

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2021-2022





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. Add: The Service's priority is providing children with confident and supportive carers.

The Fostering Service has two functions – recruitment and retention.

Our successes for 2021/2022 have included:

- Approved 21 Mainstream Foster Carers, Approved 12 Supported Lodgings Providers, Approved 1 Specialist Carer, Approved 20 Independent Visitors
- Maintained placement stability during COVID-19.
- Strengthened support to carers to promote placement stability
- Ensured we continued to provide face to face support for our families.
- Implemented the Defining Children and Families Services for the Future programme fully into our service, 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 direct work with children who have more complex needs.
- Increased numbers of Independent Visitors to provide support to our children and young people.
- Maintained excellent staff retention.
- Improved recruitment of carers from the previous year.
- Increased the utilisation of in-house placements vs independent fostering agencies.

The Fostering Service is led by Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care and Virtual School. She is supported by a Service Manager and Assistant Service Manager. These roles ensure that both recruitment and retention receive the same high-quality management oversight and service development.

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'.

2021-2022 began with continued Covid restrictions, and many of the practices we developed in the previous year, which included increased use of virtual connections, continued to be utilised as well as increasing face-to-face contact with our families where it was safe to do so.

We had established efficient ways to ensure our carers were given the most up to date information from the service, one of these being our private Facebook group, which we continued to use to disseminate information and to share good news stories, links to key research, good practice guidance and general wellbeing.

Where we were able, we held outdoor events for our carers – we organized two picnics which had very good attendance from all our carers and our staff team, the weather stayed warm and dry, and all enjoyed the opportunities from seeing each other in person again.

Placement stability remained high and where we recognized there were stability issues, we were quickly able to build a team around the child to maintain the foster home through the use of our Dedicated Placement Support Team, our Independent Visitors and working in partnership with other services – Children in Care, Virtual School and the Assessment and Resource Team (ART) etc.

We continue to see more requests for older children entering care and larger sibling groups. Through the implementation of the Defining Children and Families for the Future design we have been able to look at this cohort of older young people to identify resources to maintain their living arrangements either at home or within a foster home to prevent unnecessary residential starts. A number of our carers skilled in caring for teenagers were taking a break from fostering due to ill health or other personal circumstances which presented additional challenges with matching.

Our work in achieving permanency at the earliest opportunity has seen a decrease in Court Ordered Placements (38.6) but has seen an increase in the number of Viability Assessments for Kinship Care. With revised, clear processes in place, we have seen a reduction in Regulation 24 Fostering Arrangements and subsequently approvals in Kinship Care. There has been significant developmental work within Kinship Assessments including an increase in staffing to undertake more specific targeted work – SGO only assessments and private SGO applications.

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 chances 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 2020-2023
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to Excellence 2021-2023
- Workforce Development Plan 2020-2023
- LCF Partnership Plan 2021-2023
- Voice Strategy 2020-2023
- CFS Equality and Diversity Guidance
- Ofsted Report 2019 (Inspection of children's social care services)

Ambitions

As a department we are passionate about improving the lives of our children and young people. The CFS Departmental Plan sets out four clear ambitions:

- Help every child to get the best possible start in life.
- Help children and their families build strength, resilience, confidence and capacity.
- Help children in Leicestershire to live in safe, stable environments and have secure attachments.
- Help every child to have access to good quality education to ensure they achieve their maximum potential.

Core Values

We believe that our core values and behaviours will ensure we take the right action at the right time to so that Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people and families:

Core Values and Behaviours that underpin everything we do

Aspirational Being aspirational for our children and families	Being Curious Being curious and paying attention to detail	Collaboration Building strong working relationships.	Behaviours	Listening Listening to what children and families tell us. Involving them in decision-making, development and evaluation of new and existing services.	Building Relationships Signs of Safety (SofS) provides our approach and tools to work with children and families.	Outcome Focussed Striving to improve the lives of the children and families whom we work with.	Being Accountable Everyone is responsible and accountable for delivering high quality services
---	--	--	-------------------	--	---	--	--

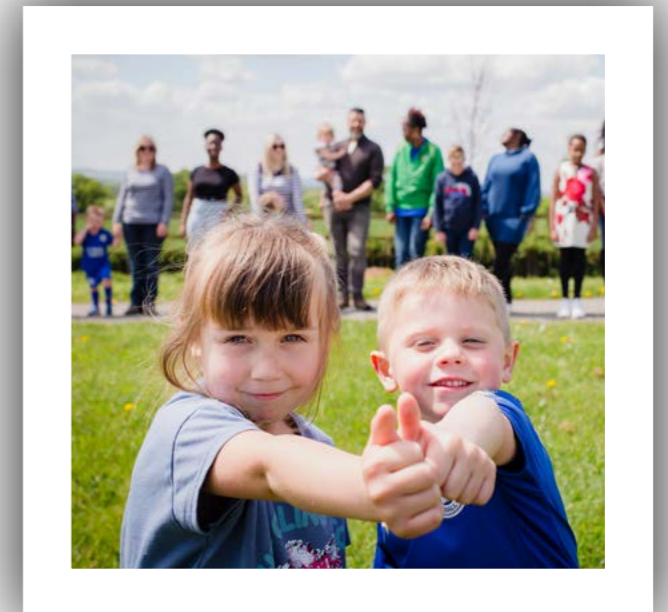
Principles

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.

Identified Tasks from 2020/21 Annual Report

- Continue to use all forms of media in our intensive recruitment campaign to achieve and increase of:
 - 35 Mainstream Foster Carers.
 - 5 Specialist Carers.
 - 15 Supported Lodgings Placements.
- We recognise that these are very ambitious targets but using the insight gained from our work within DCFS we can now predict our fostering pipeline to see where we need to take active steps when we are not achieving our 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 implementation, we had just secured funding to provide training and support from the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting.
- Develop hybrid model of foster panels incorporating both virtual and in person panels.
- Introduce face to face foster carers forums and meetings following local and government guidance.
- Review our Practice Standards across the service ensuring we recognize diversity, equality, and inclusivity.
- Evaluate "A Place to Call Home", the regional USAC recruitment for foster carers and Supported Lodgings Providers.
- Increase Reviewing Officer capacity as a net growth of foster carers continue.
- Continue to develop a Signs of Safety Approach to all areas of our service, including reflective supervision and embedding PODS.

What we did to achieve this

- At the beginning of the year, we were still experiencing the effects of Covid impacting upon recruitment. Nationally there was a significant decline as potential carers stopped making contact, (See recruitment and assessment narrative for greater oversight and analysis).
- We had set high targets as a result of sufficiency and to reach utilisation targets. By six months due to the ongoing effects of Covid, cost of living costs together with a national shortage we revised our figures to represent a more realistic opportunity to recruit.
- We approved 21 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).
- In terms of foster carers leaving the service we lost (14) Mainstream Foster Families. They resigned due to having the time to reflect on their personal circumstance. None expressed dissatisfaction with the service and support they had received.
- For Supported Lodgings we have year on year approved more than double the recruitment target, we have also seen some excellent outcomes for our young people moving into the scheme as part of their step down from residential care. This year we had a target of 15. Again, with the impact of the pandemic, cost of living rises and national shortages we revised our recruitment target to 12 and approved 12 new Supported Lodgings Providers.
- We continued with much of our recruitment activity online, using the forums of Facebook and the dedicated Leicestershire County Council website for fostering. We also developed sites on Instagram, had adverts played on Spotify and set up a WhatsApp account so carers could text us when making requests for information.
- We developed times when our recruitment team would be available to chat in person in the evenings and at weekends to enable carers who work traditional hours to plan effectively when they could contact us and talk.
- We developed 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 also went out to see carers in person if we felt that would be of benefit to meet in person and see the home environment.
- We developed a fast-tracking system for applicants who were already carers within an agency (IFA Transfers) or fostering with another local authority (OLA).
- We returned to meetings in person for our skills to foster, mentoring meetings and assessments.
- The Dedicated Placement Support Team, our service's unique selling point, has continued to develop and has continued to support placement. The team has supported 67 placements during the year, stabilising care, stepping 5 young people into family-based care or into independence from residential placements, and returning 2 young people to their birth families.



Summary of Recruitment:

The Defining Children and Families services for the Future identified in order to meet sufficiency targets our recruit targets would require a significant increase on previous years. We recognised that these were ambitious and challenging whilst we were recruiting during Covid times and whilst all fostering agencies are experiencing a national recruitment shortage.

Recruitment Targets for 2021/22:

35 Mainstream Foster Carers	5 Specialist Carer	15 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 55)
-----------------------------------	-----------------------	---------------------------------------	------------

Recruitment Activity for 2021/22:

21 Mainstream Foster Carers	1 Specialist Carer	12 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 34)
-----------------------------------	-----------------------	---------------------------------------	------------

9 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 Corporate 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, 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

Our digital strategy continues to support 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 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 374 Requests for Information which generated:

365 Fostering enquiries received & serviced of which:

We undertook 70 initial visits in applicants’ homes
53 applications progressed to Stage 1

Approvals:

21 assessments resulted in approval of fostering households. (Including 5 x IFA and 1 x OLA transfers)
12 Supported Lodgings Providers
1 Specialist Carer
10 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 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 2021-22 we welcomed 4 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 2021/22

Our physical 'Find Out About Fostering' events were paused from February 2020 due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. We continued with our virtual events to capture any potential carers interested in fostering, Supported Lodgings, or becoming an Independent Visitor.

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 emphasizes 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!

Thank you, Cards & Gifts:

Due to ongoing Covid restrictions and a general wariness of meeting in larger groups we decided to postpone our annual Carers Recognition Event, our chance to treat our carers to an evening of thank you's and celebrating our successes. We have now planned this event for May 2022.

Throughout the year we kept in touch with our carers to thank them for their support.

We continued with our branding '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, and those who have Leicestershire's children placed with them.

We continued to focus 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 as we came out of the pandemic.

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

RECRUITMENT AND ASSESSMENT: AN INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers has been widely reported upon over the last few years. This work includes research by Ofsted, the Fostering Network, and the Competitions and Market Authority. Such research has also been considered and debated upon in the House of Commons (House of Commons, 2022) and significantly, the UK government - after announcing an Independent Review of Children's Social Care in January 2021 - published this report in May 2022, which includes consideration of the recruitment of foster carers, (McAlister, 2022). Some of the findings from this research are considered here, to reflect upon our own performance over the last financial year whilst giving due attention to the national context and challenges within this market before each team provides an update about their year.

Increasing Demand for Placements

Whilst the number of foster carers in England is at its highest ever level, Ofsted report that this is not sufficient to meet demand:

“ The numbers of fostering households and foster carers in England are at their highest ever levels. Despite this, the increase in the overall number of households and carers has been slow at a time when the number of children in care is at its highest level in England. . . ”

Over the last 7 years, the general trend has been of a slow increase in numbers of places, with a 9% increase since March 2015. However, this increase has not kept up with the demand for places, with the number of children in foster care having increased by around 11% over the period to March 2020 (Ofsted, 2021).

Leicestershire County Council has experienced this slow increase in the assessment of foster carers over recent years too, and that this increase has not kept up with our growing numbers of children in care. However, our conversion rates within assessment compare favourably to the national average (see below).

Conversion through Recruitment and Assessment to Approval

Ofsted report a general reduction in national conversion rates of prospective foster carer households, since 2015:

- There were 160,635 initial enquiries from prospective fostering households in the year ending 31 March 2021, but only 10,145 (6%) foster carer applications were received. This proportion has decreased from 12% in 2014 to 2015.
- While the number of initial enquiries is at an all-time high, the conversion rate of enquiries to applications is at an all-time low. Applications have decreased by 20% since [the financial year of] 2014 - 2015.
- During 2020 to 2021, 32% of fostering applications from prospective households were approved. This is a decrease from 2015 to 2016, when 44% of applications were approved (Ofsted, 2021).

Leicestershire County Council's reporting mechanisms in respect of recruitment and assessment and related conversion data for stages within our pipeline, have been strengthened over the last year because of the work as part of the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future (DCFS) programme. It will only be in 2022-23, however, where we will see the new reporting mechanisms (within Tableau dashboards) start to accurately report data and provide us with accurate conversion data (which has been particularly hard to achieve previously for the recruitment stages of the pipeline).

Numbers in Assessment are easier to calculate manually, because of the smaller numbers, the following table provides fostering assessment data (from 2018-2019), as well as conversions (from assessment start to approval from 2019-2020):

Financial Year	Approvals (by household)	Closures (by household)	Assessments Started in Financial Year	Conversion (%) of Assessments to Approval *
2018-2019	26	45	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
2019-2020	17	20	20	(6 2019-20 starts approved in same year) + (3 2019-20 starts approved following year) + (1 2019-20 start approved in 2021-22) = 10 50%
2020-2021	13	15	45	(9 2020-21 starts approved the same year) + (14 2020-21 starts that were approved in following year) = 23 51%
2021-2022	20 plus 1 Specialist Carer, 1 UASC	19	25	Cannot be calculated accurately yet, as not all 2021-22 assessment starts have concluded.

* Conversion rates are calculated based upon, of the cases which started that year, how many were approved (regardless of what year they were approved).

Comparisons between LCC assessment conversion rates and the Ofsted data, reflect positively upon the performance of the Leicestershire County Council Assessment Team and by extension, the Recruitment Team also. Whilst a full and direct comparison is difficult, it is encouraging to be able to report that our conversions in assessment look to compare favourably with the national average e.g., with our conversion rate for 2020-2021, for example, being 7% higher than the national average. It is also positive to note that year on year, our conversion of carers in assessment has increased.

In Summary

The extent of the challenges facing local authorities can be seen in the Social Market Foundations 2021 report entitled 'Fostering the Future', which estimates that 63,000 new foster care families will need to be recruited over the next five years, to replace those leaving the system and to meet the needs of children requiring foster care, but that current trends would deliver fewer than 40,000 new families (Social Market Foundation, 2021). Utilisation of our internal foster carer cohort is reported upon below but estimates such as this, draw into focus the need for the Recruitment and Assessment Teams, and the fostering service more widely, to remain focused upon identifying creative and effective ways to continue to recruit, assess and retain foster carer households and to continue to maximize conversion rates across all stages of the Recruitment and Assessment pipeline.

It is reassuring to be able to report that the experiences which Leicestershire County Council have had regarding the recruitment and assessment of carers over the last year, have been experienced across the UK by most fostering agencies. It is also positive to be able to report that we know that Leicestershire County Council Recruitment and Assessment Teams are performing well, compared to the national average, in respect of a key performance indicator i.e., assessment conversions. We will build upon our successes in 2022-2023 and having access to more accurate data will support our development as a service. The Tableau Dashboards which have been created, should aid us in being able to make better sense of the data around recruitment and assessment in coming months and years.

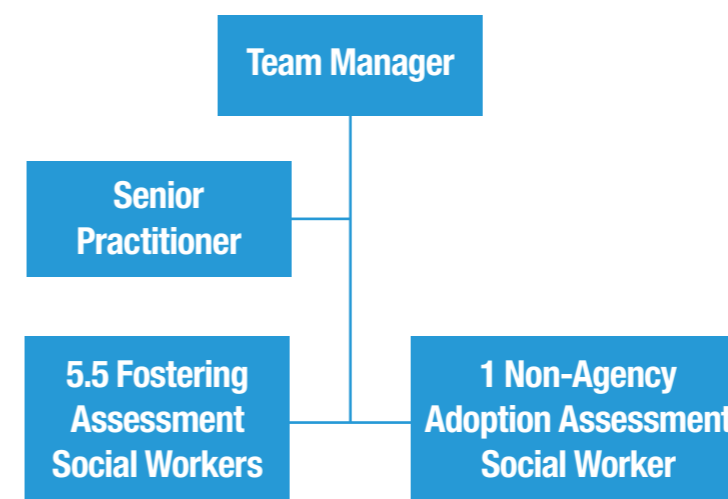
THE FOSTERING AND ADOPTION ASSESSMENT TEAM

CHILD FOCUSED – DEDICATED – PROGRESS

The Fostering and Adoption Assessment Team are responsible for:

- Mainstream Fostering Assessments.
- Leading on the delivery of Skills to Foster Training, which is jointly delivered with Team around the Child (TAC) team workers, and workers from the Dedicated Placement Support Team.
- Jointly overseeing the Mentoring Scheme (for new Foster Carers) with the TAC Team.
- Private Fostering Assessments.
- Leading on the requirement for the local authority to raise public awareness of private fostering, which has included offering training to all CFS staff, ASYEs and Social Work students.
- Non-Agency Adoption Assessments and submitting these to court.

Assessment Team Staff Structure:



Stability of Team

The Assessment Team continue to remain stable as a staff group. We have seen one member of staff leave, but this was not because of being dissatisfied working for the service. Staff have regular case and personal supervisions and have monthly face to face team meetings. The Assessment Team Meeting Agenda is set, and staff are encouraged to participate and next Team Away Day is being planned by the team themselves. Workers are also encouraged to develop themselves as practitioners, as well as participating in team development tasks - examples of joint teamwork over the last year includes drafting the Fostering Assessment Practice Standards, reviewing the H&S processes with the LCC H&S Team, and researching and drafting a new Reading and Resource List for prospective carers. Joint work with colleagues in neighbouring teams is essential and the Assessment Team often work closely with Recruitment Team Workers regarding specific pieces of early assessment work, or with TAC Workers regarding handover to their Team.

Overall Assessment Team Performance:

Targets and Performance

Data is included below for Private Fostering and Non-Agency Adoption, to highlight the other work completed by the Assessment Team, however, this work will not be considered in depth within this report.

MAINSTREAM FOSTERING ASSESSMENTS 2021-22		
	Target / KPI	Actual
Approved Carers	35	21

PRIVATE FOSTERING ASSESSMENTS 2021-22	
Closed (non-completion / part completion) of assessment	9
Approved Care full assessment, negative outcome	1
Full assessment, positive outcome	8

NON-AGENCY ADOPTION ASSESSMENTS 2021-22	
Adoption Orders granted	13
Initial Visits completed	30

Whilst we have not met our targets for Mainstream Fostering Assessment approvals in 2021-2022, there has been an acknowledgement more recently of the challenges that Leicestershire County Council face in respect of recruitment and assessment, and that a target of 35 for the last financial year, in the current climate, would be an impossible goal. The service has, therefore, reviewed their performance for the last few years, as well as having considered the national picture, and have set new targets for 2022-2023.

25 Mainstream approvals, with a stretch target of 27

Key Performance Indicators

The Assessment Team have continued to work towards the aims set out for us by the DCFSF Programme – the most significant of these aims being to have better oversight of the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment pipeline to be able to affect change within this and reduce timeframes for carer assessments, thereby, reducing the time taken to approve carers, and increasing our internal cohort of foster carers.

More specifically, one of our aims for this last financial year (as set out in the 2021-22 Fostering Annual Report) was to reduce the timescales for carer assessment weeks. The average length of carer assessment in 2020-21 financial year (from formal receipt of paperwork – ADM) was 35 weeks. The work carried out to address this, via the DCFSF Programme, set a new KPI of 21 weeks (this total combines all the individual KPIs across the pipeline from ‘waiting for allocation to ADM’. The average length of carer assessments in 2021-22 financial year reduced to 28 weeks and the current average length of carer assessment (July 2022) is 26 weeks. Whilst we have not seen a reduction in timeframes down to the KPI of 21 weeks, we have seen an improvement in the length of time carers are in assessment, which has reduced by 22% (comparing 2020-2021 assessment durations to 2021-2022).

Whilst many assessments do meet the KPI of 21 weeks from receipt of paperwork to ADM (i.e., 5 of the approvals last year) very few assessments ever would come under the KPI of 21 and many households experience a lengthier assessment period. A household experiencing a lengthier assessment period can be caused by different and sometimes multiple reasons, the following being some of the reasons from 2021-2022:

- An applicant led delay (e.g., requesting that assessment slows down as something unexpected happens in their life, a bereavement or health issue for example).
- A service led delay (e.g., staff sickness).
- A delay caused by external issues (e.g., delayed adult health assessments).
- It will remain difficult for the service to meet a KPI of 21 weeks, but the Assessment Team will continue to endeavour to improve our applicant’s assessment experience and reduce timeframes even further in 2022-2023. With a focus of mid- way meetings we will be able to identify where we will experience potential delays and at that point take actions to identify and reduce significant delays.

Mentoring Scheme

In 2021-2022 all applicants who wanted a mentor, have been matched with one of our experienced foster carer mentors. We have also had our lowest number of applicants declining an offer of a mentor.

Of the **21** households who received a written offer of a mentor **only 1** did not respond. In total 18 / 20 accepted the offer of a mentor with only 2 declining. In total, **14** Mentor Agreement Meetings have taken place regarding these matches, an additional 2 households are on hold and the planning for 2 Mentor Agreement Meetings is in progress.

It is positive that the Assessment and Team Around the Child (TAC) Teams continue to work together to ensure prospective carers are matched up to experienced carers, who will be able to support them. An area for development is ensuring that workers get the agreements set up between mentors and prospective carers at the earliest opportunity, so the latter can benefit from support as soon as possible after entering their assessment.

Our Aims for 2022-2023

- Although nationally there are more approved places than children in foster care, ‘this does not mean that there are sufficient appropriate placements for children’ Ofsted (2021). In 2022-23 – as well as achieving our target - we want a greater focus on identifying strategies for the recruitment and assessment of the right type of carers, to meet the demand for required placement type in Leicestershire.
- The DfE plan, within the next six months, to launch a national foster carer recruitment campaign to recruit 9,000 additional foster carers over the next 3 years (McAlister, 2022) and part of our recruitment and assessment work over coming months and years, will be to respond to these proposals.
- We need to start recording the recent difficulties which we are experiencing with GP surgeries and delays with their progression of adult health assessments (4 x assessments delayed so far since January 2022 because of delayed health assessments), so that we can report these concerns to our colleagues at the Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust.
- The Tableau dashboards will need to be reviewed for their efficacy over the coming months and adjustments made to the logic where necessary, especially once the delayed changes to MOSAIC steps have been implemented.
- Mentoring – more carers to be approached to check if they would like to be mentors and TAC and Assessment Team Senior Practitioners to input into a jointly owned centrally stored tracker.



SUPPORTING LEICESTERSHIRE CARERS – TEAM AROUND THE CHILD & KINSHIP TEAM AROUND THE CHILD

In Leicestershire, statutory support is delivered through the Team Around the Child (TAC). We have one team who focus on supporting Mainstream Fostering Households and another focusing on supporting Kinship Fostering Households. Both team managers work closely together to ensure that all foster carers offer the same standard of care. However, we recognize the unique challenges faced by each type of fostering and therefore the two teams offer that specialism. We are very proud of the work carried out post approval ensuring we work with foster carers to achieve the very best for the children we care for.

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

The Kinship Team Around the Child consists of:
Team Manager (0.6)
1 x FTE Senior Practitioner
4.2 x Social Workers (3 x FTE & 2x 0.6)

Due to the hard work of Recruitment and Assessment team in bringing through foster carers and of the TAC team in ensuring retention of our current carers we have 135 fostering households as compared to 128 in March 21. This figure includes the 13 resignations we have received from carers unable to continue fostering. In March 22 we have 83 Kinship Fostering Households, compared to 91 in March 21 with 5 Kinship Carers progressing to a Special Guardianship Order, supporting the long-term permanency for those children with family members.

Whilst 21/22 has been another positive year for LCC Fostering service we are facing the same challenges the rest of the country is facing. There are insufficient foster carers to meet the growing need of children coming into care. We are unfortunately under resourced in certain areas of fostering as Fostering Network's study points out.

[Fostering Network's 2020 State of the Nation Survey reported that all but six of the fostering services surveyed reported having a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of children in their local population. The highest areas of need were for teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disabilities and parent and child placements \(Fostering Network, 2020\).](#)

Despite an improvement in mainstream utilisation and focused recruitment projects we cannot compete with the increasing demand. Every year we have approximately 10 fostering households who resign. Whilst previously we have managed to hold foster carers for several years, we have more recently seen carers resign after a short fostering career.

[30% of deregistered fostering households \(1,470\) deregistered within two years of their approval \(Ofsted, 2021\).](#)

Our exit interviews capture the reasons given by carers which can relate to ill health, personal circumstances, the impacts upon other family members, or the realization of the ongoing demands of fostering a traumatized child. This makes the important role of the SSW even more imperative. The TAC teams alongside DPST activity focus on ensuring we can offer an excellent package of support to stabilize placements and retain carers.

WHAT WE DID 2021-2022

- Throughout the pandemic we maintained close links with the Foster Carer Forum, ensuring we kept connected to the challenges that our carers and children were facing. It has been good to begin to resume meeting face to face once more. The Team Manager and Assistant Service Manager meet with key carers every 2 months to hear their voice and listen to their views about service developments. We continue to seek their opinions regarding policies and practice. We now have one Kinship Carer but hope to bring more Kinship Carers 'on board'.
- All Supervising Social Workers have returned to face-to-face home visits. Having maintained some form of physical contact (be that by way of garden visits or door stop visits) this didn't come as a such a surprise. Our carers welcomed the face-to-face contact. Foster carer reviews have also returned to meetings in person, where possible. Some meetings have remained online such as foster panels and Review of Arrangements. Carers are telling us, in the main, they would prefer to hold these meetings face to face. This is being considered in line with LCC policies regarding room bookings at County Hall.
- Mainstream TAC has worked with DCFS program to Increase the utilization of our internal resource of foster carers. We have developed a dedicated team who manage our in-house duty system, implemented in November 2021 This has led to an increased use of foster carers and in March 22 had 135 fostering homes offering 161 placements. This was an increase from previous year of 128 households offering 141 placements. At the start of the DCFS programme in 2021 our utilisation sat at 42-45% compared to 60 % achieved by March 2022.
- The introduction of the TAC Duty team has also led to improved matching between foster carers and children and TAC Duty offer support calls at the point of introduction. Both the team and carers tell us they prefer to have consistent duty workers. This has improved communication, and responsiveness leading to better matches, improved utilization, and closer working with Commissioning Team, reducing delay.
- Our Foster carers' recognition event was planned for February 22 but due to the increase in covid cases post-Christmas we decided to postpone the event and are arranging for this to take place in May 22.
- Last year throughout the summer we were able to offer two foster family picnics, one in Abbey Park and another at Beacon Hill. These were well attended by foster carers and their families and were positively received. We had activities, ice cream and fun games. These events provided an opportunity for carers to catch up with other foster families, build networks, develop friendships, and gain peer support.
- Peer support has continued in the form of Mentoring Scheme and Locality Support Groups. Foster carers value the opportunity to get together monthly to share practice and gain advice and have the emotional support from someone else who knows how it feels to be a foster carer. These are not attended by staff, but the group leaders share any challenges or concerns with the Service and every 6 months Team Manager and Assistant Service Manager visit the groups. Currently we have 5 Mainstream Locality Support Groups and 1 Kinship Locality Support Group.
- Both Mainstream and Kinship TAC Teams are committed to offering foster carers every opportunity to learn and understand about the importance of parenting traumatized children in a therapeutic manner. We have been able to support foster carers to develop their skills in therapeutic parenting as well as increase the professional support offered to them in respect of therapeutic parenting. Last year, we introduced a membership for all carers to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. 105 carers used the membership and told us they were emotionally, and practically supported through listening circles, one to one consultation, trigger groups. In February 22 we completed a survey in which 52 carers responded. This told us that carers found the emotional support excellent but 22 said they would prefer just the use of the training and webinar support. With this in mind, we have reconsidered our offer for next year to ensure the support offered is what carers say they need.
- POD working has continued to take place offering peer supervision amongst team members.
- LCC Fostering Facebook page continues to offer support and recognition to our carers. It is becoming an increasingly popular way of communicating amongst LCC Fostering community. All content is checked to ensure it is both appropriate and supportive.

What we Plan to do in 2022/23

- We are under way in planning our Carers Recognition Event. This year it will take place on 20th May at King Power Stadium. We have invited all foster carers both Mainstream and Kinship to the same event, as well as Supported Lodgings Providers and Independent Visitors. This is an opportunity to demonstrate our appreciation for all the hard work given by our foster carers and their children. Our intention is that all carers will leave feeling acknowledged, respected, and regarded. Director and Assistant Director will be present to show their gratitude.
- We will continue to organize foster family events, with an April Easter egg hunt, family picnics in the Summer, bingo night, a Christmas party and our sons and daughters events.
- Foster Carer Training Programme – a new brochure will be launched in April 22 and will be delivered via a hybrid model offering a variety of face to face, e-learning, and webinars. We intend to continue to offer a number of training options both virtual and face to face. This offers opportunities to those who struggle with internet, but also supports those that work full time and for Kinship Carers who live outside of Leicestershire. The Training Officer remains vital in supporting carers access suitable training and virtual events.
- We are constantly considering our training offer to carers and we respond to what they tell us. Each year we carry out a carers survey. Carers told us they feel their families and themselves not always sufficiently prepared to manage the repeated loss they experience in saying goodbye to children and young people. We have commissioned a specialist service called Sunrise to offer workshops in the Autumn to respond to this need.
- This year we are offering carers a membership to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting where they can choose between a training pass or the support package, or both, if the need is such. This will ensure we get good value for money and meet each carers specific need.
- We would like in the future to be able to have foster carers within our network who can offer specialist support in therapeutic parenting and offer advice and guidance to colleagues. We have financially supported 3 foster carers to complete the Diploma in Therapeutic parenting. We are meeting on a regular basis to support learning together and reflect on learning.
- We are also joining University of Hertfordshire in a piece of research into whether offering foster carers a reflective programme alongside the usual social care support provided to carers, helps to improve the emotional wellbeing of children in care. The research will also be targeting whether such a programme reduces carers' stress and burnout and therefore has an impact on how often foster children move placements. The programme is due to start in January 2023.
- Having focused on improving the timescales of our carers' review process, we will now focus on practice quality, with Reviewing Officers undertaking audits and data gathering to ensure assessments are evidence- based and analytical. We are also focusing on the central importance of the child's voice aiming this to be gained throughout the year and gained when a placement has ended.

The service is developing its understanding of trauma, aiming to be a trauma- informed agency. We will be considering our work with carers and children and the impact of life experience as well as fostering processes upon both. We will consider how we can improve process delivery and sensitivity in by practicing in a mindful manner.



The Kinship Team (Connected Carers)

The Kinship Assessment Team consists of:

1 Team Manager
1 Senior Practitioner
4 Full time assessing social workers
2 Part time assessing social workers
1 Full time SGO specific assessing social worker
1 Full time assessing IVA social worker
1 Full time stage one support worker
X2 Vacancies (PT ASW/SGO support worker)

The Kinship Team has undergone significant area of change and growth within the service provision and as part of the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future program – the Kinship Team work jointly across locality service areas at the point of the initial viability assessment (IVA) being required – this provides a robust and balanced over view of the current circumstances for the children, and early assessment of the carers factoring the National Minimum Standards, alongside the exploration of all other options for connected assessments, including Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders. We have developed this area of the service to incorporate a continued program of training for locality teams, and from September 2022, this will also include a monthly “surgery” based within each locality office, to strengthen the partnership and cohesion across the service. We have a dedicated IVA social worker, and due to the volume of requests the Kinship Assessment team regularly complete additional IVA assessments to respond to as many referrals as possible.

Alongside the enhanced support package for our SGO carers, we have continued to expand 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 focused learning and development training, this not only strengthens the assessment and confidence of our 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 who have experienced trauma and loss.

We have an appointed and SGO assessing social worker, solely to complete those assessments that have been identified for Special Guardianship Care, this provides consistency across the assessment area of all connected assessments with comprehensive, thorough, and detailed assessments completed – individualized understand and support the specific needs of each family but standardized in quality and expectation. From September we hope to expand this service further into supporting locality service areas with the completion of private law SGO assessments.

The Kinship Team has seen the requests for full assessments double over the past 12 months with a clear drive from care planning and the court for children to find permanence and belonging within their birth families and connected networks where-ever possible. We currently average between 45-50 open and active assessments at any one time. Working collaboratively with our partners across the local authority to effectively support carers within the process and ensure the right outcomes for our children. We have been working alongside both the fostering panel and ADM to strengthen the assessments that are completed, learning both from emerging themes and audits, but also incorporating current research and guidance into our work with families.

What we have also seen is through this approach, robust IVA process, seeking SGO at the earliest opportunity we have seen a decrease in the approval of friends and family foster carers.

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 2022/23 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.
- Develop our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity model into all our assessments recognizing the diversity of our Kinship Carers.
- Continue to develop our training to other service areas regarding Kinship Care.
- Continue to progress Special Guardianships where there is a pre-existing relationship.
- 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 (DPST) 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:

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 for young people at risk of residential care or stepping down into family-based care as part of their transition to adulthood.
- Supporting our Mainstream Foster Carers and young people where there have been placement stability concerns.
- 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 2022/2023

- We worked with our Practice 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 67 families and/or carers.
- We have supported 5 young people to return home.
- We have supported 2 young people to move into independence.
- We have a growth bid for a further two full time support workers for the team.

Supported Lodgings

- We have 34 carers offering 46 placements.
- We have 29 young people in placement.
- We have 3 potential carers in assessment.
- Ensured our Supported Lodgings Providers have access to all training and support forums including portal, online training, and support groups, we also have a bespoke UASC set of carers who can offer specialist placements.
- Over the last year we have gained 11 Supported Lodgings Providers (approved 12, 1 retired) and one Specialist Carer.

Staying Put

- We have 40 young people over 18 remaining in either their previous foster placement or Supported Lodgings.

Specialist Foster Carers

- We have currently 6 carers under this scheme offering 7 places.
- We have 7 young people in placement.
- Over the last year we have gained one Specialist Carer.

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.

The team have continued to work throughout the pandemic, completing face to face visits with children and families. We have continued to support our fostering family with picnics, skills to foster and Talking walks, walking with carers and their families to increase well-being and all workers carrying a caseload of 8-10 families.

Our Supported Lodgings Team have introduced locality events and meet ups, they have embraced the new UASC carers, and we have matched 90% of the carers with young people. The team now has a full time Senior Practitioner to help growth in this area.

Our Specialist Scheme continues to grow, we now have 6 Specialist Carers with 7 young people in placement. We are also looking to grow this scheme by working with the carers we have and looking at recruitment for further growth. All 7 young people are very settled and thriving.



The team has continued to grow and develop over the last 12 months, the outcome for some of the young people we have worked with has been amazing, some of this has been captured in the feedback below:

One of the Specialist Carers has applied for a Special Guardianship Order, the supervising social worker has received the following feedback from the carers:

“ ‘We have always referred to Chloe’s as ‘our superstar’ she has supported us through every aspect and gone above and beyond.’ ”

One of our support workers had fabulous feedback from the supervising social worker in a case that was at breaking point and there as a strong possibility that the children would have to move.

“ ‘Beckie input has been invaluable in term of moving the situation forward following several concerns/allegations, the home life is much better, and the carers are now managing the children and working on their behaviours, it is so good that the carer have now put an application in for a Special Guardianship Order’ ”

Another worker has worked with a grandmother to help move and settle her and the children in a new home, the carer wrote to Sharon one of our support workers and stated.

“ ‘Thank you so much for how you have advised and helped our family, you have gone above and beyond especially with the house move. We are in our new home; boys are settled, and I am much more confident in my abilities through the advice you have given me’ ”

Our Plans for 2022/2023

- We are implementing group work for our young people to become involved in a range of activities to increase their confidence and self-esteem.
- To recruit a further two support workers to the team. We have seen the positive impact the workers have on families, and we plan to strengthen this.
- Continue to be part of the Residential Review Group / Risk of Residential Care group to ensure we identify the right time for children / young people 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 Barnardo’s in partnership with Leicestershire so that we can make best use of our forthcoming residential services (ensuring that children and carers receive the right service at the right time).

Retention Overview:

We know over the last two years during Covid times a number of our carers have been on hold due to a variety of reasons – health concerns of themselves or a family, considering retirement, matching worries and change of family circumstances. We have worked hard to help carers reach the right resolutions for them, meaning regrettably some have chosen to take a step back from fostering.

Total De-Registration; 39

Of which:



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.

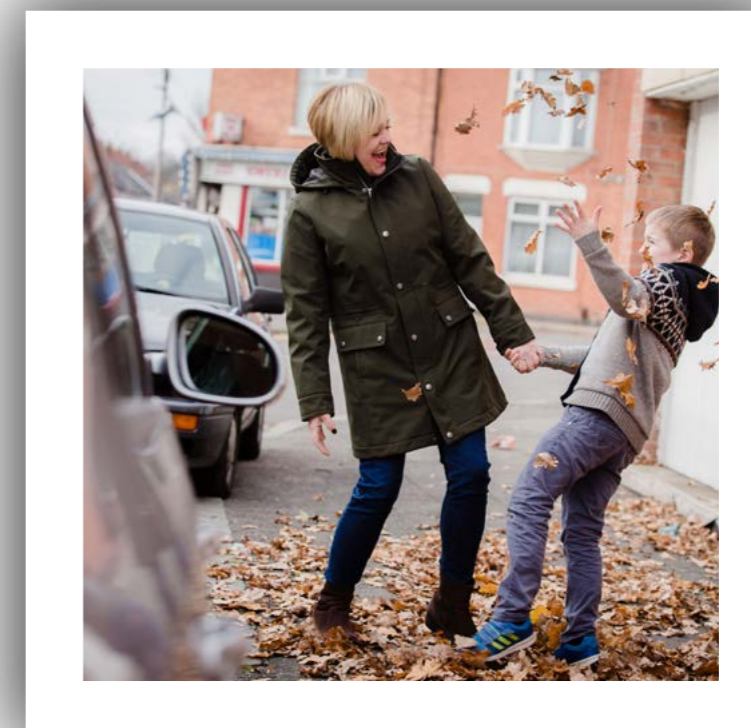
We pay very competitive skills fees in addition to the child element of fostering allowances. Our skills fees to our carers start at level 1 and through training, gaining experience of the fostering task and previous childcare / fostering experience carers can commence through the levels to level 4.

In 2016 we implemented our first specialist scheme - One2One carers, a professional scheme with experienced carers who support young people stepping down from residential care. Due to the complexities of some of the young people we pay an enhanced fee of £660 per week in addition to the foster allowance.

Our specialist schemes continue to grow and we have implemented two further schemes:

Pathway Carers – Long term placements for younger children with more complex needs who are at risk due to their behaviours of requiring residential care, who require carers who can manage their complexities on a long term basis. In addition to the fostering allowance this scheme attracts a fee of £440 per week

One2One scheme for children with complex health needs - For our children with significant health and additional needs, with an allowance of £660.



TRAINING

We have developed our training programme to ensure we continue to grow the foster carers' knowledge, skills, and development. The skill set levels for carers has been reviewed and more courses are offered to provide a holistic approach to the fostering family.

The feedback we receive develops our training programme for the future in ensuring the service meets the needs of the carers and the children they care for. This year we have developed our virtual forums using 'Teams' with Webinars and opened up some face-to-face workshops. Our carers also have access to awards and certifications for courses such as NVQ's and Diplomas through with 3rd party providers, colleges, and charities.

The service has continued to develop our eLearning through the Training Hub and through our Learning & Development team which means 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 – children who experience domestic violence, mental health and debt, child abuse and Autism to name a few.

We also welcome Special Guardians, Independent Visitors and those who are being assessed as foster carers onto some of our training platforms.

A new 'We are family' Kinship skills workshops has been developed to offer those newly approved Kinship Foster Carers training on the fostering role, expectations, and information on Special Guardianship Orders.

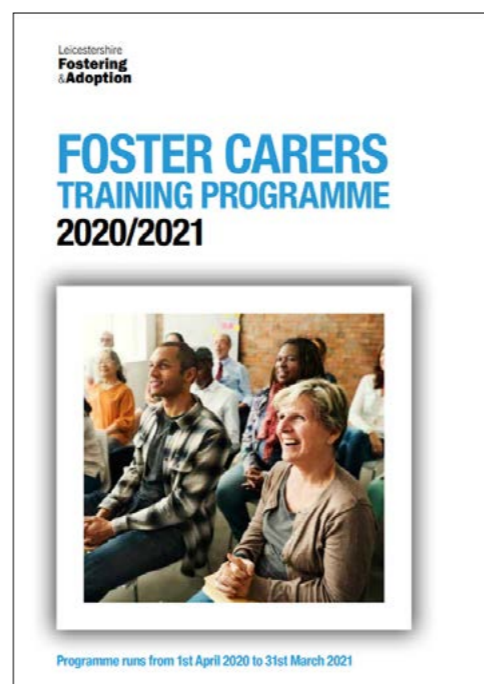
The service has a dedicated Training and Development Officer for the service who supports and provides training for all our carers both Mainstream, Kinship, Specialist Carers as well as Supported Lodgings Providers, Independent Visitors, and Special Guardians. The Training and Development Officer also provides phone support, workshops for Information Technology and using the online portal. A one-to-one home service is also offered to support individual carers with disabilities and learning difficulties to be able to access the training offered.

As part of our training offer, we have:

- 562 e-learning courses available of which:
 - 6 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.

We also offer

- 10 face to face courses.
- 60 webinars.
- 3 specialist CAMHS Courses .
- 1 course to equip the family and friends of carers.
- 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 carers' home.
- NHS Diana training for short breaks carers.
- Diploma in Therapeutic Parenting.



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 and can be completed through an online link or a paper version.

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

- Continue to embed our therapeutic parenting membership offer to all our foster carers.
- All carers to have access to NATP training pass or a yearly membership.
- Develop more online opportunities for carers to learn including online forums.
- Involve our experienced carers in the delivery of training including Therapeutic Parenting workshops.
- Continue to introduce more face-to-face training safely.
- Develop workshops to support carers mental health and wellbeing.
- New courses to include LGBTQ+, early years workshops, mental health, teenagers, and debt.

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.

Scheme providing positive, long-lasting relationships, evidenced through feedback forms and case studies.

Case Study

Background

- L a 10 year old with a level of learning difficulties was referred to the scheme to build her confidence, self-esteem and support placement stability following an adoption breakdown.
- M was matched with L and has remained involved for 10 years, even when placement ended.
- L is now 20 and has a child of her own and M continues to support her and her baby.

Impact for L

- Having a consistent adult in unstable times.
- Building a lasting forever relationship.
- Having another person who can support her in her journey through parenthood.

Case Study

Background

- K has been an IV for 2 years and has been matched with siblings (aged 5 and 8 at outset).
- The children are in a connected placement with 2 other siblings.
- K has provided both 1 to 1 time and as a sibling group.
- This relationship has been even more important to the family as one carer has been ill and the IV has been able to undertake extra visits to support the children and the carers during this difficult time.

Impact of the relationship:

- Enabled the children to engage in individual activities they want to do.
- Flexible support.

Quotes from Independent Visitors:

“I love that I can build a meaningful, friendly relationship with a young person and feel like I’m making a difference to their life”

“It feels good to make a difference to someone else, however small a part of her life we are. We see how her trust and confidence has grown since we’ve been taking her out”

“I couldn’t be more appreciative of this scheme as I have met some amazing people along the way. I would definitely recommend this to other people”

“What an absolute delight it is being an Independent Visitor”

Quotes from Young People:

“She is amazing, and like a big sister”

“Our trips out are awesome”

“My IV is lovely, kind, and great to be with”

“I love it when we are laughing so much, we can’t stop!!”

Approvals

Between April 21 and March 22, the scheme has approved 21 Independent Visitors taking the total to 50. However, 4 visitors ceased being visitors in this period, 1 retired, although will continue contact with their young person who is now 21 and 3 ended the role due to a change in their personal circumstances. The service has reached its target of 50.

There are 6 potential applicants awaiting assessment, and 5 currently in assessment. 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 4 males, and a further 2 are in assessment, 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.

Matches

Between April 21 and March 22, the scheme has matched 36 children. 3 are out of county matches. There are currently 17 children waiting, of those, a match has been identified for 8 young people, matching visits are in the process of being arranged.

Recruitment

The coordinator is promoting the scheme internally through attending team meetings and attending 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 provided data for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests that inform national practice.

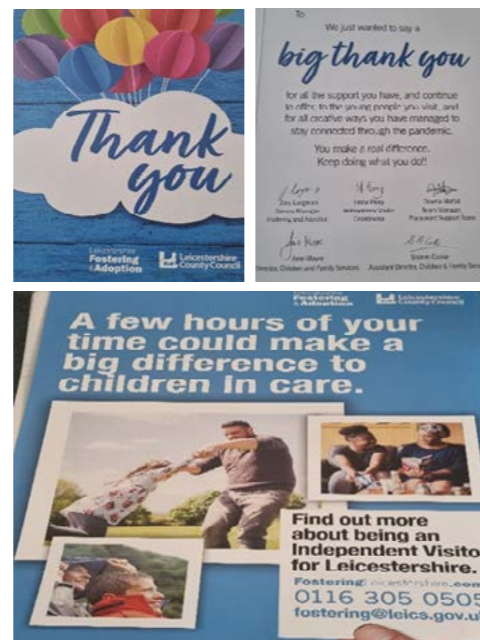
Training/Events

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 being matched, alongside additional training through LCC fostering service. The service has secured funding for 2 first aid training courses for Independent Visitors.

The scheme continues to link young people and Independent Visitors into events run by the National IV Network. IVs 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. In June 21 we held a picnic for IVs as a thank you for their volunteering role as part of National Volunteer Week. In September 21 we held a further picnic get together for newly approved IVs.

What have we done?

- Provided opportunities for IVs to network together.
- The WhatsApp group set up during the pandemic continues to be used to share ideas and to keep connected, IV's have engaged with the app and there has been positive feedback about its usefulness.
- Identified Mentors to support newly approved IV's.
- Sent thank you cards to IV's.
- Designed a promotional poster which has been distributed to businesses and leisure facilities.
- Utilised media to promote the scheme. Radio Leicester and East Midlands Today interviewed our Independent Visitors during national volunteer week in June.
- Increase male IVs recruited.
- Increase in matches for out of county children and children with additional needs.
- Promoted the scheme internally and externally.



Developments for 2022/23

- Recruit an additional member of staff for the scheme.
- Produce a promotional video for the scheme.
- Develop a robust training plan.
- 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.

REPORT FROM THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

The number of fostering reviews remains steady, with 201 undertaken compared to 202 the previous year. Reviewing officer Becky Edser took over as the team manager of our Kinship Team in November 2021, and we now have two permanent part-time reviewing officers in post.

As lockdown has eased, a focus has been on making sure that our reviews are again held face-to-face at the placement, to build rapport with our foster carers and to make what can be a daunting meeting personable and productive.

The end of lockdown has made it easier for our supervising social workers (SSWs) to ascertain the voice of the child independently. While we encourage use of our voicework booklets, we know that some children require a more flexible approach, and it has been great to see the different ways that our SSWs have used to help our children share how they feel about their lives in foster care.

Our children remain overwhelmingly happy with the care provided to them by our foster carers. This is the case for those placed in Mainstream and in Kinship Placements. In general, they feel part of the family and treated the same as their foster carers' own children. They are able to decorate their rooms how they want and are involved in family activities and with extended family and friends.

It remains difficult to get the views of children placed on a short-term basis, such as out-of-hours. We are also focused on getting more end of placement reports, to better understand why some foster placements come to an unplanned end, and how such moves are handled to minimize disruption to our children. Likewise, exit interviews are offered to all foster carers who resign to get more of an idea of why our foster carers leave their roles. There are various reasons why our foster carers cease fostering and the majority stop for reasons unrelated to their job satisfaction and would recommend fostering for Leicestershire County Council to others.

Our foster carers provide their own reports to the majority of reviews. Reports from Children's Social Workers (CSWs) and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) are also valued to give a holistic picture of the lived experiences of our children. The latter two reports are received for around half of our reviews, which is a number that we are keen to improve on.

Foster carer training remains largely online. We have seen an improvement in the amount and quality of the training plans and support plans drawn up by our SSWs. The contents of these plans are agreed with our foster carers, about how training and other support will be utilized to help to develop their practice over the forthcoming year.

Although our foster struggle with the high turnover of Child's Social Workers overall, they feel well supported by their SSWs. Team managers are available to support when necessary, and placement disruption meetings are arranged promptly when required to consider the additional support needed for some placements.

There is a focus on overcoming the barriers that prevent Kinship Carers applying to become Special Guardians. From our review meetings, it is evident that while many Kinship Carers are interested in this type of permanence, they often want more certainty around future financial and other support available when no longer part of the fostering system.

Priorities for 2022/23

- Ensure reviews have feedback from all professionals to help inform our assessments.
- Increase the number of end of placement reports to help us understand more about why some placements come to unplanned ends.
- Gain more feedback from children and young people who have been in respite care and/or emergency placements.
- Undertake audits on how the recommendations from our fostering reviews and subsequent Agency Decision Maker (ADM) oversight are being progressed throughout fostering year.
- Placement Disruptions – Undertaking feedback from carers / children and young people where there has been an unplanned ending to understand their experience. This feedback will then be discussed within team meetings / PODS and ensure we can take this learning forward.

Ben Marchant
Fostering Reviewing Officer

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTER PANEL CHAIR REPORT

This report refers to the functioning of Leicestershire County Council Fostering panel for the year 2021/2022. The Fostering panel is constituted under the Fostering Standards Regulations (England) 2011.

1. PANEL FUNCTIONING

Since March 2020 panel has taken place via Teams. This is now well embedded and managed well by panel members and presenting social workers. There continues to be some concern about the impact on applicants who have not been able to receive immediate in person support from their workers. This concern has been shared by the social work teams and plans are in place to ensure direct support by workers and applicants/ carers being together for the panel meeting.

Membership

- The agency has a Central List of panel members, in accordance with Fostering Regulations, Guidance 2011.
- This year saw the resignation of our longstanding Chair which led to the appointment of two new panel Chairs, one of whom had previously been Vice Chair. Alongside this four new Vice Chairs were appointed. Additional social work representatives have also been engaged and we are looking to increase the diversity of our panel membership through increasing the number of members from BAME communities, care experienced adults and people with experience of caring for the children of friends and family.
- A consultant panel advisor was recruited in early 2021 whilst recruitment was underway for a full-time advisor. The permanent post was filled in April 2021 and the consultant adviser remained in place to offer smooth handover and ongoing capacity to cover in the absence of the permanent post holder.

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 are always open to developing their knowledge base and are keen to understand legislative and regulatory changes.

Panel members are all aware that they need to declare any conflicts of interest and where an interest is declared the panel member is removed from that agenda item.

Panel: frequency

- Since August 2021 panels have been scheduled for four per month. Panels A and C are Chaired by Mohamed Patel and panels B and D by Sue Tribe.
- During the year 21/22, there have been 36 panels. Four panels have been cancelled since August due to a lack of business.

2. PANEL DEVELOPMENT

Reviews of Panel Members

Panel member reviews have taken place for all panel members other than those who have joined during this year. Panel members gave positive feedback about the use of Teams, but many would like to see further discussion about a return to in person panels, particularly when considering complex cases.

New Panel members have been offered the opportunity to meet with experienced panel members in order to discuss each upcoming panel and reflect on appropriate areas for further exploration. Existing panel members have welcomed this opportunity to mentor their colleagues and embraced the opportunity for continued development.

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

Panel Training

Joint Panel and Fostering teams training took place on 23rd October 2021 and focused on Safeguarding in Fostering assessment and support. This was led by Helen Daft; Consultant Social Worker and positive feedback was received from attendees.

Training for the 2022/ 2023 year is planned on:

- The Traveller Community
- Trauma informed Practice

Business Meetings

We have held quarterly business meetings which have been well attended by panel chairs and the agency.

Numerous discussions have taken place in order to continually reflect on practice improvements for both the agency and panel. Areas discussed have included support to applicants at panel, management of deferred cases and equality and diversity issues. The implementation of practice standards has remained on the agenda, and it is recognized that further consideration is needed in this area to ensure that these are adhered to from both the agency and panel perspectives.

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. Due to the increased number of panels and panel members there is work required to ensure all panel members receive feedback from these meetings.

The importance of consistency between the two panel chairs has been acknowledged and agreements put in place as to how panels will run. As both panel Chairs become embedded within their roles this may need to be revisited to ensure that our social workers know what to expect when attending panel and can therefore prepare their carers accordingly.

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 and including changes to terms of approval, standards of care and significant changes within the fostering family.
- 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	3
Short - term	15
Parent and child	0
Respite	11
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 already placed with them. In many cases Connected Persons are temporarily approved as foster carers by a senior manager, 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 completed.

ii Family and Friends (Connected Persons)

Family and Friends	26
Support care for Family and Friends/ Connected Person/ Respite Connected Carer	1

Considering the approvals of Connected Persons applications continue to provoke thought and discussions about the ways in which carers can be supported to 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

31 First annual Foster Carers Reviews have been presented to panel with all carers being viewed as suitable to carry on being carers.

Standard of Care

5 standards of care reviews were presented to panel this year. Panel recommended that 2 were deregistered.

iv Terminations of approval

Resignation

During the year 2020/21, 23 Foster / Kinship Carers have submitted their resignations. Reasons given are as follows;

Reason	Number
Retirement	3
Change of circumstances including health/ Covid vulnerabilities	5
Moving to Independent Fostering Agency	0
Moving to another Local Authority	0
Dissatisfaction with agency/Local Authority	2
Connected Carer gained SGO/ child turned 18/ alternative care plan agreed	13
Other	1

Deregistration

One decision was made that the carer was no longer suitable. This carer resigned prior to deregistration taking place

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	0

5. COMPLAINTS

One complained was received in respect of the panel process during a case deferral. This was considered by the panel chair and processes put in place to ensure that applicants will always be directly addressed by the Chair should similar circumstances arise again.

Reason	Number
Complaints received from applicants	1
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 includes 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.

The Agency Decision Maker also observes each panel Chair once per year, 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 and opportunity is offered for panel members to digest and discuss any feedback. Overall, positive comments have been received. Feedback in respect of the timely running of panels has been acted upon and in recent months panels have consistently ran to time with only occasional exceptions at which times efforts have been made to keep carers and social workers informed. Feedback has also been received from the agency in respect of deferred cases as it has been felt that there has been a lack of clarity within feedback and minutes.

Examples of positive feedback:

I think the scores I've given speak for themselves really. The overall experience was excellent. Timely, specific, respectful, sensitive yet thorough within the line of queries and questioning. Thank you. (Experienced carer transferring in to LCC)

Everyone was really lovely and made us feel very relaxed (Kinship Carers)

A really positive, if virtual, experience. Everyone worked hard to put us at our ease. Questions were well thought out and relevant. If our answers answered subsequent questions at the same time, the panel then didn't ask those questions. It was really good how they started off with the strengths of our application, that certainly helped us feel better about the whole process. Really do not think that it could have been improved. (Mainstream Carers)

"I thought the panel went well, having not experienced a panel virtually I was apprehensive as it can feel like you are talking over each other and very closed off. I felt that the panel engaged both the applicants and myself and that questions were asked but it felt like a conversation which put carers and myself at ease.

The questions were pertinent and needed clarification from what wasn't in report.

The panel felt positive for us both, and we felt comfortable throughout"

I believe that in person panels are still beneficial, as you can provide support in person support to carers, but as a possible improvement is it possible that SSW and carers are put into a room whilst panel are making their decision to enable them to talk/reflect on panel." (SSW)

Feedback with challenge:

"To be honest with you, the beginning of this one I felt very intimidated by the chair who quite abruptly suggested that I have not captured the voice of the children. I had completed extensive and creative direct work with the children as sometimes the booklets don't really capture the true voice, I feel that they can be limiting, and I am more creative as a practitioner.

I feel that in future, it might be useful to support us social workers to share the work we have done as opposed to immediately assuming that they have not."

"Panel today went smoothly; I feel J was made to feel very welcome. I like the way the strengths are read out and praise given where it is warranted. Everyone was friendly and professional, and I know this helped J to feel at ease. I was left querying the recommendation that was for the assessing social worker about her being able to read this in the minutes and felt a little in the dark about this as the children's social worker.

The most frustrating part was the lateness of the start time which was almost an hour after the agreed time of 11:40, then told 12:20 but was still at least 10 minutes+ after that which meant I had to cancel a meeting for another family at very short notice. I'm not complaining at all, just some feedback."

Sue Tribe – Panel Chair

Newly arrived as one of the Chairs in Leicestershire it has been a pleasure to sit on panel. The Panel is robust and works well within the quality assurance and critical friend role to further enhance good outcomes at panel.

We have interviewed and appointed several new panel members who will bring positive and valuable insight to panel. The diversity of the panel is increasing, and this is to be welcomed and will hopefully expand further to encompass a wide range of diversities which reflect the communities we serve.

Mohamed Patel – Panel Chair

Panel have played a crucial role in the scrutiny of cases being presented. The experience the panel members bring from a range of professional disciplines and personal background has meant we ensure any children placed for fostering is in the best interest of the child. We have adapted well to virtual panels but would hope that either face to face or hybrid panels also is available. We continue to play a crucial role in identifying areas of improvement service can make in respect of the quality of the paperwork and practice.

It's been a pleasure the chair panel over the last year. I hope we can widen our panel membership to include people from more diversified communities.

Quarterly Panel Meetings

The service meets with Panel Chairs and the Agency Decision Maker on a quarterly basis to review feedback and how we can take this forward to improve the experience for all involved. Actions are agreed and reviewed in subsequent meetings. As a learning authority we ensure that panel members are provided with training from Leicestershire to enable them to have awareness and knowledge of our working practices and aspirations for our children and families.

7. OBJECTIVES FOR 2022/23

1. Review Practice Standards at quarterly business meetings to ensure that these are being adhered to by both the agency and panel members.
2. Work to ensure that panel recommendations, particularly deferrals and negative recommendations, are fully understood by applicants/ carers and the agency.
3. Ongoing work to ensure consistency across panels.

Mohammed Patel and Sue Tribe

Independent Panel Chairs

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

The substantive arrangements to fulfil the function of Agency Decision Maker in Leicestershire remain as 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. This is usually to manage workflow during leave periods. The Strategic Lead for Transformation and Change also undertakes the ADM role in relation to annual foster carer reviews to assist when capacity requires it.

With the appointment of 2 Fostering Panel Chairs, there have been additional meetings between them, the Panel Advisor and ADM in addition to the quarterly panel business meetings. This has been useful to check processes and promote consistency for those attending panel as well as panel members. While Fostering Panel Practice Standards were put in place in October 2020, there remains a need to review and refresh to ensure they are applied in practice. The fostering performance meetings provide opportunity for enhanced connectivity between ADM and the fostering service but this has been difficult to prioritise and maintain regular attendance alongside the work cycles coming through to ADM.

Assessments for mainstream fostering approvals continue to be generally of a good standard. However there have been 2 deferrals by panel on mainstream applications and a further 7 ADM requests for further information. One of the applications which was deferred subsequently withdrew from the process. These requests have related to queries about how the proposed terms of approval have been considered and how fostering fits with the proposed fostering family. There has been just one approval for the specialist fostering scheme and one approval specifically for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. It has been positive to discuss these situations in live time with the assessments manager as part of the weekly fostering performance meetings.

In comparison to previous years, the pace and volume of activity around connected person's assessments has lessened in terms of what has been presented to panel and ADM. This is a particularly complex area of fostering with family considerations and tight court time scales adding to the challenges.

There has been an improvement in the consistency that management oversight and quality assurance is seen within the presentation of connected persons assessments to panel. The panel advisor provides a useful additional layer of pre-panel quality assurance and link between panel and the teams which present to Panel.

24 assessments resulted in the applicants being considered suitable to act as connected foster for specific children. This represents a drop from the 39 approvals in the previous reporting year. There have been 8 occasions when ADM has asked for further information. Panel have made 5 deferrals on connected persons assessments. The reasons include further exploration around the safeguarding concerns, triangulating information including when references may contraindicate the agency's recommendation, managing the family dynamics and financial implications. Because the decision about fostering approval relates to suitability to foster rather than a care planning decision to place a child, some connected persons applications progress to approval when they are the 'back-up plan' for children. There have been an increasing number where carers are approved but the children have either not been placed with the carers and / or the care plan for the child has changed. This clearly uses the fostering service resources and presents a challenge in supporting approved carers to meet the fostering standards when they may not be required to take on the care of the child(ren) they have sought approval for. This implies the need to monitor the utilization rate of approved connected foster carers.

This year has seen a reduction in the number of qualifying determinations made in relation to connected fostering applications from 9 in 2020-1 to 4 in 2021-2. However the complexity of completing kinship assessments is illustrated by some additional cases seen by Panel. Upon the advice of the Independent

Review Mechanism, a Qualifying Determination has been set aside for a fresh application to be made by the family members in light of a significant change in circumstances. This resulted in the IRM appeal not going ahead and the applicants approval upon their return through Fostering Panel. A further assessment received a recommendation by Panel to approve but a decision was reached that in order for the carer to be suitable, there would need to be further work for the applicant to understand the children's needs given a lack of established connection and restrictions on sharing the necessary safeguarding information. A further connected foster application resulted in a Qualifying Determination and subsequent appeal and return to fostering panel, following further work required by a second ADM. Two new appeals have been made to the IRM by connected applicants and the outcome was not known by the end of the reporting period.

Fostering assessments of family members who are living abroad and seeking to care for connected children outside of UK jurisdiction have also presented significant challenges. While a negative recommendation was agreed with by Panel, this application had to be set aside to allow for an assessment process which was compliant with the procedures for UK and the applicant's country of residence. Other applications have highlighted the challenges of completing assessments before fact finding court hearings. The potential risks may be subject to significant challenge and it can be very difficult to explore the safeguarding issues with family members in this context.

First reviews continue to be presented to fostering panel as do reviews after concerns. There were no mainstream carers who were de-registered for practice issues in this reporting period. Two Qualifying Determinations were made in relation to already approved connected foster carers.

Panel deferred making a recommendation regarding 1 mainstream fostering household after their first review. There was then a delay of several months before it returned and received ADM oversight. Likewise there have been some delays in a number of connected reviews being presented to panel. Panel have also deferred making a recommendation on a number of connected carers reviews or more often a decision is reached to pull the case from panel agenda. This means the reports being presented about carers' fostering practice and performance can span several months. It is hoped the next year, improvement will be seen. As regards the timeliness of reviews after concerns being presented to panel, there is a balance between completing work to analyse concerns and consider how the agency are to work with foster carers to address the issues, and the need for the oversight of panel and ADM consideration.

There is a tighter grip on the routine annual foster carer reviews which come directly to ADM without panel oversight. The tracking meetings between managers for supervising social worker, Assistant Service Manager, the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officers, business support and ADM have proved useful in predicting periods of increased workflow which allows for support in completing the ADM part of the review process to be arranged with the Strategic Lead for Transformation and Change. Reviews have highlighted consistency issues with changes of supervising social worker and/or child social worker expressed by both mainstream and connected carers. Support planning remains an area with scope for improvement so that the fostering agency can evidence how they are supporting mainstream and connected foster carers to fulfil the fostering National Minimum Standards. This remains an area where ADM often sets requirements in the interests of addressing any vulnerabilities and with placement stability in mind. There is closer attention to focussing on carers' training and development needs. Discussions have taken place with the management team about how the review process informs and helps to plan the support and supervision over a review period. When looking at concerns and vulnerabilities, the importance of chronologies and looking back to the original assessment and approval has been highlighted by ADM.

There have been improvements in the process of completing rapid foster carer reviews. Rapid reviews are necessary when a child is placed outside of a carer's usual terms of approval and enable ADM to consider a change to these in line with regulations and guidance.

The increase to 4 panels per month does offer greater flexibility in complying with court timescales and targets for completion of assessments. However the utilization of Panel's capacity is not consistent with an average of 2.6 cases per panel between June 2021 and March 2022 which covers the period since the introduction of this frequency. The reasons for cases being withdrawn from the agenda will be more closely monitored in the forthcoming period to identify if there is scope for improved efficiency.

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 as we have seen carers join locality groups based within their own localities.

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 2022-2023

- 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 continue to support carers if subject to an allegation / investigation.

OUR LOCALITY SUPPORT GROUPS

Throughout the pandemic we have seen the importance of our locality groups, they have been a constant source of support to both their carers locally and the service, ensuring key messages are disseminated and the service receives feedback.

As we have come through the pandemic our locality groups have started to meet in person again, either at a carers home or at a neutral venue, all report feeling positive about meeting up in person again.

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 carer is approved, their details are provided to the coordinator to make contact and welcome to the support group. Many of our coordinators are also mentors so new carers are quickly inducted into their local group.

Our Locality Co-Ordinators play a vital role in the recruitment of staff within the service, they support us by sitting on interview panels, provide feedback for new policies and procedures and two have been nominated to undertake the National Diploma in Therapeutic Parenting.

As a service we meet with them on a quarterly basis, we value the support and challenge they bring to the service.

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.

During 2021/22 we received formal 5 complaints.

The complaints that were upheld were in relation to communication and payments. Whilst we welcome challenge we also need to listen to the concerns raised by our carers and take learning from them. In terms of ensuring we continue to improve our service we have reviewed our payments systems to ensure carers are paid without delay. We have also put in systems to ensure carers are made aware if their worker is absent for any period that our duty team will provide support and advice.

During 2021/22 we received 5 Complaints. Of those:

- 4 were upheld

During 2020/21 we had 9 allegations of those:

- All were referred to LADO
- Of those 1 had an outcome of no further action
- 5 Led to Position of Trust Meetings which led to reviews following concerns
- 2 Fostering Households had a period of additional monitoring / support
- 6 were reviewed / returned to panel

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. Due to the pandemic working restrictions it has been difficult bringing staff in person, so we have held these virtual events. We have also seen each team have their own service-related days.

The social workers within the team attend the Social Work convention ran by our Practice Excellence Team.

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

At the beginning of the year, we were again faced into a “lockdown” after seeing cases rise over the Christmas and New Year period, we saw the impact this had on our families and for our children, carers becoming home tutors, activity planners and chefs we were so impressed by the tenacity of not only our Foster Carers, but our Supported Lodgings Providers and our Independent Visitors. They all embraced our philosophy of “We are Family” and really were that team around the child. As all restrictions were ended in February, we embraced this knowing the impact it has had on our children and families

We embedded the findings of the Defining Children and Families for the Future into our daily practices, developing our thinking around business models. We have found that this has been very positive for the service giving us clear focus in:

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers – setting clear targets for the recruitment from request for information through to timescales and targets for the time it takes to assess a foster carer. Utilisation – Once carers are approved, how we utilise carers once approved

The introduction of a dedicated duty system and seeing the benefits of this, reducing on hold places, and placing more children in house than in external placement.

At Risk of Residential Meetings – Reviewing all young people (11-15 yrs.) where they are at risk of residential care due to age, placement availability or behaviours. Some are new into care so the challenge meeting focused on how we can support at home / in current foster home using our therapeutic support team (ART) or our Dedicated Placement Support Team, Independent Visitors and Family Intervention Workers to prevent escalation to residential care.

Residential Review Group – Each child that is in residential care required an up-to-date trajectory, identifying if and when the appropriate time to step down into family-based care.

Achieving Permanency at the earliest opportunity. For our children placed in Kinship Care coming through for connected assessments at the point viability we can process whether this needs to be a full Kinship Assessment or can progress straight through as a Special Guardian Assessment.

As a service we were asked to think of the way we deliver our services in a different way and despite early reservations I am so impressed by the way the team have worked with the defining programme using this as a forum to influence the changes.

I am pleased with our placement stability, yet again we have seen evidence of the effective use of stability meetings to prevent placement disruption involving the POD approach – all the important people discussing how we can promote stability, the team around the child – involving the carers and their support too.

All the managers of the service have had a key role developing their service areas, we are very pleased that this has also meant new roles being developed, and workers joining the service.

Our Newsletter has returned to being a paper copy, for us this may seem very simplistic and are carers told us loudly that they wanted the copy to read at their leisure, they wanted to put the important dates on the fridge door and most importantly they wanted to read the good news stories and wanted to be featured in them, we asked, and they told us!

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 Carer to Independent Visitor, the timely response of visits and how we support our carers through the process of approval.

For the forthcoming year:

- Continue to use all forms of media in our intensive recruitment campaign to achieve stretch targets:
 - 25 Mainstream Carers (net 25).
 - 2 Specialist Carers.
 - 12 Supported Lodgings.
- We recognise that these are lower target than last year but we feel that these targets are realistic and achievable, and the service will push for higher recruitment figures, called stretch targets. We are aware of the national shortage of carers and our recruitment campaigns have been revised to reflect Leicestershire's Carers for Leicestershire's Children, including revised radio and media campaigns.
- Introduce Key Performance Indicators for each team to identify and track performance, implementing action logs to be reviewed within weekly performance meetings. We want to implement this across all teams post approval.
- Continue with our membership of The National Association of Therapeutic Parenting, encouraging more carers to become involved in training and webinars.
- Review practice standards across the service ensuring we recognise race, equality, diversity, and inclusivity.
- Develop reflective supervision across all service areas.
- Implement automated performance reporting post approval using Tableau reporting and dashboards.

We are proud of the achievements we have made, the service has remained stable, and carers continue to report they feel supported by their supervising social workers.

Our carers continue to provide good outcomes for our children and young people, and our children tell us they are happy in placement, and more importantly feel safe to say when they have worries, which we work with them to resolve.

I look forward to developing the service further over the next twelve months,



Joss Longman



FOSTERING SUMMER POP UP EVENTS

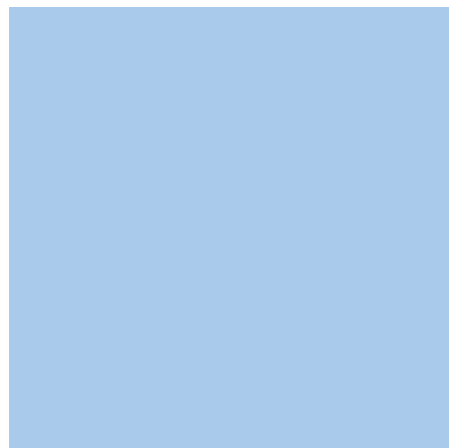
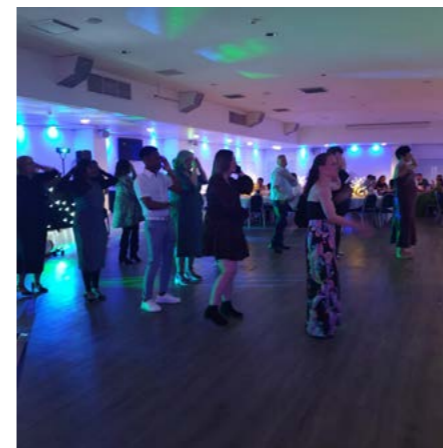
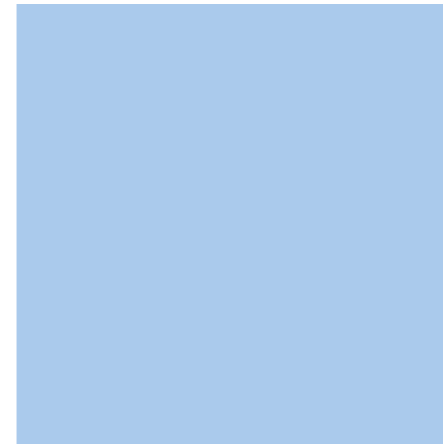
Leicestershire Fostering & Adoption | Leicestershire County Council

- SNIBSTON COLLIERY PARK - Thursday 14 July
- BRADGATE PARK - Friday 22 July
- BEACON HILL - Thursday 28 July
- LEICESTER PRIDE - Saturday 3 September
- FOSSE PARK - Thursday 21 July
- ASHBY MAGNA VINTAGE RALLY - Saturday 18 June
- LEICESTER RACECOURSE FUN DAY - Sunday 7 August
- LITTERWOOF DOG FESTIVAL - Sunday 8 May

OUT AT OUR SUMMER POP UP EVENTS



LEICESTER PRIDE EVENT



You are cordially invited to join us for a

Celebration of our carers



Leicestershire
**Fostering
& Adoption**



FosteringLeicestershire.com

This page is intentionally left blank