, we have recruited 5 males, some of our current male independent visitors have agreed to take on an additional child to support the waiting list of young males needing to be matched.

Between April 20 and March 21, the scheme has matched 8 young people. There are currently 31 young people matched to an independent visitor. There are currently 16 children waiting, of those, a match has been identified for 9 young people, matching visits are in the process of being arranged.

During 2020/2021 the scheme has had to adapt to the pandemic with restrictions placed on face to face visiting and network/group supervision. A WhatsApp group has been set up to share ideas and to keep connected IV's have engaged with the app and there has been positive feedback about its usefulness.

IV's have continued to support children/young people during lockdown through virtual contact. Some of the activities they have done are.

- Online Escape room
- Movie nights
- Post cards and letters
- Quizzes
- Talent shows
- Word searches and puzzles
- Parcels through the post
- Scrap books of trips out pre Covid restrictions to keep young people engaged for when visits resume
- Online Kid's comedy in Leicester
- Texts/Facetime

The scheme has linked young people and independent visitors into events run by the National IV Network

- Workshops on Frog Life & Reptiles. This workshop was for children aged 8 – 12
- Halloween Competition
- Animation production – 1 young person from Leicestershire is enrolled on this project

All newly approved independent visitors are required to complete, prior to matching, LCC 40-minute online course – Essential awareness in safeguarding for children and adults, and LCC 1 – day Essential awareness in safeguarding for children and adults within 6 months of starting the role, alongside additional training through LCC fostering service. Independent visitors are invited to events run by the fostering service and have been invited and attended the yearly celebration event and have previously been part of/contributed to the national volunteer week.

The coordinator is promoting the scheme internally through attending team meetings and has started working alongside the children in care council to promote the scheme with children and young people. There is collaborative working with the fostering recruitment team to generate enquiries and to promote the scheme through social media advertising.

The independent visitor coordinator is embedded in the regional network events for independent visitor coordinators and has been a representative on national working parties. The coordinator has access to national information and resources through the on-line Huddle platform, all of which informs local practice. The Coordinator has contributed to the national evaluation with case studies and an interview to ensure LCC's voice is heard and captured in their findings.

Developments for 2021/22

- Roll out a robust training plan
- Consider options for out of county placements, children with disabilities alongside national discussions/developments
- Recruit more male independent visitors, those who can support children with additional needs and out of county placements
- Continue to promote the scheme internally and externally
- Continue to review processes for feedback and review of the scheme
- Embed independent visitors in the fostering service community

DEFINING CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES FOR THE FUTURE PROGRAMME

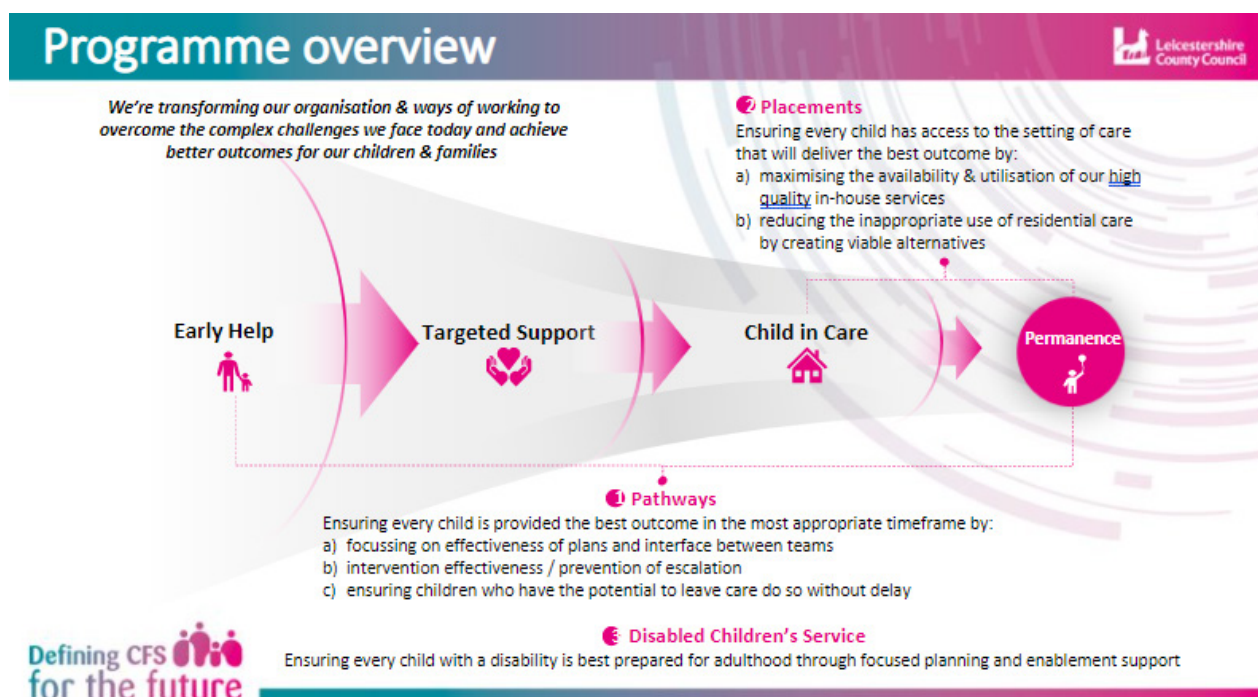
The Children and Family Services Department faces significant challenges due to increased growth and demand on its services, this is reflected in the growth approved within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) by full Council on 7 February 2020. To address this the Department commissioned a partner and the Transformation Unit to support us in exploring how we can position our Children and Family Wellbeing and Social Work services, to make sure that our budgets and resources are best placed to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families. The programme goal is to ensure assessed needs are met in a timely way that results in best outcomes for the child and helps to build family resilience, so preventing where possible, the escalation of children through the pathways to higher targeted services.

In August 2020, we started the diagnostic phase to explore and understand how we can progress this work. This included working with staff at all levels to review practice, service provision and cases, to explore what we do well and what blocks development. Some front-line staff from partner agencies joined these sessions. The diagnostic proposed some improvements across three key areas:

1. Pathways - How we manage our cases and prevent children and families escalating in need and cases from drifting
2. Placements – developing both our internal and external placement capacity
3. Independence – ensuring early planning for adulthood and independence.

These opportunities are currently being explored and developed within the department with Children and Families staff leading future designs for ways of working. These new ways of working will explore how best to achieve the right outcomes for our children and families, trialling and testing changes, leading to optimising practice, process, and systems in three areas of work. The new ways of working may also include the need for the introduction of new skills, culture and structural change.

The final set of designs will be developed by August 2021.



REPORT FROM THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

The number of Foster Carer Reviews continues to grow year on year, during 2020/21 we undertook 202 reviews, an increase of 35 from the previous year reflecting the growth of kinship carers. As a result of this growing demand an additional part-time Reviewing Officer was recruited in November 2020.

The Pandemic saw the switch from face to face visits to 'virtual' reviews. Overall, this has worked well and ensured that the review process continued. Whilst the majority of reviews will revert to face to face visits, we recognise there are times when holding 'virtual' reviews are a necessity.

With Supervising Social Worker's (SSW) visits reduced to a minimum for much of the year, the challenge of gaining the independent 'voice of the child' became more difficult, particularly with younger children, to gain their views and experiences.

An audit of the 'voice of the child' was completed, covering the period October 2019 to September 2020, the outcome of which confirmed:

- The impact of covid-19 has had a significant impact on SSW's being able to capture the children's voice.
- The overwhelming majority of children/young people rate their placement highly and this is true of both kinship and mainstream placements.
- A bedroom that is personalised and decorated to a child/young person's taste, where they feel comfortable and safe is highly regarded and will support the child's sense of belonging and sense of worth.
- Children's views of respite and out of hours placements are rarely gained.

As a result of this feedback the 'Your voice, Your Choice' booklets and 'Questions for Children/Young People that Foster' have been adapted so children and young people can complete these electronically. SSW have also become more creative in gaining children's views.

We continue to see an increase in feedback from Independent Reviewing Officers and Children's Social Worker, which helps provide a clearer picture of the lived experience of the child and a foster carer's strengths and vulnerabilities. Overall ensuring a more robust review process.

Many foster carers have struggled to fulfil the training requirements during the pandemic, mainly due to juggling responsibilities of caring, home schooling and seeing the switch from face to face training to online learning. It is hoped improvements will be seen in the forthcoming year as we adjust to the new 'normal.'

This has been a difficult year for many carers in terms of support, as they have understandably missed face to face visits by their SSW. This has been particularly difficult for carers who are newly approved or who have had changes in SSW. Building supportive working relationships 'virtually' is not easy. Be that as it may, carers generally feel the service values them as carers and they feel supported, they appreciate the support from the TAC team Manager and the availability of the Service Manager.

Issues with overpayments and delays in payments continue to be an issue particularly with foster carers who provide respite or emergency placements.

For some kinship carers, understanding their changing role from being a family member to foster carer and the expectations placed on them is hard. With the move of those carers to the Team Around the Child (fostering supervising social worker team for mainstream carers) there is more consistency and a gradual shift in understanding and overall kinship carers are meeting or working towards meeting the requirements.

Plans for 2021/22

- Ensure all reviews have feedback from all professionals to complete the feedback for the carers
- Gain feedback from children and young people who have experienced a placement breakdown.
- Gain feedback from children and young people who have been in respite care and/or Emergency Placements.
- Undertake annual audit on Voice Work
- Feedback findings / feedback via monthly managers meeting
- Attend quarterly Panel Business Meetings to identify themes, reflections and learning for the service.

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTER PANEL CHAIR REPORT

This report refers to the functioning of Leicestershire County Council Fostering panel for the year 2019/2020. The Fostering panel is constituted under the Fostering Standards Regulations (England) 2011.

There are four Fostering teams that present work to the panel.

1. PANEL FUNCTIONING

It has been a challenging year for panel adapting to virtual meetings during the pandemic. Whilst members are now used to running panels virtually its can still come with technical issues which can lead / add to delays. The panel now presents via Teams which has addressed some of the technical difficulties we experienced via Skype.

The main worry for panel is the impact virtual panels can have on applicants, some who may have limited technical know-how, and can find the process distant and unsupportive. We address this by reassuring applicants and ensuring there are regular breaks.

Panel members receive the paperwork at least five working days in advance to enable them to read the paperwork and prepare for the discussion. This is seen by the questions asked and the general discussions that are had. Panel members have a good understanding of their role and remit, especially as it relates to panels Quality Assurance role. Panel members always open to developing their knowledge base and are keen to understand legislative and regulatory changes.

Panel members. All where that they need to declare any conflicts of interest where professional interest is declared this is recorded in the minutes, on the rare occasion that there is a personal conflict-of-interest panel members notify myself, the Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator in advance to ensure that the panel member is not sitting for the said item or that panel.

Panel: frequency

- On average the panel sits three times month. During the year 20/21, there have been 24, main panels and 10 extra panels. The need for extra panels during this year has been largely due to the increase in the number of connected persons assessments and court demand. All the extra panels have been chaired by the two vice chairs.

Membership

- The agency has a Central List of panel members, in accordance with Fostering Regulations, Guidance 2011. There has been a consistent panel membership for several years. We are looking for additional Social work representatives and ensuring that panel is inclusive and supporting of Equality and Diversity.
- The Panel Advisor role from the agency has been covered by a secondment of the Foster Independent Reviewing Officer on a temporary secondment which finished in January 2021. Due to the frequency of panels the agency reviewed the post and agreed this would now be increased to a FTE. Whilst in the recruitment process the Agency appointed a consultant PA, for consistency this will remain in place to ensure a smooth handover to the permanent role who commences her role in May 2021.
- We will be recruiting a new Panel Chair as we have received notice of her resignation. We thank her for the support and knowledge she has brought to the role. We will recruit two new Chairs and four Vice chairs to meet capacity and to bring new knowledge and diversity to the panel

2. PANEL DEVELOPMENT

Development of Practise Standards

Reviews of Panel Members

All panel members have shared that they have enjoyed being on panel and that they have learnt a lot about the processes of panel and see that they and to take a valuable

New Panel members have offered suggestions for improving the induction process for future new panel members, specifically many have talked about the need for more than just an observation and then starting their first panel - suggestions include, highlighting what sort of questions and areas that they should be looking for in the paperwork in this respect we have introduced a mentoring scheme where panel members can be paired up with experienced members.

Both new and existing panel members have also contributed to ideas for the annual panel training.

Panel Training

Panel training took place on 5 November 2020 and external trainer was provided, and the feedback was very positive, ideas for future training include:

- Therapeutic parenting
- The UASC Foster Scheme “A Place to Call Home “

Business Meetings

We have held quarterly business meetings and they have been well attended by the agency and have been productive in developing thinking about how we can meet the competing demands of kinship and Form F assessments. Moving from face to face meetings to virtual has impacted upon attendance at times.

The agency uses Practise Standards as part of their processes, and we thought this would be beneficial for the panel process. The Practise Standards were developed over several months and panel, the Agency Decision Maker and the service have been consulted in the development. The Standards were launched in October 2020. They set clear outcomes to be achieved, what are the timeframes for this and the outcomes to be achieved. We have also identified further areas to ensure consistency across kinship and mainstream assessments. This work is ongoing as we still experience inconsistency in the quantity of work being presented and the lack of analysis to support recommendations.

Prior to the meeting the Panel Chair and that Panel Advisor will ask panel members if they have anything that they would like raised at these meetings for discussion. The discussions held at these meetings is then shared with the wider panel, it usually at the meeting following the business meetings to assist panel in their quality assurance/critical friend role.



3. TASK OF PANEL

Panel makes recommendations on whether to approve prospective carers or whether they continue to be suitable to be Foster carers; these recommendations go to the Agency Decision Maker who then either ratifies or rejects panel's recommendations, thereby making a decision. This qualifying determination allows applicants the right of appeal to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

The panel work includes:

- Applications for prospective Foster carers.
- Application for family and friends (Connected Persons) carers child specific.
- First Annual Reviews (Home Reviews) and other reviews, which discussed continual approve or extension of approvals or standards of care.
- De-registrations/terminations of carers.
- Regulation 24 extensions
- Quality Assurance

4. OVERVIEW OF WORK PRESENTED TO PANEL

i Foster care approvals (mainstream, some with multiple TOA)

Type	New Carers
Long- term	
Short - term	13
Parent and child	0
Respite	8
Specialist carers	3

Under the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, the fostering panel considers applications related to Family and Friends (Connected Persons) carers for specific children who are about to be placed with them or are ready placed with them. In many cases Connected Persons Are temporarily approved as Foster carers by the Agency Decision Maker, so that a child is immediately placed with them. This temporary approval last for up to 16 weeks and can be extended for a further 8 weeks upon presentation to the fostering panel, prior to the full assessment being carried out.

ii Family and Friends (Connected Persons)

Family and Friends	63
Connected Persons	0
Support carer for Family and Friends/ Connected Person	0

Considering the approvals of Connected Persons applications continue to provoke thought and discussions about whether due to the complexities of give and families the identified carers can meet the National Minimum Fostering Standards and the needs of the children given the inherent risks factors associated with birth family. Panel continually must weigh up the legal processes that are underway of these applications, including the local authorities care plan, which often can mean consideration being given to Special Guardianship Orders/applications.

iii Reviews

Annual Reviews

34 First annual Foster Carers Reviews have been presented to panel with all carers being viewed as suitable to carry on being carers. 21 Mainstream approvals and 13 Family Friends/Connected Persons.

Standard of Care

None this review period.

iv Terminations of approval Resignation

During the year 2020/21, 22 Foster / kinship carers have submitted their resignations. Reasons given are as follows;

Reason	Number
Retirement	1
Change of circumstances	14
Moving to Independent Fostering Agency	1
Moving to another Local Authority	0
Dissatisfaction with agency/Local Authority	0
Other	0

Deregistration

Reason	Number
Standard of care	0
No contact	0
Child/ren no longer placed with the Family and friends/Connected Person (change of care plan)	0
Unwilling to take placements/unavailable	6

5. COMPLAINTS

Reason	Number
Complaints received from applicants	0
Complaints received from social workers	0
Complaints received from managers	0
Complaints received from others	0

6. FEEDBACK TO PANEL

Observers

The pool of observers to panel generally include social work students, new staff members as part of their induction or staff members recently recruited to the fostering teams. The aim largely being to demystify the process, particularly for those who have a pending case to present to panel for the first time.

As well as senior managers usually the Agency Decision Maker, specifically to observe the Chair as part of the chair's annual review.

Panel Evaluation

The panel/authority has a process of asking, social workers, and applicants/Foster carers to complete a short feedback form of their experience of attending panel. The questions relate to whether they found the experience from invite through to attending panel satisfactory. All parties are asked to rate/grade their response. These responses are correlated and presented to panel either, after each panel or quarterly. Overall, there is no adverse comments about the experience.

7. OBJECTIVES FOR 2021/22

1. Ensure the Practise Standards are embedded into the panel process and owned by the panel and the agency.
2. Review Practise Standards at quarterly business
3. Look at cases presented to panel in terms of number and types to ensure the balance is right to help panel members remain focussed for the duration of panel. This will require additional panels to meet the capacity demands of the service.
4. The Panel Chair has served notice and the agency will progress to recruitment of two Panel Chair and a further 2 Vice Chairs to meet capacity needs moving forward.
5. Commencement of permanent Panel Advisor

Mohammed Patel

Independent Panel Vice Chair

STATEMENT BY THE AGENCY DECISION MAKER (ADM), HELEN GRONHAUG

The substantive arrangements to fulfil the function of Agency Decision Maker in Leicestershire are for a dedicated standalone post. This provides a level of independent oversight of final decisions for both fostering and adoption. The Agency Decision Maker role can also be undertaken by the Assistant Director for Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care as well as Head of Service for Safeguarding, Improvement and Quality Assurance.

Assessments for mainstream fostering approvals continue to be of a good standard. There was only 1 application that ADM required substantial further work by way of a second opinion. This was due to complexities of background information. There has been just 1 approval for the specialist Pathway Scheme. Such applications come through so infrequently, it is necessary to ensure the assessments have adequately explored the needs of children who are placed on these schemes as well as applicants' capacity and preparation for meeting their needs.

Reviews of mainstream foster carers show carers and children are largely well supported. Clearly Covid social care restrictions have impacted some carers' access to training, full completion of the supervisory role, such as health assessments and unannounced visits. There were no mainstream carers who were de-registered for practice issues in this reporting period.

In comparison to mainstream assessments, the pace and volume of activity around connected person's assessments are much greater. This is a complex area of fostering with family considerations and tight court time scales adding to the challenges. A kinship action plan has been devised in response to the themes identified from the service, Panel, and ADM. In turn this is interrelated with the Defining Children and Family Services work in terms of the Permanence Pathway and in understanding internal fostering capacity and performance management. The latter is promoting a dialogue to identify themes that cause delayed presentation to Panel and/ or determination by ADM. There are a small portion of connected fostering applications where they have been presented to Panel on a number of occasions. It is hoped that Practice Standards that strengthen joint working and pinpoint stages for information exchange and evaluation between assessing worker and child's social worker will reduce the occasions where disconnect is seen. The work of Defining Children and Family Services Permanence Pathway should ensure the most appropriate placement type is identified according to the needs of the children being placed- this may mean directing away from connected fostering arrangements to alternative orders, such as Special Guardianship Orders. This will require clear guidance for the kinship and locality teams in considering thresholds for meeting fostering standards or where alternative arrangements are more suited. It will be useful to harvest the longer term perspective and learning from the post support team for connected person's carers.

While Fostering Panel Practice Standards had been put in place on October 2020, there is a need for refresh and to ensure they are applied in practice. This will help ensure Panel receive a comprehensive and complete set of papers. Areas for improvement in terms of assessment include consideration of carer capacity against the length of time the child is likely to need the placement with future proofing and contingency planning; the likely challenges for applicants in managing family relations and any safeguarding issues; applicants' understanding of the fostering role; the evidence base and analysis of assessments with robust consideration of historical information. Importantly, support planning needs to be case specific and proactive to address any identified vulnerabilities for the child and the fostering household, recognising the fostering agency's duties to support the meeting of fostering standards.

The need to strengthen the quality assurance function provided by the manager was highlighted in the previous annual report. ADM advocated for routine evidence of team manager oversight through use of a compliance tool. This needs to be consistently embedded and would also benefit from a qualitative element to accompany verification of compliance with the required checks. It is hoped that this will lead to fewer Panel deferrals and requests for further information. The kinship action plan has identified methods for practitioner self and peer reflection along with team manager oversight. Regular meetings between the kinship team manager, and ADM provide opportunity for learning and discussion. The inclusion of the manager for connected persons post approval support further strengthen the learning loop as this means connected foster carers' practice post approval can be considered too. Panel Advisor role has been covered by a number of people in this period. The introduction of formal Panel Advice from Panel Advisor appears to offer a clear focus to Panel. With the recruitment of new Panel Chairs and Panel Advisor, bi-monthly meetings have been set up to discuss learning from Panel activity and particularly should there have been cases where recommendations and decisions differ between the agency, Panel and ADM.

In terms of connected foster carers' reviews, it continued to be the case that requirements identified by ADM (at the point of approval or previous review) are not consistently referenced or actioned satisfactorily by the point of the carers' review. There were 2 reviews following concerns which led to Qualifying Determinations that the carers were no longer suitable to foster the children they were specifically approved for. This was due to safeguarding concerns.

There has been a considerable drive to tighten timescales for completion of the annual foster carer review cycle. This workflow passes through different parts of the fostering agency (supervising social worker, team manager, reviewing officer, business support and ADM). Throughput has not been steady which then has led to bottlenecks in the system. The Deputy Assistant Director has provided oversight and drive to ensure development of social care records support efficient running of this workstream. She has also acted as Agency Decision Maker for some of the foster carer reviews to help improve timeliness of decision making. There is clearer oversight and tracking of the review workflow through regular catch up meetings. In addition, communication has improved to ensure decision making following reviews is prioritised according to the needs of our children e.g. if long term fostering approval is to be considered in readiness for Permanence Panel where matches for children in long term care are presented.

The plan is for mainstream fostering applications to increase. The impact of Defining Children and Family Services for the Future programme on the numbers of connected foster carer approvals has yet to be seen. This has implications for ADM activity in terms of approval and subsequent fostering reviews as the number of fostering households increases. In terms of continual service improvement, it is positive that there are a number of arrangements in place for reciprocal feedback between Panel, ADM and different parts of the service.

THE FOSTER CARER ASSOCIATION

The Leicestershire Foster Carer Association (LFCA) has been running for several years. This followed the establishment of a committee who had determined the areas where foster carers and their families could be better supported.

Many of our LFCA have fostered for the service for several years and bring to the association a wealth of experience. The membership of the association remains low.

We have encouraged more membership but have seen carers using locality groups more regularly. LFCA will link into locality groups for additional support .

We advise our LFCA when there has been an allegation to ensure additional independent support is available.

Developments for 2020-21

- Regular attendance at the Foster Carer Forum
- LFCA to be invited to attend locality groups to seek new membership and promote their role.
- LFCA to work with LCC and be the neutral person to undertake exit interviews when carers leave our service.

OUR LOCALITY SUPPORT GROUPS

We are proud to report our locality groups have certainly risen to the challenge of Covid been re-vitalised. We now have 5 locality groups based across Leicestershire. They are very vibrant groups who are supportive of the service yet feel comfortable to challenge / raise any concerns.

Most meet monthly, they are very social groups and are facilitated by the carers. Details of the meeting times are advertised in our Newsletter. When a new career is approved their details are provided to the co-ordinator to make contact and welcome to the support group. Many of our co-ordinators are also mentors so new carers are quickly inducted into their local group.

We recognise the impact our locality groups have on our carers, they challenge the service when they feel we have not provided the best, they support carers through their first year and they provide ongoing support when placements are made.

Another valuable source of influence is their involvement in our staff recruitment. This year they have assisted in the recruitment of social workers, Team Managers and Assistant Service Manager.

COMPLAINTS AND ALLEGATIONS

We continue to provide many forums for carers to raise and resolve issues. Both the Team Managers from the Team Around the Child, and Kinship will meet with carers to discuss any concerns. The Service Manager is also available to meet with carers both as a group or an individual foster family. As a result of managing concerns quickly and efficiently last year we received no formal complaints.

During 20/21 we received no formal complaints.

During 2020/21 we had 14 allegations of those:

- All were referred to LADO
- Of those 10 had an outcome of no further action
- 2 Led to Position of Trust Meetings which led to Reviews following concerns
- 4 Fostering Households had a period of additional monitoring / support
- Of that 1 carer resigned

OUR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Within our Fostering Service we seek to ensure that all areas of our work achieve excellence, we have developed our review paperwork to gain further feedback and will continue to develop this.

As a service we constantly look for evidence to evidence the impact we make gaining feedback at every opportunity.

Twice yearly we hold Service Days where the whole team can reflect upon our achievements, develop our learning and where is the evidence of the impact we have made.

They are a very simple, clear way for teams to identify has enabled teams to identify learning, resources, and performance targets to improve the service.

The audits are then used to develop the key areas within the service.

The findings from the audits are then presented back to the team with a timeline of improvements.

The audits form part of the departmental Quality Assurance Strategy, to consistently raise practice using effective management oversight. A report is provided to our senior management team with actions to be followed to ensure improvement.

A FINAL WORD FROM THE SERVICE MANAGER, JOSS LONGMAN

The last year has certainly been challenging, but it has also afforded us some very proud moments. I have been impressed with tenacity of my Assistant Service Manager and Team Managers, when our first lockdown was announced they responded to meet the needs of our carers, looking for new opportunities to support them and maintain stability for the service.

In November we engaged with our colleagues at Newton Europe to develop our existing services and structures to increase our number of carers and consider how we could improve the utilisation of our placements. We have welcomed an independent consultancy service reviewing our work and for them to recognise through the feedback, workshops, and diagnostics that Leicestershire has excellent. As we travel through to piloting new developments we have the opportunity to xxx I have been in post for 4 years and when I reflect upon the journey of the service I am incredibly proud, as a service we have developed our “We are Family” and I see this reflected in the daily practice of the team, from the enquiries we receive, where we capture the availability of applicants from foster care to Independent Visitor, the timely response of visits and how we support our carers through the process of approval.

Placement stability has improved. The Dedicated Placement Support Team works to minimise disruption to placements. Having workers who are flexible and can provide the right support at the right time has been crucial to this.

Our Dedicated Placement Support Team has supported over 70 children where placement stability had been identified and at risk of disruption, and they have supported several children stepping down from high cost placements into supported lodgings placements. Our specialist carers have supported 5 young people in foster placements who either had stepped down from residential care or would have escalated to residential care.

The new review paperwork is strengthening our impact and expectations to other professional Our Team Around the Child has developed its support to carers, and we see the impact of this through our carers actively engaging in service days, staff interviews, participation events and our retention survey

Our recruitment team have benefited from engaging with recruitment consultants to ensure we have clear processes when inviting the right carers through to assessment.

Moving forward our assessment team will be focussed on supporting our foster carers through the assessment process, embedding our “We are Family” philosophy at those early stages.



For the forthcoming year:

- Continue to use all forms of media in our intensive recruitment campaign to achieve stretch targets:
 - 35 mainstream carers (net 25)
 - 5 Specialist carers
 - 15 Supported lodgings
- We recognise that these are very ambitious targets but using the insight gained from our work within DCFS we can predict our Fostering Recruitment Pipeline to see where we need to take active steps when we are not achieving targets.
- Introduce Key Performance Indicators for each team to identify and track performance, implementing action logs to be reviewed within weekly performance meetings
- We will continue to look for further opportunities to develop our carers and introduce the therapeutic model to all our carers. At the time of compiling the Annual Report we have secured Membership to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting for all our carers
- Develop a hybrid model of Foster Panels incorporating both virtual and face to face panels.
- Introduce face to face Foster Carer Forums, and meetings following government guidance
- Review Practise Standards across the service ensuring we recognise Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity
- Develop Reflective supervision across all service areas
- Evaluate “ A Place to Call Home” UASC recruitment of Foster Carer and Supported Lodgings Providers for the East Midlands Region
- Increase our Reviewing Officer capacity as a net growth of foster carers continues.
- Continue to develop our Signs of Safety Approach to all areas of our service, including reflective supervision and embedding PODS.

We welcome the end of a very challenging year and look forward with new ways of working that have developed our virtual presence. We have recognised that we can be more effective with our time with meetings being held virtually. This has to be balanced against providing a service which prides itself on the relationships we build with others.

We have ensured we have captured this time for our families in our virtual memory boxes and will continue to recognise the tenacity of our carers.

I feel very proud of my carers, my staff who continue to go that extra mile and the support of my Team Managers both to their carers and their teams and the support offered to keep the service performing so well.



Joss Longman

Christmas card competition – 2020

Winners of our Christmas card competition



Christmas card design by B, aged 9



Christmas card design by H, aged 5



Christmas card design by J, aged 9



Christmas card design by M, aged 12



Christmas card design by D, aged 10



Christmas card design by T, aged 12

Remembering one of the true heroes of 2020

By our children



Easter competition

“ Thank you to all the children who took part in our Easter Competition. We loved seeing the pictures of the wonderful things you had made. A big well done to you all. ”

The winning entries are:

1st place

NHS Easter Fete – CT



Joint 2nd place

Easter story biscuits – BRJ



Easter biscuits - AM and LM



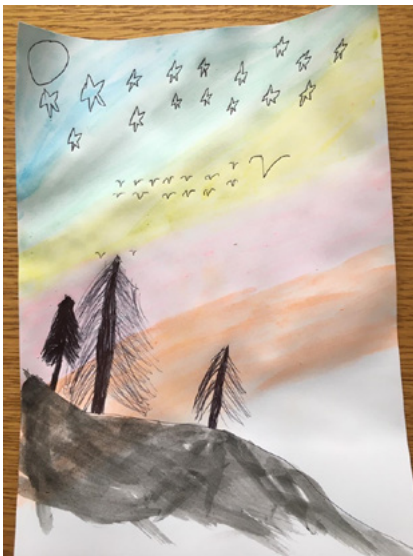
Joint 3rd place

Chocolate Easter cupcakes – ID



During half term Participation officers ran an ART WORKSHOP.

Eight children participated and produced some amazing paintings.

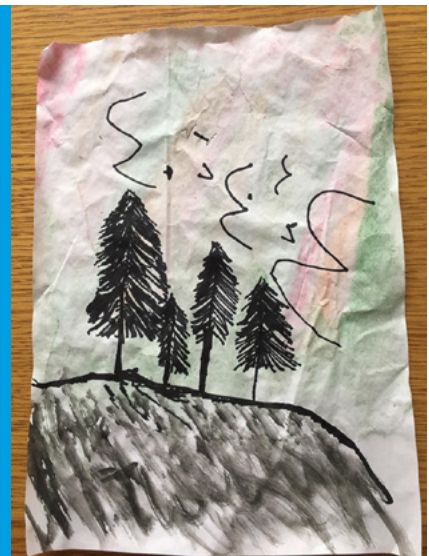


One child commented:

“ ‘I didn't want to do it but it was really good!’ ”

and another

“ ‘it was fun’ ”



What have you been getting up to during lockdown??

We've enjoyed seeing what our children have been getting up to while they've not been able to go to school.



“ Busy baking a yummy cake for VE Day street party! ”



“ A fun time baking . . . and also an English lesson writing all the menus, invitations and recipe cards, now for afternoon tea . . . yummy! ”



“ And now it's time for a trip to the hairdresser! Looking good ! ”



“ Time for your PE lesson! ”



“ Happy 4th birthday . . . hours and hours on fun on his waterfall table ”



“ Camouflaged as a bush . . . might take us a while to find him! ”



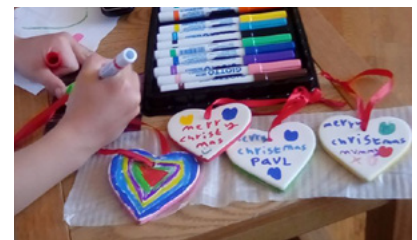
“ Stone age small world cave all finished ”



“ Hot tub day . . . someone can't wait! ”



“ FC gets up this morning . . . “Look what I built last night” . . . Pretty sure he should have been sleeping! ”



“ Someone's started early for Christmas! ”

Thank you hampers for carers

The postman / lady has something on its way to all those carers looking after our children during this weird and wonderful time



“ Thank you so much for the lovely hamper that the children and I have just received. We cant wait to get cooking. And the children are already looking at the books x ”



“ Making cakes from the hamper yum yum 😊 ”



Thank you for the very posh hamper. it's very much appreciated.

Just received our hamper, the children loved it as did we. Looking forward to the pizzas, thank you very much. Peter and Hazel x

“ Thank you for our lovely hamper 😊 everything the girls need to make me dinner 😂 was such a lovely surprise after a very busy week and not much zzz 😴 ”

“ Thank you for our lovely hamper and thinking of us xx stay safe xx ”



“ Someone loved making and eating the cake. Thank you from us all 😊 ”

“ Little man made pizza for lunch using the pizza dough, salami and olives with a few home added extras ”



He's on a mission 😂

Leicestershire
**Fostering
& Adoption**



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