

Annual Report

Lincolnshire Fostering Service

April 2022 -
March 2023



Lincolnshire
COUNTY COUNCIL
Working for a better future

Introduction

Lincolnshire Fostering Service is a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act 2000. Fostering Services continue to be a much needed and increasingly complex service provision in relation to children and young people who need to be cared for by Lincolnshire County Council (Local Authority). It requires a diverse range of foster carers who are skilled and resourceful to provide stability, security, and a positive experience of family life. The service provides quarterly reports to the Directorate Leadership Team and the Executive.

During the last couple of years with the gradual recovery from the Covid 19 pandemic all areas of Children's Services have necessitated a creative approach to ensure that families and foster carers have been actively supported. This is from the point of Early Help which identifies the need for help for children and families as soon as difficulties start to emerge or are likely to emerge in the future, a strong multi-agency approach to those in need and in need of protection and for those within the care of Lincolnshire who are unable to live within their families.

At the end of March 2023, the number of children in care stood at a total of 723 this being a slight decrease from March 2022 figures which were reported at 735. The number of children in care following the pandemic remains high with the highest national figures recorded of 82,170 children (Children and Young People Now, published 17th November 2022). This figure is higher than any year since current reporting began in 1994, with numbers steadily increasing year on year since 2008.

Of our total 488 were placed in foster care; this comprises of 68% of the children in care population. Of these, 45 are placed with independent fostering agencies. Given the events of the last two years this continues to be a huge testimony to the existing and new fostering families who open their homes to Lincolnshire children and do their best to provide local placements wherever possible.

Over the last three years the numbers of children in care have increased nationally and creative approaches to ensure that children can remain within their wider family or social network is an established practice. The figures reflect a continually high number of children placed within their own kinship networks, accounting for 24% (at the end of March 2023) of all foster placements which mirrors a continued commitment and drive to ensure that children who need to be cared for can feel loved and cared for by people with whom they already have a connection.

Supporting family and friends' carers alongside all other foster carers in the same way is a recognition of how Lincolnshire value and appreciates those carers that step forward and provide stability to the children. In anticipation of a forthcoming changes in relation to Kinship following the findings of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care published in May 2022, Lincolnshire have maintained their sharp focus on securing foster placements or longer-term care arrangements with those best placed to care for children who can offer them stability, security and love.

Every decision for a child in care is subject to decision making by the Local Authority and sometimes the Court to ensure that the ratification of plans have the child's best interest's paramount and at the centre of the decision-making process.

This year has seen a continued use of externally commissioned foster placements which at the end of the year has ended marginally lower than the previous year. This remains attributable owing to an overall number of carer households and the needs of the children being more difficult to match with existing carers and other children's 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, retention, training, support, and development plus kinship. The Caring2Learn initiative and ethos is business as usual and continues to have a positive impact for the service and carer community.

The development of the online community during the pandemic has continued and grown from strength to strength with continued high levels of interaction and support, higher levels of engagement in training and development and foster carer champions and others positively influencing all areas of fostering practice.

Numbers of Foster Carers

As at the end of March 2023, there were 288 foster carer households currently registered, including 58 Connected Person households and 4 Foster to Adopt households.

Type	Number of households
Task Centred including Respite	141
Parent and Child, Task Centred	6
CWD Short Break Carers	1
Placement Plus	8
Permanence only	14
Permanence, Task Centred	52
Emergency	2
Remand	2
Family or Friend (Connected Person)	58
Foster to Adopt	4

During the period 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023, 87 new fostering households were approved, including 50 connected persons and 7 Foster to Adopt. The 30 new mainstream households provided up to 52 new placements as follows:

Approved places	Number of households
1 child	12
2 children	13
3 children	5

During the period 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023, 31 mainstream households ceased fostering, owing to the following reasons:

Reason	Number of households
Family circumstances changed	7
At carer's request (not health reasons)	12
Health reasons	1
Retired	6
Carers moved out of the area	1
Dissatisfaction with service	1
Carers no longer considered suitable	1
Child has residence or adoption order agreed	1
Transferred to IFA	1

In addition, 53 Connected Person households were de-registered. Of these, 35 had Special Guardianship Orders granted for the children in their care. Five had children turning 18 during the year (and of these four transferred to the Staying Put scheme).

Six households were deregistered following the children returning to the care of their parents, three following the children moving to mainstream foster care, and two following the children moving to independent living. In one case a Special Guardianship Order for the child was granted to another family member, and in another case the child was moved to an adoptive placement.

Six Foster to Adopt households were also de-registered following successful adoption links.

The recruitment of foster carers continues to be both a local and a national challenge. The Fostering Network, the UK's largest Fostering charity details within the State of the Nation report December 2021 that almost three quarters of the nation's children in care community reside with approximately 45,370 foster families across the country. (House of Commons Debate April 2022).

It is widely anticipated that owing to the pressures and demands within the fostering sector that further attention will be given to this national challenge in light of the sector seeing an increase in children coming into care and an anticipated decline in carer and placement availability going forward.

There continues to be an emphasis to secure more good foster carers who can be the difference in the life of a child or young person. Currently the national shortage stands an estimated 9,365 homes according to the latest available data. (State of Nation Report December 2021).

The local picture during this year reflects the larger scale challenges with the gap widening between the children in care number growth and the number of fostering families becoming approved. Despite Lincolnshire experiencing a growth in interest during 2020 to 2021 the figures this year have slowed with interest, but conversation rates have reflected growth.

During the year the service has witnessed a continued commitment from carers to provide new placements and offer short term breaks(respite) and buddy up to ensure that carers and their families receive that much needed break.

The fostering community have stepped forward at times of great difficulty to create capacity and have served to support one another in the good and the more challenging of times. This reflects a positive community and the continued efforts and enthusiasm within the service including the Caring2Learn initiative serves to reinforce the meaning and value of foster carer households.

The loss of existing carers continues to be of concern and reflects the demographics of the foster carer population. There is further evidence from foster carer feedback that the support from the fostering service and community the retention "offer" and the embedded ethos involving the Caring2Learn approach are key factors in households remaining caring for local children in Lincolnshire.

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 knowledge, skills, and experience. Foster carers provide family-based services ranging from weekend short breaks or respite to supporting birth parents and carers, preparing a child for a transition to 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 prior to or during care proceedings.

The service continues to offer a small, trained group of foster carers to provide assessment placements to parents and children, usually babies. Our recruitment campaign includes strengthening this cohort. 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.

Within the last couple of years, the service has seen several Court requested parent and child assessments and where possible these are sourced in house and local to the parent, their child and wider support network. In instances where matches are not forthcoming or limited availability then these are commissioned for a period of 12 weeks as directed within the live care proceedings.

Activity and Performance 2022-2023:



Foster Carer Recruitment

Recruitment and retention remain a key priority for the fostering service, national trends and benchmarks for performance and data have helped the service understand its own strengths and plan for development through a joined-up approach and service strategy for growth.

Initial Expression of Interest (IEI)

Number of fostering IEIs received:

Financial Year	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Total
2022 to 2023	65	61	52	49	227
2021 to 2022	87	75	78	82	322
2020 to 2021	80	103	74	83	340
2019 to 2020	46	66	55	72	239
2018 to 2019	52	52	53	76	233

- 102 home visits and initial calls were undertaken.
- 35 Registration of Interest forms (ROIs) were received.
- 30 households were newly approved to foster.

The sharp rise in enquiries seen the previous year and during the pandemic have now settled and the fostering service has now seen the number of enquiries return and remain at a pre pandemic level. A great amount of effort and resource has been invested by the dedicated

recruitment team with ongoing support and commitment from the wider fostering service which it has felt has contributed towards the continued performance.

Other local authorities and independent agencies have seen a significant decline in their pre pandemic enquiry rates according to the fostering networks published data (2022). The previous sharp rise in enquiries did not bring a rise in approvals of foster carers. This was a national trend.

The number of visits completed this year has fallen, although the conversion from initial enquiry to visit has increased by 5%. A continued improvement following the 11% progression the previous year. Most fostering service experiences their biggest rate of drop out at this stage. A key recommendation in the 2022 independent audit commissioned by the National Association of Fostering Providers was to request feedback from applicants that withdraw. This has been embedded into the process.

Unfortunately, the amount of people completing this has been very low and so recently the recruitment team have started to collect feedback to also learn from those that go on to apply, learning more about why people choose to go on to choose Lincolnshire as their fostering provider. The fostering Service will continue to look at ways to improve this area of recruitment through research and ongoing development.

The support to applicants during the assessment stage has been developed further, providing them access to the fostering support hub. This has encouraged those in the application stage to engage with the training offer earlier and start to build and establish a network within the community. Supporting the transition to fostering. Since implementing this a rise in the conversion to approval has been significant.

Virtual Information Events

There have been 7 information events taken place virtually this year, these have taken place mostly in the evening time, day sessions were tried as an alternative although they were poorly attended in comparison. Most people that attend an event have already completed an IEI, all those applying are encouraged to attend an event as an initial introduction.

With regular appearances out in the community the service has determined at present that the virtual events continue to be a better use of resource, using the services marketing budget on a more specific and targeted approach to recruitment. This will remain under review.

The Fostering Service have made some changes to sessions using feedback and best practice recommendations. A member of the recruitment team leads the event with a Supervising Social Worker. Foster carers also support in the sessions, co-facilitating and answering queries. This really demonstrates the ethos and culture of welcoming foster carers as part of the wider fostering community.

Advertising

Lincolnshire fostering service competes in a competitive market with both other local authorities and the independent fostering sector, their unique selling point remains their link and connections to local people. Communities feel a sense of local responsibility and Lincolnshire Fostering service is establishing itself and growing a brand as a member of that community. Supporting local causes and getting involved in the things that local people care about.

Lincolnshire Business have also adopted a similar theme of making a commitment to its local community, the service has connected with over 50 companies that have agreed to support the fostering service, this has included offering discounts to the fostering community or helping to spread the word by sharing advertising posts.

Schools are a main part of the community and Lincolnshire Children's Services has been praised and commended for its strong relationships with education settings. The Fostering service has worked with the Virtual School to share resources and schools have helped share messages about fostering and shared information about short break or respite fostering with their staff. The recruitment team have also attended school community events and the Virtual school events to help raise awareness around the events and activities that schools can do to support the service in the recruitment of foster carers.

Lincolnshire County Council use their social media pages to share adverts and posts about fostering, regular updates are also included on internal communications.

District councils East Lindsay, Boston Borough and South Holland agreed to be part of Lincolnshire County Councils, Fostering Friendly Employer Scheme at the beginning of the financial year, and initial connections were made. The recruitment team have established a strong connection with the digital team for all three district councils, which has allowed the service to use their resources:

- Internal communications among their employees.
- Internal articles for their intranets
- Blogs and articles on their main websites
- Use of bin lorries or sweepers to advertise the service (Boston)
- Recurrent posts on their social media accounts

As well as schools and district councils, NHS buildings and staff, Libraries, Children's Centres, some LCC Buildings have been contacted and have agreed to display posters in their public areas. Moving forward, the efforts with strategic partners are being facilitated by the safeguarding partnership to further engage agencies to engage in the broader corporate parenting agenda.

Lincs FM hosted one of the biggest marketing campaigns of the year. Three different adverts (based on general fostering, short breaks, respite, and permanence) had been broadcasted up 12 times a week at their most popular airtime slots. This was also combined with interviews with a foster carer during Fostering Fortnight 2022, and Facebook paid advertisement throughout the year.

The service recognises and research strongly recommends that services use marketing material to dispel some of the myths around fostering, the Recruitment Officer ran a campaign throughout the year. "Myth busting Monday". A strategy to break common misconceptions with graphics and videos that were posted every Monday, they reached on average of 250 people per post, these were posted on the service's social media accounts.

The service has committed to attended local events, staff took part in the Lincolnshire show, Lincoln Pride and ran in the Lincoln Santa Run. The service staff has also regularly made donations to the Lincolnshire foodbank along with various local causes that are shared and promoted by the service.

Lincolnshire Fostering service continues to use online options for adverts and marketing as an effective tool for reaching the public and has been the first organic result shown on the 2 main online searching platforms, Google, and Bing for the whole financial year. Some other agencies may appear on top, under the paid category.

Facebook remains a cost-effective tool for marketing and significant progress has been made in performance this year. The service started the financial year with 1221 Facebook followers and 79 Instagram followers. At the end of March 2023, the page had 1462 Facebook followers and 124 Instagram followers. An increase of 241 and 45 respectively. Although number of followers has increased, the pages reach has been significantly increased during the last financial year. The organic social media (Facebook) posts have been seen a total of 299,008 times throughout the year. While paid posts have been seen 298,548 times by over 263,346 people across the county.

This is an increase of the organic reach of 75.1% (since previous year) and an increase of the paid advertisement of 87.7% (since previous year). There has been no increase in spending during this time on this type of advertising, but all posts were analysed monthly to reach to inform reach and engagement depending on the post, day of the week or even time of publishing.

Permanence Campaign

Despite children sometimes remaining with task centred foster carers permanently there continues to be a demand for the recruitment of new permanent foster carers. The permanence campaign ran for an extended period this year, with a dedicated advert being played on Lincs FM daily between November 22-March 23. Additional airtime was purchased during this time and an increase in enquiries since this advert went live for permanence has been recorded.

As part of the child centred recruitment strategy, anonymised profiles for children have been posted and shared from the Caring2Learn Facebook page, the main Fostering Facebook page and online hub forums. Profiles can be accessed anytime by fostering households through the foster carer's drive. This is a secure area where foster carers can access information and forms relating to the area of permanence, training, and all administrative matters. The profiles are

also shared with those carers that are interested in offering this type of care, this also includes those that are in the application stage and have an allocated Social Worker.

Website

The fostering website has been updated regularly, to ensure the information is current and up to date, the service continues to use images that will connect with local people.

Over 82% of enquires for fostering are still coming via the online platforms and all enquiries and application forms are now submitted electronically. QR codes were added this year to posters and flyers that are visible in public spaces and handed out at community events, this code directs people to the webpage.

Choosing a fostering provider has been developed to support carers with understanding the differences between the Local authority fostering and independent fostering agencies and things to consider when selecting a provider. Supporting local people to make informed decisions about their choice of foster provider is critical for the children and accountability of the public purse. Lincolnshire Fostering service encourage those applying to foster to research our service, research fostering materials, attend the information event and take up the opportunity to speak to one of our foster carers so they see and hear the full experience.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL lincolnshire.gov.uk/fostering. The page features a navigation menu with the following links:

- Our offer to foster carers
- Eligibility
- Parent and child fostering
- Choosing a fostering provider
- Become a foster carer
- Make your house their home campaign

The main content area is titled "Our offer to foster carers" and includes a photograph of a woman smiling with two children in a grassy field. To the right, there is a dark blue box with the Ofsted logo and the text "Ofsted Outstanding Provider". Below this, contact information for the fostering recruitment team is provided:

Contact the fostering recruitment team
Telephone: 01522 554114
Email: fostering@lincolnshire.gov.uk
[Like us on Facebook](#)
[Follow us on Instagram](#)

At the bottom, there is a section titled "Enquire about fostering" with a button labeled "Enquire online" and a shield icon.

Foster Carer Retention

The fostering Service lost 31 fostering households this year and it is why retention remains a priority. Maintaining those foster homes ensures the growth of the community and ability to meet the need of an increasing number of children but also provides us with the options for better matching between foster carer families and children's needs.

Finance remains a high priority for the service in terms of investment in fostering going forward and is something that remains at the core of the service strategy and review. The high rates of pay and recent increases or financial incentives to join independent fostering providers is creating a challenging marketplace for local authorities to compete within. The financial pressures nationally have also been felt locally.

The annual survey completed in December 2022 reported that 69% of foster carers participating in the survey felt the financial package needed to improve. The fostering service hope to increase allowances in April 2023 in an effort to respond to any increased national minimum allowances proposed by the government as a result of the findings from the Care Review. Additionally, given the economic challenges carers have noted the pressures on their own families and are seeking increased financial support from the service. Any response and implementation of increased allowances would go some way to carers feeling more supported in meeting the rising cost of living.

The fostering community hub across the county is an ever-developing model, adapting to meet the changing demands of the fostering community and the children it supports. The support forums continue to act as a way for foster carers to access support from other foster carers and children's service's teams. This is providing a more integrated approach to support.

This year 4 additional staff were trained in Thera play level 1 and clinical supervision is in place, ensuring, this development in the Placement Support Worker group has meant the service can now extend its therapeutic offer to more fostering households and the supervision assures safe practice.

The annual fostering survey indicated although there are some key areas of development in the support offer, foster carers are feeling increasingly supported and areas of support have improved and have been built on.

The hub continues to be supported by the foster carer champions who have roles that cover responsibilities as 'Hub Links'. They also hold social groups and support with workshop delivery.

Participation in the different areas of the hub continues to increase. Assessed need is monitored to ensure that the right kind of support is identified and delivered.

The WhatsApp listening group which has 140 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. At the request of the carers additional groups have been developed, these include a LGBT, early years, foster carers to be, early years group and men's group. These are active groups which are used daily by carers.

The closed community Facebook page also continues to offer dynamic and creative support and solutions to foster carers and has over 800 participants.

It will be important to continue to consult with the fostering community to understand better the challenges, strengths, progress made throughout the year and include them in shaping services and practice for informed change over the next 12 months.

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 9.3% at year-end which is higher than preferred. This figure suggests that most children in care in Lincolnshire experience high level of placement stability from the point of coming into care. Albeit, higher than the service and council would prefer this reflects some of the challenges and the intricacies of meeting the needs of children and matching them within our existing resources. The complexity of children requiring placements and reduced placement options has had an impact on the indicator. Likewise, when children have exited care by means of returning home, being placed for adoption, or made subject to a private law order this equally impacts on the performance indicator despite being a move that is considered to be in their best interests.

Over recent years there has been considerable focus on supporting foster carers to maintain placements. The importance of support meetings, with the launch of the fostering hub and an overall improved core offer to foster carers it remains a necessary and priority task to ensure that foster carers and their families feel supported in their valuable role.

The efforts of other agencies also contribute to the overall experience of the foster carers and the children they care for including access to support and therapy for children whose experiences may vary yet their response to their trauma has common themes.

The NI063 placement stability figure with a year-end figure reported as 64%. The Valuing Care tool is embedded within the Fostering service. The tool continues to be used alongside the children in Care Valuing Care tool to support and inform matching with a view to improving placement stability. The use of this within the Regulation 24 (kinship) assessments

and Special Guardianship assessments for court are being embedded which will reflect a whole service approach.

There remains an importance of identifying carer's strengths in accordance with a child or young person's needs. This enhanced level of integrated support has been effective in creating and sustaining placements. The tool is used in both the foster carer annual review and is also used during foster carer Form F assessment to inform foster carers ongoing learning and development needs.

Family Lincs Care

Short breaks are a continuum of services which support children in need and their families. The provision of short-term breaks offers children and young people with disabilities and their families the vital opportunity to have a valuable break from their caring role.

Short breaks are for any person aged 0 to 18 with a disability, including:

- children and young people with an autistic spectrum disorder
- severe learning disabilities
- complex health needs
- cognitive or sensory impairments
- moving or handling needs
- life-limiting conditions

Short breaks are provided under Section 17(6) of the Children Act 1989, which allows local authorities the ability to provide accommodation as part of a range of services to discharge their general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need.

Section 20(4) of the 1989 Children Act also allows local authorities to provide accommodation 'for any child within their area (even though a person who has Parental Responsibility for him is able to provide him with accommodation) if they consider that to do so would safeguard or promote the child's welfare'.

Short breaks that are provided under arrangements by the local authority whether this is frequent, intensive, or overnight stays are regulated under the 2006 Act, whether it takes place in the child's own home or a carers home.

This opportunity for families to use the Family Lincs Scheme allows children, young people, and their families a chance to take advantage of a home from home experience with a specially trained foster carer rather than the traditional residential approach.

The scheme is serviced by one fostering household which offers regular breaks to one young person and despite a strong and focussed campaign to recruit this has not created any interest. Over the years there has been an overall reduction in demand owing to parents and carers choosing to use direct payments or personal budgets which offer greater flexibility and is their personal choice.

The current Family Lincs Scheme offers 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 carer is meeting the current demand for this service as it continues to be a vital part of the fostering provision and is regularly reviewed with the Children with Disabilities Team to ensure adequate provision is available.

Permanence

Creating long term stability for children in care remains a priority for the Fostering Service. Family Finders have continued to meet monthly between 1 April 2022 and the 31 March 2023 to consider children with a care plan of permanence who need a long-term foster placement.

These meetings are predominantly in person though have the scope to use Microsoft Teams when needed to maximise attendance. Attendees at these meetings include Supervising Social Workers for the North and the South of the county, marketing and recruitment leads, a placement support worker representative and most recently a representative from the children in care team.

Over the year, twenty-nine children have been considered by family finders, of these sixteen children were newly referred from 1 April 2022 onwards. This is an increase in the previous year when twenty-two children were considered between April 2021 and March 2022.

Of the twenty-nine children considered this year, long term foster placements were identified for four children, two singletons and a sibling group of two children, with the singleton children remaining in their current placement and the sibling group moving to a newly identified placement. The sibling group were found a permanent placement as a direct result of one of the permanence events held this year. Of the remaining twenty-five children, eight of these remain in residential settings, one is with an Independent Fostering Agency and the remaining sixteen are with in-house foster carers.

Two permanence events have taken place this year, in July 2022 and January 2023. The aim of these events is to showcase some of the children who are seeking permanent placements. Approved foster carers and those in the second part of the assessment stage, are invited to attend to hear information about the children from those that know them well such as the child's social worker, placement support worker, residential keyworker, and foster carer.

The Valuing Care tools are utilised to give a better understanding of the child's presenting needs and what they need from a fostering family. The presentations that the professionals give considers the children's likes and dislikes, anecdotal information about what they are like and what strategies their carers use to support them. This is complimented by information from the school who share knowledge of the child and helps to provide a more comprehensive overview.

A set of permanent foster carers also attended the event to share their positive experiences of offering a long-term home to a child who was previously living in a residential setting and

highlighting both the support they received and the rewards they experienced. Profiles for all the children currently on family finders are all shared on the day for all foster carers to request further information. Further permanent events have been planned for the next year.

As of 31st March 2023, there remains twenty children being considered by family finders looking for permanent placements. This is a significant increase from last year where only thirteen children were seeking permanent families as of March 2022.

This year seven fostering families have been linked for Permanence at Fostering Panel creating permanency for eleven children in total; however, all of these were with the existing task centred foster carers and the children had not been referred to family finders.

Eleven fostering households have been successful in being approved as permanent carers this year, compared to last year where there were no permanent approvals made. This includes six newly approved fostering families and five changes of approvals from approved foster carers. Whilst the six sets of carers have not yet been linked with children on family finders it is hoped in the next few months this will take place. The majority have attended the permanence event and appropriate matching is taking place.

Within family finders this year the service has also focused on the level of support offered to young people during the transition period. Placement support workers are being allocated earlier to ensure the young people and carers receive the most appropriate support and that families can continue to work with a placement support worker before, during and after their transition to a permanent carer.

For several years recruitment of permanent foster carers has been difficult with most permanent matches being made with their existing carers and this year demonstrated that continued trend.

The family finders review panel continues to meet when necessary 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.

During this year thirteen children have been reviewed by this process, one of whom has been removed from family finders as permanence has been achieved.

Staying Put

Staying Put arrangements provide the opportunity for our young people to remain living with their foster carer when they reach eighteen years old, providing this is what the carer and young person wants. It offers the young person stability and continuity at this key stage of their life as they transition into adulthood. As long as a foster carer can continue to suitably accommodate and support their young person they can be approved as a Staying Put provider. Carers who become Staying Put providers receive ongoing support from the fostering service, and the young people residing with them are supported by their own designated Personal Adviser from Barnardo's Lincolnshire Leaving Care Service.

At the end of March 2023 forty-five care leavers aged 18+ were in Staying Put arrangements. Thirty-eight arrangements were within Lincolnshire and seven outside the county.

Of the forty-five young people in Staying Put, six were attending university, twenty-four were in full or part-time further education, five were in employment, two were on an apprenticeship and two were on the Care Leavers Apprenticeship Scheme. There were six young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) owing to health and wellbeing matters. These six young people are being supported to access education and, or employment through the Leaving Care Service, the Fostering Service and their Staying Put providers. For all six young people there is a plan in place which is reviewed regularly.

Partnership working between Staying Put and other services has been a key component of the service as it is vital that young adults are fully supported by a range of services to enable them to engage positively with education, employment, or training as this is a core requirement of the Staying Put scheme. Encouragingly, several young people who are engaged in further education or at university also had part-time jobs or were engaged in volunteering opportunities.

For those young people who attended university and lived away, providers received a retainer in recognition of the on-going support they provide, and to enable the young person a home to return to during holidays and continue life within their family setting. A time-limited retainer is also offered when young people join the Armed Forces or move on into alternative arrangements where professionals and the provider had shared concerns regarding the stability and longitude of the arrangement moving onto.

Staying Put has provided this group of young adults to remain living with their former carer, enabling them to maintain those lifelong relationships whilst having stability and support as they move into adulthood.

The Staying Put offer in Lincolnshire positively reflects the current legislation of the Children Act 2014 and best practice from the 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 in relation to moving to adulthood.

Over the the next 12 months Staying Put continues to receive a steady flow of referrals from children in care Social Workers. There are currently nineteen young people waiting to join the scheme when they turn 18 years of age. This figure is expected to increase as discussions are being held regularly with young people in care, and with their foster carers, preparing them for this provision and new referrals and enquiries are received regularly.

Kinship

Kinship remains a priority consideration when exploring alternative means of care for children who cannot remain in the care of their birth parents or primary carers. This starts with the children's teams early on as part of children's care planning, trajectory, and contingency planning. Family group conference and family network meetings are held to identify potential

alternative carers, and the children’s team undertake viability assessments. This identifies connected person carers and potential placements for children and young people. A referral is then made to the fostering service when these placements and carers become the care plan for the children and young people.

Kinship work consists of a variety of Regulation 24 assessments, Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments, Private Fostering assessments, and any other connected person assessments such as a 38(6) assessment and statutory checks. When placements are made under a Regulation 24 arrangement the Supervising Social Worker will support the carers in understanding their role as a foster carer, support them in meeting the National Minimum Standards 2011 and Fostering Regulations 2011 as well as completing their assessment and supporting them to meet the needs of the child(ren) placed. This is not completed in isolation but through a joined-up approach with the children’s team and any other professionals working with the family.

It is recognised the impact on children in care and this was discussed in the Independent Review of Social care report, 2022. This report highlighted the importance and value of connected person placements for children in achieving positive outcomes, allowing them to remain within their family network, which supports their identity, relationships, and culture.

The numbers below show the number of referrals and assessments regarding kinship assessments for the previous two years, and then a further table to show the numbers for 2022-23. The SGO and Stat check column has been separated to show further detail and understanding of this data. Statutory checks (stat checks) are undertaken within 38(6) assessments and private law assessments when children are not in care.

Year	Referrals	Regulation 24	Regulation 24 and SGO	SGO and Statutory checks	Private Fostering
2020 to 21	186	38	53	71	24
2021 to 22	196	24	84	39	19

Year	Referrals	Regulation 24	Regulation 24 and SGO	SGO	Statutory checks	Private Fostering
2022 to 23	195	28	67	62	17	21

The number of referrals for kinship assessments remains steady from the previous year, as has the number of reg 24 assessments. Although the number of private fostering assessments also remains steady, the number for this year also includes the expansion of Private Fostering

Regulations in relation to Ukraine children and young people. The overall number of reg 24 placements (with and without SGO) has reduced from 108 to 95.

- Of the above figures for 2022 to 2023 kinship households were approved at Fostering panel.
- 62 Special Guardianship Orders were granted in respect of 95 children.
- 7 of the Private Fostering assessments were in relation to children and young people from Ukraine.

The Kinship Preparation Course continues to be delivered and has been updated to ensure it is current and relevant. Kinship carers are encouraged to access a wide variety of training and supported to meet requirements as a foster carer. Kinship carers are invited to partake in local fostering events along with mainstream carers and have equal opportunity and access to the fostering support and community.

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 Fostering 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 2021 and Guidance, volume 2, 2010.

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

- The approval of foster carers both short and task centred and long term or permanent foster carers
- The approval of family members or friends as "connected person" carers for children who are in care with 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 Enquiries or Allegations

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, Independent Vice Chair
- Janet Morris, Independent Member
- Russell Petit, Independent Member
- April Harrison, Independent Member
- Laura Dodd, Independent Member
- Sarah Jane Davis, Independent Member
- Joy Tribe, Independent Member
- Caroline Mogg, Independent Member
- Stephen Tyrrell, Independent Member
- Maggie Nisbet, Independent Member
- Paula Bexon, Social Work Representative
- Michelle Maxfield, Social Work Representative
- Paul Fisher, Social Work Representative
- Joanne Hindley, Social Work Representative
- Ruth Roberts, Social Work Representative
- Laura Tyrrell, Social Work Representative
- Dawn Oldroyd, Panel Advisor
- Administrator in attendance at each panel

The Panel Advisor is responsible for the volume and financial management of panel business, in particular the capacity to ensure that connected person cases can be heard within 16 weeks of placement. They ensure 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 and there would always be consideration to additional panels where necessary.

In response to the emergence of Covid 19 in March 2020, the panels have continued to be held remotely via Microsoft Teams. All panel members were trained and supported to engage in a new way of working albeit this is subject to review to enable panel members to engage face to face with applicants. There have been challenges but most panel members are now participating in a 'paperless' panel process through the Councils secure intranet, SharePoint.

The introduction of remote panels via Microsoft Teams has also enabled applicants to attend panel from different areas of the country and even from abroad when timescales have coincided with planned vacations. This mode of meeting has also enabled children to attend panel from the security of their home address. There have also been creative presentations of children's views that have been shared electronically via video to panel members within the meeting (via screen share) and has included footage of teenagers being 'interviewed' for their views.

The panel have been keen to seek feedback regarding participation and those attending panel have commented on how effective this medium of communication is and it is their preference to attend virtually.

There has been the successful recruitment of a new independent panel member who is also a current local authority foster carer and a Caring to Learn Champion. There have also been

three new social work representatives sitting on panel which expands the knowledge and experience of panel members.

The Panel receives medical advice within the social workers' reports, and this is considered within the assessments with a medical advisor supporting panel too. Legal services provide advice as required, to assist in the panel's recommendations.

IFAB (Independent Fostering Advisory Board) has been up and running since February 2022 on a minimum of a monthly basis. The IFAB is attended by the Panel Advisor, and Independent Foster Panel Member and a Practice Supervisor from either fostering or the children in care team.

IFAB quality assures all foster carer annual reviews at the 4-, 7- and 10-year stage and has been well received by practitioners in offering oversight and feedback to the carer household, fostering service and wider staff regarding good practice and areas for development.

It has also enabled feedback to be shared with locality teams where foster carers have provided constructive feedback about social workers and the panel advisor has been able to challenge any practice issues to ensure continued good communication and compliance with fostering regulations.

Positive feedback has been received from IFAB Panel members about the learning they have had from participating in the panel which they are able to take back to their daily practice.

Workload of the Panel

The fostering panel has met on 26 occasions this year, 1 more than the previous year, due to the workload of panel and ability to hold meetings via teams.

Panel recommended for approval the following households:

Approval	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Task Centred, Respite	20	27	19	27	13	20
Regulation 24, 25 Kinship Care	63	56	43	33	39	39
Permanent Foster Carers	0	0	0	2	1	10
Change of Approval	4	2	6	7	0	5
Permanence Link	6	4	6	10	10	11
Reviews	33	32	23	22	17	35
Total	126	121	97	101	80	120

Reviews

Review	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Task Centred, Respite	22	15	15	12	9	19
Remand	0	0	0	0	0	1
Regulation 24, 25 Kinship Care	11	11	6	9	3	12
Permanent Fostering	0	0	0	0	4	12
Allegations	7	6	1	1	1	1

Feedback and Quality Assurance

Panel continues to seek feedback from all participants including social workers attending panel. As the panel invitation links are sent via Microsoft Teams by the panel member, feedback forms are also attached to these emails and some applicants have sent feedback either on these forms or within an email. The feedback received has been positive and suggests that applicants do not feel negatively impacted by the remote access to panel.

The reports for Panel continue to be subject to a robust quality assurance process to ensure suitable quality standards are achieved. The panel advisor routinely has oversight of all reports presented to panel and can highlight potential complexities in cases to ensure all aspects are appropriately addressed within a restorative approach. The panel advisor also offers social workers and their supervisors the opportunity to have early discussions about complex cases to ensure that appropriate support and assessments are in place prior to presentation at panel wherever possible.

Complaints

In the last year the Fostering Service have received only 1 formal complaint, this complaint was not upheld by the Investigating Manager. Despite the service looking to resolve the complaint at a low level the complaint was progressed to stage 2 of the formal complaints process by the complainant as they were not satisfied with the outcome of the complaint's investigation. The complaint was Investigated at this stage by the complaints team and was not upheld at this stage.

In 2022 to 2023 there have been no matters referred to the Independent Review Mechanism.

Foster Carer Continuous Development

The Fostering Service recognises the importance of supporting our carers to develop their understanding, skills, and knowledge in an accessible and engaging manner. We are invested in our 'Caring2Learn' model; ensuring the training offer to foster carers is one which communicates our understanding of the challenges they may face whilst equipping them with the resources they need to provide our children with nurturing, supportive and loving homes.

We recognise that no two homes are the same and carers come to fostering with differing levels of existing knowledge. Consequently, our learning and development offer provides a multitude of learning opportunities to new and experienced carers alike.

Our training consists of online and face-to-face training events which are complimented by e-learning modules. This ensures we are responsive to all preferences and learning styles. More of our training is delivered online as this aligns with the demand from carers. In April 2022, we moved to a service led booking model which allows foster carers to book onto training via email, phone or through their supervising social workers. Foster Carers can also still access training via the Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP) website however the majority choice to use the caring to learn booking route.

We recognise the importance of providing a responsive training service, so we continually monitor the uptake of training across the year, and formally review our training offer on an annual basis ensuring we take account of carer requests and service needs. Although we deliver many training courses ourselves, we recognise the importance of drawing upon knowledge and expertise held outside of the authority and of incorporating lived experiences. As such we work closely with our Foster Carer champions who support in the delivering of special interest workshops around matters that commonly affect children who have experienced trauma.

The service has also developed strong working relationship with training providers 'Crisp and Crane' who deliver Therapeutic Crisis Intervention, 'Singletons' who deliver First Aid and Paediatric First Aid and 'Breaking the Cycle' who deliver Safer Care and Safeguarding through a combination of online and in person options. It is important to also recognise the huge number of courses and workshops that are available and delivered by partner agencies and organisations. Fostering have ensured carers are informed of learning opportunities they can access through health Services, the Fostering Network, and the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. These expand the amount of learning opportunities to support personal and professional development without the use of additional service resource and finance. Our approach to training appears to be appreciated by foster carers as evidenced by 100% of carers who completed the annual foster carers survey indicating they wished for the combination of in-person and virtual training to continue.

All foster carers are required to complete the Training, Support and Development standards (TSDs) with predefined timescales (18 months for connected carers and 12 months for mainstream carers) to demonstrate they fully understand the requirements of the role. To support our carers in this endeavour and ensure they are familiar with the guiding principles

and policies of Lincolnshire County Council it was agreed that the TSDs and Learning Home Toolkit would be combined.

The service sees these come in for assessment resulting in carers receiving a “Learning Homes Award”. There is an expectation on approved carers to resubmit a portfolio every three years to ensure on-going personal and professional development. Currently there are 85 foster homes that have achieved their Learning Homes Award. The service is seeing the number of awarded homes continue to rise, which is testament to the commitment of our foster carers and staff alike.

In response to the common themes impacting on placement stability and in considering service needs several courses will be introduced over the coming year, these include training courses on extremism, Child Sexual Exploitation, Child Criminal Exploitation, County Lines and Drugs.

The training we deliver ourselves ensures carers are provided with theory, principles and practice examples that embed and combine Signs of Safety, Social Pedagogy, Restorative Practice and Trauma Informed Care. These approaches underpin everything we do within the service and are also used within the carers supervision and support visits by Supervising Social Workers and further embedded by Placement Support Workers which ensures a consistent and joined up approach across the service. The 6-week Therapeutic Parenting Workshop has been highly successful as demonstrated by take up and feedback, consequently we are now running this course more frequently and moving forward will be offering twilight sessions in response to carers requests.

The table below reports the number of carers who have undertaken training this year. As can be seen foster carers have continued to access workshops and training events. This is generally consistent with the previous year.

Type of event	Number of carers participating
Virtual Training, workshops	706
Face-to-face	356
E-learning completed	224 for part year

Forward Plan

During this year, the fostering community and their support networks have continued to support the children they care and made sterling efforts to support one another along their journey. Their commitment, resilience and tenacious approach to this voluntary role continues to ensure that a high proportion of children in care are in fostering families and affords them a continued opportunity to live in a local family setting.

Despite the existing fostering families Lincolnshire have there is a continued to need to retain these people and recruit new households who can join this strong and resourceful community to offer local placements for Lincolnshire children.

The national challenges relating to fostering are known, understood, and felt across the sector which is reinforced by the data revealing that over the last few years more carers have left fostering than joined and the children in care figures continue to rise. The impact of the National Transfer Scheme (for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) tells part of the children in care figure rising but not all of it.

Lincolnshire continue to work tirelessly with the local community, partners and via other enterprises to reach out to communities to help and support to care for vulnerable children. Carers who are deemed suitable are thoroughly assessed, approved, prepared, and supported on their journey into fostering and beyond within the auspices of the regulations and National Minimum Standards 2011.

The Christmas 2022 advert by John Lewis PLC reinforced the value and importance of how making one simple lifestyle choice can engage people into thinking about fostering and this advert served to ensure that the agenda for children and young people is never far away from people's thoughts and hearts. Lincolnshire were appreciative to this retailer for grasping the issue and doing their best to raise the profile of children in care and care leavers.

The service continues to review their practices and in doing so work well with the Valuing Care toolkit and strive to match children with the right carers at the right time. This tool is used within assessments, reviews of carers and is almost embedded within the Kinship and Court directed assessments. This together with the ongoing development of the hub and the hopeful increase in fostering allowances in the new financial year means that Lincolnshire are at the forefront of good practice.

Fostering in conjunction with the Adoption service have revised the Special Guardianship Reports and Support Plan which are trauma informed and future focused to support children leaving care and living within a family setting without the need for statutory intervention. This is a critical part of the work that the service does in supporting children with their exit from foster care where it is assessed and endorsed as a child centred decision that considers the voice of the child and those important to the plan.

This work is vital and is likely to be further reconsidered by the recommendations from the Independent Review in Social Care published in 2022 which serves to capitalise and reform the Kinship agenda and review implement regional care co-operatives whose focus would be on creating a better marker for placements whilst ensuring that exorbitant costs and profits for private providers is addressed. This is a good news story in principle; however, it is yet to be seen whether a regionalised approach to care placements fixes these existing and profound challenges being faced day by day.

Despite the challenges the service has and continues to look forward and proudly support our children and continually strive collaboratively with other teams to improve outcomes for our children in care by providing care locally within Lincolnshire where possible. As outlined there continues to be a dependence on commissioned placements for some children and every decision is individually considered.

The next year is going to be a testing time but with a positive fostering workforce, the continued investment of fostering families and our genuine commitment our efforts to give children and young people safe, supportive and nurturing environments where they can thrive and be happy remains our absolute priority.

Our thanks are extended to all foster carers and their supporters for their efforts and care they afford every child.

Deborah Crawford

Head of Service, Fostering and Adoption