



Lincolnshire Fostering Service

Annual Report April 2020 – March 2021

Introduction

The Fostering Service is a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act, 2000. Fostering has become an increasingly complex service in relation to children and young people who need to be looked after by Lincolnshire County Council (Local Authority). It requires a range of foster carers who are skilled and resourceful. The service provides quarterly reports to the Directorate Leadership Team and the Executive.

The Local Authority offers a comprehensive range of preventative services delivered under an Early Help offer which enables families to access services as soon as difficulties emerge. 2020/21 has been a particularly challenging one with the pandemic impacting upon all areas of Children's Services and requiring creative solutions to ensure that families and foster carers have been actively supported. It is perhaps no surprise that at the end of the year, the number of children in care had increased by 8% to 680. Of the 680, 491 were placed in either foster care or pre-adoptive placements; this comprises 73% of the population and is a reduction on the previous figure. Nevertheless, at a time of national lockdown it is a huge testimony to foster carers who have continued to both maintain and offer placements to children. Of these, 29 children were placed in externally commissioned foster placements. 5 were unaccompanied migrant children aged between 15 and 18. The figures reflect a continually high number of children placed within their own kinship networks, accounting for 24% of all foster placements.

The Fostering Service is managed by the Head of Regulated Services, through two Team Managers who manage dedicated fostering teams from bases in the north (Lincoln and Louth) and the south (Sleaford). The service has 5 Practice Supervisors who manage day to day practice, and each has lead responsibility for an area of service development. The lead areas are permanence, duty desk, foster carer recruitment and retention, training, development and support and kinship. In addition, the Caring2Learn service has continued to engage effectively with foster carers. The pandemic has seen the development of a foster carer community with a strong on-line presence, higher engagement in training and development and foster carer champions influencing all areas of fostering practice.

Numbers of Foster Carers:

As at the end of March 2021, there were 295 foster carer households currently registered, including 55 Regulation 24/25 carers and 6 Foster to Adopt carers.

Type	No. of households
Task Centred including Respite	144
Parent and Child/Task Centred	10
CWD Short Break Carers	2
Placement Plus	9
Permanence only	15

Permanence/Task Centred	50
Emergency	2
Remand	2
Family/Friend (Regulation 24/25)	55
Foster to Adopt	6

During the period 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021, 89 new fostering households were approved, including 56 Approved Kinship and 7 Foster to Adopt. The 26 new mainstream households provided up to 45 new placements as follows:

Approved places	No. of households
1 child	11
2 children	11
3 children	4

During the period 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021, 24 mainstream households ceased fostering, owing to the following reasons:

Reason	No. of households
Change in employment	4
Family circumstances changed	5
Health reasons	5
Moved to an IFA	1
Retired	4
Child reached 18	1
Dissatisfaction with service	1
Carer died	3

In addition, 44 approved Kinship households were de-registered; 27 of these converted to Special Guardianship Orders and 6 were related to the child moving to independence. A further 6 Foster to Adopt households were also de-registered

The recruitment of foster carers is both a local and a national challenge, with the Fostering Network State of the Nation report continuing to identify a significant shortfall in available families at a time when the number of children in care continues to rise. Pleasingly, against the backdrop of the pandemic, in Lincolnshire, we have seen a significant increase in interest in fostering with a commensurate increase in approvals. This has largely been achieved within the virtual world and reflects that some of the practice changes necessitated by the pandemic have created a new dynamic which will provide opportunities into the future. Carer availability during the past year has been

restricted due to self-isolation and covid constraints, but carer retention remains good and there are signs that more foster carers are making themselves available to take placements following vaccination. Crucial to carer retention has been the further development of Caring2Learn which places foster carers at the heart of all we do.

The loss of existing carers continues to be of concern and reflects the demographics of the foster carer population. However despite the presence of independent agencies within the County, only 1 carer has left the Authority this year and that was clearly a decision that was financially motivated. There is evidence from foster carer feedback that the Caring2Learn approach, support from the fostering teams and the retention "offer" are key factors in their remaining as foster carers for Lincolnshire children.

Role of Fostering Service

Lincolnshire County Council's Fostering Service provides a range of short term and permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience. Foster carers provide family based services ranging from weekend respite to supporting birth parents and carers, preparing a child for adoption, or providing a longer term placement that will see a child through to independence. There continues to be a high number of family members or friends who come forward for assessment within care proceedings.

The service continues to offer a trained group of foster carers to provide assessment placements to parents and children, usually babies. These placements focus on a parent's capacity to meet the needs and safeguard the infant, and the foster carers are vital in assisting and supporting, often young parents, to develop basic parenting skills. During the pandemic and reflective of the carer demographic, only limited numbers of parent and child placements have been available and there has been some growth in the numbers placed in Out of County placements as a result.

The profile of children in care remains similar to that identified last year. The percentage of those under the age of 5 has remained consistent at 25%. At the other end of the age profile, the percentage of young people, aged 16/17, continues to constitute 22% of Children in Care. Only 37% of this group are in foster placements; the majority being placed in residential or independent accommodation.

In 2020/21 the increase in the number of children who have entered care and the reduction in the number of foster placements available have resulted in a significant increase in the number of children being placed in Out of County residential placements. As a result, transformation work has been undertaken in order to identify how this trend can be altered by both growing in house residential provision and further enhance the support offer to in house foster carers.



Foster Carer Recruitment

The service has a dedicated Recruitment and Retention approach which ensures that the recruitment and retention of foster carers for and within Lincolnshire County Council remains a key priority. In light of covid, all recruitment and marketing activities were delivered remotely for much of the year.

Recruitment Activity

From 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021:

- 340 Initial Expression of Interest forms (IEIs) were received for fostering
- 214 home visits/initial calls were undertaken
- 55 Registration of Interest forms (ROIs) were received
- 26 households were newly approved to foster (whilst there were 27 approvals, 1 of these is the partner of an existing foster carer and so does not make a new household). These 26 approvals equates to 32 placements (44 if taking siblings)

Despite the unprecedented Covid-19 epidemic changing the way people across the UK live and work throughout 2020-21, the recruitment figures were significantly higher than they had been in previous years as demonstrated below:

Financial Year	Number of fostering IEIs received				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
2020 / 2021	80	103	74	83	340
2019 / 2020	46	66	55	72	239
2018 / 2019	52	52	53	76	233

There is evidence that with so many people living in lockdown during this period and being unable to physically go to work, that more people considered whether fostering could become part of their lives.

Virtual Information Events

Information events took place in a virtual format this year. Attendance was not as high as those that were conducted face-to-face prior to the covid outbreak. It was not possible to engage with attendees

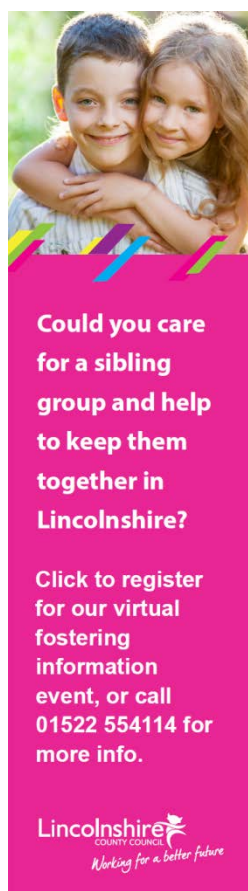
so directly and felt less effective as a result. However it enabled additional flexibility and could be delivered more frequently as indicated below;

- Tuesday 14th July at 2pm
- Tuesday 11th August at 2pm
- Wednesday 9th September at 6:30pm (as more people began slowly returning to work the timings of the events changed to an evening to accommodate for this).
- Tuesday 20th October at 6:30pm
- Tuesday 17th November at 6:30pm
- Thursday 21st January at 6:30pm
- Thursday 18th March at 6:30pm

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

Advertising

The focus for recruiting new foster carers changed to a more digital model as more people were at home and available online. Many local news companies reported seeing a surge in traffic to their websites during this period. Advertising was targeted towards getting people to attend the information events as well as advertising the type of foster carers we need to recruit i.e. respite, permanence, carers for siblings, teenager and children with additional needs. Examples of digital adverts used can be seen below:



Permanence Campaign

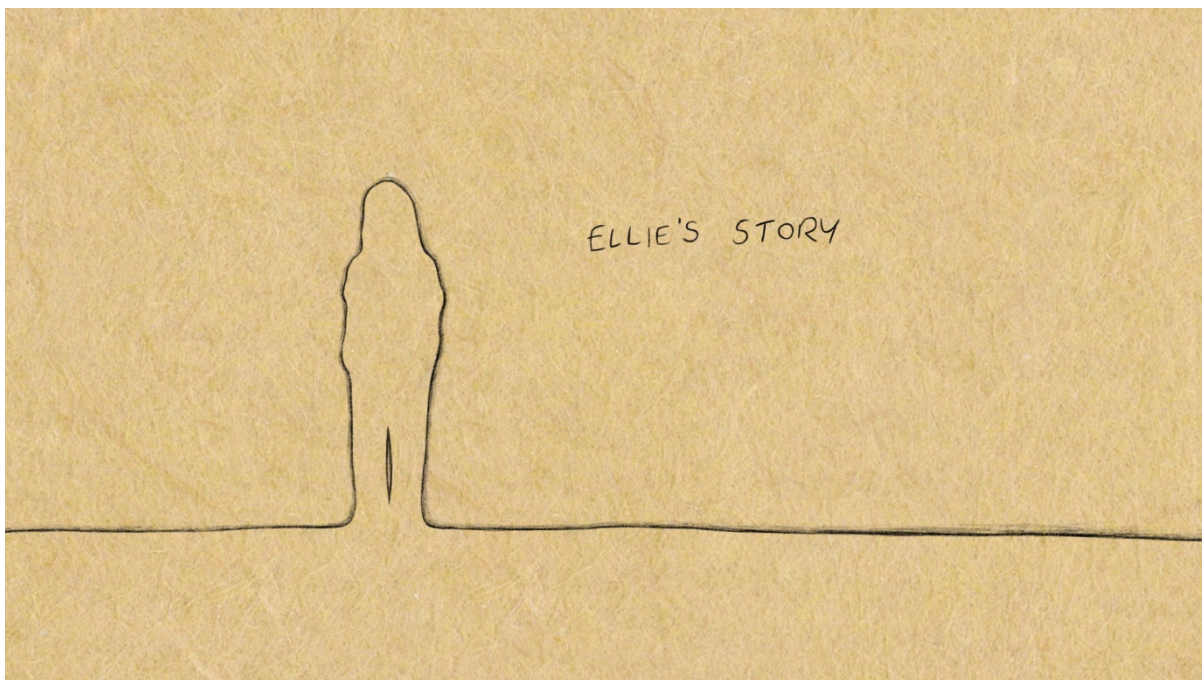
There continues to be an increase in the number of children with care plans for long term fostering and the emphasis on permanence continued this year and included advertising in the form of radio adverts, Facebook posts, and adverts in various forms of local media including online, newspapers and magazines.

Internally, anonymised profiles of children were posted onto the Caring2Learn closed Facebook page as well as the main Fostering Recruitment Facebook page. A regular section was added to the e-newsletter which is sent to approved foster carers. This has become a standing item which is updated on a monthly basis. An article also appeared in the spring edition of County News Magazine about permanence from the perspective of 2 children who are living in long-term foster care.

Also during this period a dedicated permanence campaign landing page was set up on the website which includes information about what long-term fostering is; the Ellie's Story animation (please see below for more information), the benefits of long-term fostering and what support package is in place.

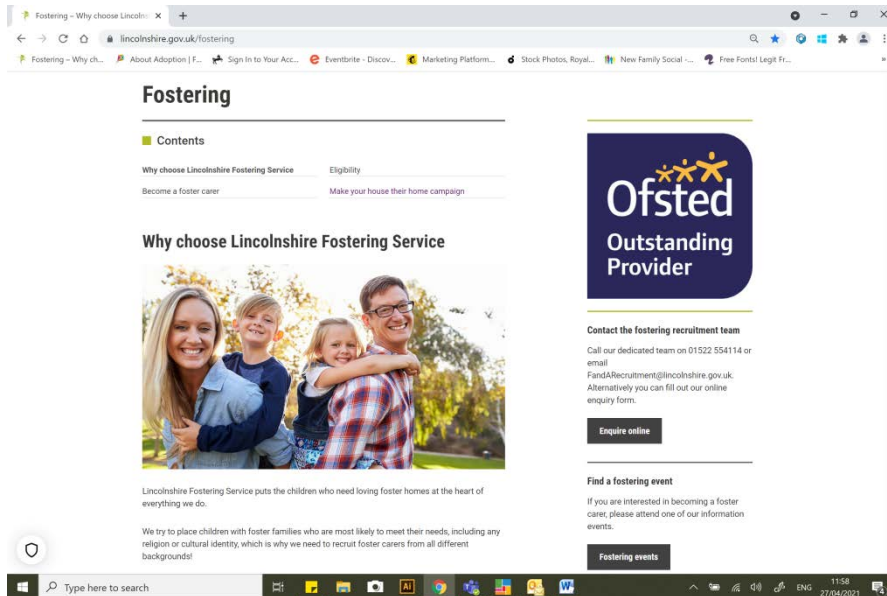
Ellie's Story

At the beginning of March 2020 an interview was carried out by the Marketing Officer with a care leaver about her experience of being in care with the aim of using this as the narrative for an animated film which highlights the voice of the child in long-term foster care. Electric Egg (which produced the previous animation about the process to become a foster carer) was commissioned once again to do the animation. Work on editing the audio began late-March with the animation process taking place in April and early May. The completed film was launched at the end of Foster Care Fortnight on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It was also shared by many of our media partners and was viewed over 500 times during the launch weekend. It is also shown on the fostering information evenings and on the preparation course and is always met with very positively (Press Ctrl+Click on image below to watch video).



Website

Work was carried out on the fostering website to rewrite the content on the 'Why Choose Lincolnshire Fostering Service' page to include Lincolnshire's Unique Selling Points (USPs) and to compete with Independent Fostering Agencies operating locally. There are also some videos on the site of our foster carers talking about these different aspects. A screenshots of the webpage is below:



Foster Carer Retention

As important, at a time when recruitment, support and connection is particularly challenging, is the issue of retention. The service has invested heavily over recent years in providing foster carers with additional practical and theoretical support. The innovation of Caring2Learn has developed a new community based hub model, encouraging foster carers to actively invest, share, problem solve and support each other as a community. Over 90% of fostering households actively participate as a member of the hub. The hub model recognizes and acknowledges their skills and knowledge and how these can be used to help support and improve other foster carers' experiences and outcomes for children. The hub offers both formal and organic learning and development opportunities where connections can be built and maintained.

Facilitating and supporting the Hub model are 24 Foster Carer champions; these individuals offer new carers support in their first year by helping to integrate them into the community and make links that will support them and their development in their fostering role. Building upon the champions' existing skills and providing a high level of development opportunities has equipped this group to be able to complete direct work with foster carers as well as supporting and facilitating practice workshops and the induction and preparation course. Foster Carer champions are actively involved within the recruitment of new carers, making initial calls to potential carers that are considering Lincolnshire as their provider. Foster Carer Champions on average are completing 30-45 pieces of allocated work per month. The Caring2Learn Practice Supervisor has overall oversight of this work and allocation.

The role of the Placement Support Workers has been further enhanced and is integral to the hub model. All placement support workers are now trained in Theraplay and therapeutic parenting, enabling the service to offer therapeutic support to foster carers both directly and via training. With the introduction of the 1st national lockdown, the design of the hub meant it could continue to operate and thrive with platforms easily accessible online. Placement support workers have worked closely with the Caring2Learn hub and have also been creative in the platforms used to engage children and young people, offering a variety of groups virtually including baking sessions and quizzes.

The Whatsapp listening group which has 82 active members remains a constant hive of activity, with foster carers connecting, reaching out to their community for support or to share their challenges and successes. The Facebook page also continues to offer dynamic and creative support and solutions to foster carers and has over 650 participants.

Caring2Learn has been integrated into all aspects of the fostering service and appears to be making a real difference to placement stability and foster carer satisfaction. The development of the champion role has reinforced the key role of a foster carer and seeks to promote and validate their experience and skills. In many ways it has given foster carers a voice. The emphasis upon retention is a response to feedback from both surveys and exit interviews.

Placement Stability

Placement stability continues to be a critical factor in offering an effective Fostering Service, and is crucial to ensuring that the Local Authority delivers good outcomes for each child in care. The service has been developed and structured to promote stability and support to foster carers. Stability is measured by 2 national indicators, NI062 relating to children who experience 3 placement moves within 12 months, and NI063 which relates to children who have been in care for 2½ years who have been in the same placement for 2 years.

The national indicator NI062 reported 8% at year end. This figure suggests that Children in Care in Lincolnshire have a high level of placement stability from the point of coming into care. This is an achievement given the reduction in the number of foster carers and the difficulties in recruitment this year. However, the complexity of children requiring placements and reduced placement options has had an impact on the indicator, and this is likely to remain a challenge. Over recent years there has been considerable focus on supporting foster carers to maintain placements. Placement support workers have been trained to offer therapeutic interventions and Caring2Learn has developed champions and hub supports to all carers. During the pandemic, this enhanced level of integrated support has been effective in sustaining placements. Together they have supported a continued improvement in the NI063 placement stability figure with a year-end figure reported as 72.2%; this is continues to be good performance.

Family Lincs Care

The provision of short term breaks in principle offers children and young people with disabilities experiences away from their primary carer to enhance their personal and social development. This serves to offer support whilst enabling parents/carers and families the opportunity to have a valuable

break from their caring responsibilities.

The scheme is now serviced by one fostering household which offers regular breaks to one young person as the other fostering household is not in the position to offer placements due to a change in personal circumstances.

The efforts to recruit to the scheme have not been successful to date. Family Lincs carers offer 100 units of care per annum with the option to offer additional units dependent on demand and the carers availability, each unit equates to 8 hours of care. The current demand for this service is being met with the current carer having two task centred placements alongside the short term break commitment.

Permanence

Between 1st April 2020 and the 31st March 2021 Family Finders has continued to meet on a monthly basis to consider children with a care plan of permanence and in need of a long term foster placement. Owing to the covid pandemic these meetings have been undertaken virtually over Microsoft Teams.

Over the year 22 children have been considered, of these 6 children were newly referred from 1st April 2020 onwards. This is a significant decrease on last year's figures of 39 children.

Out of the 22 children considered, long term foster care in house foster placements was identified for five children, all single children, with three of these children moving to newly identified placements and two children remaining in their current placements. Of the remaining 17 children, 7 moved to IFA foster carers, made up of three sibling groups of two and one single child and it was agreed that one further child would remain in her current IFA placement. Three children moved to residential children's homes, a sibling group of two and a single child; and one child was removed from Family Finders due to a change in his care plan.

Six children have been linked for Permanence at Fostering Panel over the year, however all of these were with the existing task centred foster carers and the children had not been referred to Family Finders. Currently five children remain on Family Finders, made up of a sibling group of three and two single children. In respect of the sibling group of three agreement has been given for an IFA search however this is currently on hold pending the outcome of a re-assessment of a family member.

For years recruitment of permanent foster carers has been difficult with most permanent matches being made with existing task centred foster carers. In 2020 only one new fostering family was approved for permanence.

Although this year there has continued to be a high level of support in place for both prospective and current permanent foster carers; we have clearly had to be more creative in how we deliver this with, until very recently, limited face to face contact. A virtual permanence preparation course and Family Finders event took place in November with 10 children on Family Finders featured and a further event is planned for June 2021.

The Family Finders Review panel continues to meet regularly to consider children where no potential placement matches have been identified within a three month period, enabling senior management to have oversight of actions already taken and discussions around any further options to be considered or

explored. Over the course of the past year a total of 11 children were referred to the Family Finders Review meeting. For those children who have waited too long, this meeting considers referrals to independent fostering providers.

Staying Put

The 'Staying Put' initiative in Lincolnshire is in its twelfth year. It has, since its inception, enabled a total of 168 young people to remain with their previous foster carers. Staying Put arrangements provide the young person with stability at a key stage of their life remaining until their 21st birthday. On-going support and training for carers is provided by the Fostering Service, with the young people having their own designated Personal Advisor from Barnardo's Leaving Care Service. To further support young people in their transition to adulthood if they are ready to move on before their 21st birthday, or for those who join the military, each young person is given a three month window in which they are supported by their carer. For those young people who attend university and live away, carers receive a retainer in recognition of the on-going support they provide, and to enable the young person to return during holidays and continue life within their family setting. During the last 12 months additional support has been provided to those carers who have continued to support young people in the home if they have been unable to return to university and have remained at home to complete their studies. This has provided stability for those young people in a difficult year with them being able to remain with their families and continue to study.

Lincolnshire's Staying Put Service has continued to support young people and their carers with 44 young people living in a Staying Put arrangement at the end of March 2021. Of these, 24 were in full time further education with 5 attending university. The others were in employment, on Work Experience Placements or Apprenticeships; with 5 of these on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme. There has been a dip in the number of Staying Put arrangements which has been owing to the cohort of young people being of a slightly younger age and therefore have not transitioned to Staying Put.

The Staying Put offer in Lincolnshire positively reflects the current guidelines and best practice from the Government and Fostering Network. Signs of Safety is used and embedded in all the documents relating to Staying Put with Social Pedagogy being used to support the transition and understanding around moving to adulthood. During the past 12 months connections with carers have remained in place; with Supervising Social Workers keeping in contact with carers by telephone and virtually. Microsoft Teams has been used to complete virtual meetings ensuring young people and carers fully understand Staying Put and to complete the relevant paperwork relating to the arrangement. Microsoft Teams has enabled greater participation in meetings with the support network for the young person being able to meet up in a virtual environment. Looking forward to the next 12 months Staying Put, there are currently 20 referrals and the scheme will be reviewing documentation and processes following on from the support of the Legal Department and Commissioning in reviewing the License Agreement

Kinship Service

The placement of a child within their family and friends network continues to offer a positive alternative for many children enabling them to maintain the links with family and friends and a continued sense of their identity and culture. This can also bring with it practice issues in terms of supporting family

members to fully understand their role as 'Connected Person Carers' and the expectations of this role.

Since 2015 there has been 6 FTE Supervising Social Workers dedicated to undertake Kinship Assessments. There have been changes in terms of workers covering the kinship agenda as one of the Practice Supervisors retired in November 2019 and the other relocated. Following interim management arrangements the service has recently recruited a new Practice Supervisor who has joined the service, and alongside other colleagues will have direct oversight of this area of work.

The number of referrals into the Kinship Team has increased this year. This is most noticeable in the increase in the volume of referrals for Regulation 24 assessments moving to Special Guardianship Order Assessments, Private Fostering and Special Guardianship Assessments including the statutory checks, when compared to the last year. The number of cases presented at Fostering Panel has increased considerably when compared to the previous year. Most of the assessments have been presented to the fostering panel within 16 weeks of allocation; however owing to the pandemic some assessments have been scheduled to be completed within the extended 24 week period.

The numbers below for the year records the number of referrals and reflects the ongoing national picture in terms of the area of service increase in terms of assessments.

Overview of the year – April 2020 -31st March 2021

Number of Referrals	SGO	Reg.24 to SGO	Reg.24	Private Fostering
186	71	53	38	24

Of the above figures:

- SGO – 26 applicants withdrew/ did not progress due to placement ending
- SGO – 37 are still in process
- SGO – 2 were negative assessments and the children were not placed
- SGO – 4 cases, Court granted a Child Arrangement Order
- SGO – 20 were Statutory Checks completed by Fostering Service
- SGO – 7 progressed but child either remained at home or moved to an alternative placement.

Where children were placed with a likely plan to progress to SGO

- SGO/Reg.24 – 6 SGO granted

- SGO/Reg.24 – 36 are still in process
- SGO/Reg.24 – 11 where child was moved or other Order granted
- Reg.24 – 23 Carers approved at panel
- Reg.24 – 21 children were moved
- Reg.24 – 10 Not yet attended panel
- Reg.24 – 2 carer granted Child Arrangement Order
- Reg.24 – 5 Returned home

The service has continued to offer the specific one day kinship preparation course for both Regulation 24 carers and Special Guardianship applicants, with five having taken place in 2020/2021. This course has been delivered virtually due to the covid 19 pandemic and the method of delivery will remain subject to review in accordance with government guidance. The course has continued to receive excellent feedback, particularly in terms of the Therapeutic Parenting input by Placement Support Workers. The course was adapted in September 2019 to ensure specialist therapeutic guidance was being delivered and continues to be reviewed and updated to enable carers to receive the latest training and guidance to support them in their role.

Fostering Panel

The Fostering Panel is established and acts in accordance with the regulatory framework provided by the Fostering Service Regulations 2011, Family and Friends Care, Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011, and the Standards set out in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011. The Foster Panel takes account of the legislation set out in The Children Act 1989, and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Amendments 2015 and Guidance, volume 2, 2010.

The Fostering Panel has the responsibility for making recommendations in relation to:

- The approval of foster carers both short/task centred and long term/permanent foster carers
- The approval of family members or friends as "connected person" carers for children who are looked after by Lincolnshire County Council, and connected to the applicant as a family member or friend
- The first annual review of all foster carers and connected persons carers
- Reviews of carers where there have been serious issues such as Child Protection
- Investigations or
- Reviews of carers where there are concerns regarding their fostering practice and their suitability.

The current membership of the Panel is as follows:

- Sharon King, Independent Chair
- Chris Sharp, Vice Chair
- Stephen Carson, Independent Vice Chair
- Janet Morris, Independent Member
- Russell Petit, Independent Member
- April Harrison, Independent Member
- Laura Dodd, Independent Member
- Ellie Simmons, Independent Member
- Maggie Nisbet, Independent Member
- Paula Bexon, Social Work Representative
- Michelle Maxfield, Social Work Representative
- Joanne Stares, Social Work Representative
- Panel Advisor and Administrator in attendance at each panel

The Panel Advisor is responsible for the volume and cost of panel business, in particular the capacity to ensure that connected person cases can be heard within 16 weeks of placement. She ensures that the central list is maintained and updated to allow for all panels to be quorate. There continues to be two Fostering Panels each month.

In response to the emergence of covid 19 in March 2020, the panels have been held remotely via Microsoft Teams. All panel members were trained and supported to engage in a new way of working. There have been challenges but this has allowed for greater flexibility and connection with applicants who may have had to travel significant distances to attend the panels. Whilst the panels have been effectively run, the consensus from panel members is they would prefer to provide this function face to face when appropriate to enhance the engagement with applicants.

The Panel receives medical advice within the social workers' reports, and this is considered within the assessments. Legal Services provide advice as required, in order to assist in the Panel's recommendations.

Workload of the Panel

The Fostering Panel has met on 25 occasions this year, 5 more than the previous year.

This is due to the workload of panel and ability to hold meetings via teams.

Panel recommended for approval the following households:

APPROVAL	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Task Centred/Respite	27	19	27	13	20
Reg 24/25 Kinship Care	56	43	33	39	39
Permanent Foster Carers	0	0	2	1	10
Change of Approval	2	6	7	0	5
Permanence Link	4	6	10	10	11
Reviews	32	23	22	17	35
Total	121	97	101	80	120

Review Breakdowns:

REVIEW	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Task Centred/ Respite	15	15	12	9	19
Remand	0	0	0	0	1
Reg 24/25 Kinship Care	11	6	9	3	12
Permanent Fostering	0	0	0	4	12
Allegation	6	1	1	1	1

Feedback and Quality Assurance

Panel seeks feedback from all participants including social workers attending panel. Whilst it is not the same experience being on Teams this has allowed for much more focused discussions which address key matters. The Panel has fully embraced restorative practice and continues to develop the key areas for conversation in relation to fostering and the needs of young people and children in care.

The reports for Panel are signed as being suitable to present at Panel by the Practice Supervisor; for the worker to ensure suitable quality standards are achieved. There continues to be an active support from the Panel Advisor with the agency on more challenging cases, this allows for clear discussions and opportunities to review how the agency has developed practice. One such development is around the post allegation report template which provides a consistent framework which is embedded in evidence based practice.

The Chairs to the Foster Panel have continued to work closely with the Panel Advisor and the Fostering Team Managers. These Feedback sessions take place on a six monthly basis and produce an action plan based on the Signs of Safety model. This has enabled both the agency and the Panel to review any areas for development.

The quality of reports presented to Panel continues to be of a good standard with Social Workers producing sound, evidence based assessments. There is clear evidence of use of the Signs of Safety Model and this works well with how the Panel is structured.

Restorative practice is in evidence and an understanding of how this approach is particularly important is in the work with some of the Kinship carers where there is a clear need for the authority to support carers to meet fostering standards. This has been particularly highlighted during the pandemic and has resulted in some excellent work following a negative recommendation and appeal by the family.

The Child's Voice at Panel is actively encouraged, in particular children attending Panel, particularly in permanent link cases. There has been evidence of direct work both with the birth children of foster carers who are an integral part of the fostering household but also children in Kinship arrangements.

The Panel is also mindful of the Training Standards and Development of foster carers, and is actively monitoring the activity around training and ensures that any matters raised are referred back to the training. There has been an impact on the full completion of the workbooks for some carers and this appears to be related to the impact of covid, an additional 3 months has been given and these are required to be reported to panel.

Complaints

In the last year the Fostering Service has received three complaints. One of the complaints was upheld, two not upheld and none were escalated to stage 2. The complaint upheld was raised by a carer in relation to poor communication from the service. Upon investigation this complaint reinforced the importance of communication with fostering households and this continues to be an area for review and development in an effort to continue to provide a high quality service to all children in care and their carers.

The second complaint from a parent related to the matching of a foster placement for a child in care. The matching process was explained and a resolution reached based on explanation and further understanding of how and where placements are identified. The complaint was not upheld.

The final complaint was raised by a foster carer applicant who expressed concern about the conduct of the staff member with responsibility for their assessment. This complaint was not upheld given the pertinent issues that arose and that required additional exploration. This complaint alongside the others was reviewed and lessons learnt to inform our current practice.

The low level representations and concerns were promptly dealt with in the service and satisfactorily resolved. In 2020/2021 there were no matters referred to the Independent Review Mechanism.

Foster Carer Continuous Development

The Fostering Service in partnership develops an annual learning and development offer to include practical and e-learning opportunities, providing foster carers with a schedule of face to face training events and e-learning options which are accessed through the Lincolnshire Safeguarding Childrens

Partnership (LSCP) website and Caring2Learn. A common theme has developed with a preference to access the Caring2Learn events. Feedback indicates this is due to quality, accessibility and personal booking options.

The offer is reviewed annually to ensure it continues to meet the personal and professional development needs for carers, ensuring they have the skills and knowledge to be able to care for children and work towards positive outcomes according to best practice guidelines set out within the local authority. This year brought the unexpected event of social distancing and restrictions due to covid 19, meaning the training offer was no longer fit for purpose and the way training and development would go ahead had to evolve to ensure progress and development for foster carers continued.

The existing Caring2Learn hub made it possible to take courses online to be delivered virtually within just 2 weeks of the first national lockdown. The online sessions and multi-agency offer have created a dynamic learning community where all carers are provided with theory, principles and practice examples that embed and combine Signs of Safety, Social Pedagogy, Restorative Practice and Trauma Informed Care.

Singletons have continued throughout the last year to facilitate the Emergency First Aid, Safeguarding and Safe Care course.

The current training offer supports the Learning Home Toolkit, for new carers this also includes the TSD criteria. The feedback received has been positive and ensures that newly approved foster carers meet the standards whilst evidencing their continued development and understanding of our guiding principles and what this means in practice.

Another Learning Home toolkit is currently in development, this will be given to all carers that have completed the original toolkit and have a Learning Homes Award, the aim is to ensure ongoing that foster carers have a portfolio that supports continued development of knowledge, skills and overall practice. This allows the service to ensure its carers remain up to date with research and guiding principles and theories set by the Local Authority. Foster carers will reapply every 3 years for a Learning Homes Award by submitting their portfolio.

Carers have been able to access mandatory training through the learning and development team virtually. Carers have also had access to the E learning modules offered via the LSCP training platform.

The table below reports the number of carers who have undertaken any form of training this year. Despite the challenges with the pandemic throughout this year, foster carers have continued to access workshops, training events and completed and worked towards Learning Homes Awards. Participation in training and workshops has increased this year by 93% when compared to last year.

Type of event	Number of carers participating
Virtual Training/workshops	474
Face to face	42

E learning completed	565
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The annual Foster Carers' Celebration/Conference took place virtually in Dec 2020; the event was a success with carers being presented with a lapel badge, certificate and gift voucher to recognize their long service. Feedback was very positive from the community regarding the event and a write up on each of the carers that received an award or joined the service was featured in the 'Our World' community magazine.

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Given the extraordinary and unsettling circumstances that the nation faced in the latter part of the financial year there remains some uncertainty about what the impact of the Covid pandemic will have on everyday life going forward. Such an unprecedented and challenging time has undoubtedly impacted on those caring for and supporting children in foster care.

From the outset of the pandemic the service proudly supported those fostering households in the hope that all efforts would serve to promote stability to children and young people in foster care during this crisis, the ever changing situation and the recovery anticipated.

The service has been and will continue to be engaged in the transformation work in working with other teams to improve outcomes for our children in care by providing care locally within Lincolnshire, rather than care at a distance to keep children and young people within their own communities, where they can be close to their networks.

The implementation of the Valuing Care toolkit is an approach which helps us explain, record and track children's needs and outcomes over time. The tool enables us to look at the needs of children across 13 different areas to build up a holistic picture of their needs and strengths. This combined with the fostering toolkit supports the matching activity and strengthens the process of identifying the skillset of the carers alongside the holistic needs of children.

The work of the transformation programme identified a number of key workstreams including the revision of the core offer to foster carers which would support the service reviewing the offer of services and practical support available. The work would highlight the County Council's unique selling point as a fostering provider and consider what attracts members of our communities to become and remain as foster carers for Lincolnshire County Council.

Embedding Caring2Learn within the fostering service will be further considered to better integrate the support offer for foster carers thus maximising the Council's ability to improve outcomes for children, minimise placement instability and provide an enhanced support and training offer to existing foster carers and strengthen the recruitment strategy.

All of the above serve as a focus to improve the provision of locally sourced foster placements that meet the needs of children in care within an increasing challenging and competitive environment.