

# Public Document Pack

## NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

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| <b>CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY<br/>PANEL</b> |
|--------------------------------------|

**28 February 2024**

|                  |                          |                        |                               |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Chairman:</b> | Councillor Trevor Foster | <b>Venue:</b>          | F36, Church Square<br>House   |
| <b>Time:</b>     | 2.00 pm                  | <b>E-Mail Address:</b> | dean.gillon@northlincs.gov.uk |

### AGENDA

1. Substitutions
2. Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests and personal or personal and prejudicial interests and declarations of whipping arrangements (if any).
3. To take the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2023 as a correct record and authorise the Chairman to sign (Pages 1 - 2)
4. Public speaking requests, if any.
5. Fostering Arrangements in North Lincolnshire - Fostering Annual Business Report 2022-23. Discussion with the Director: Children and Families and Senior Colleagues (Pages 3 - 30)
6. Added item, if any
7. Any other items that the Chairman decides are urgent by reason of special circumstances that must be specified.

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# Public Document Pack Agenda Item 3

## NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

### CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

6 December 2023

**PRESENT:** - Cllr T Foster (Chairman)

Cllr L Yeadon (Vice-Chair), Cllr M Armiger, Cllr P Clark, Cllr J Longcake, and Cllr K Vickers.

Mr Howsam

The meeting was held at the s01e, Church Square House.

#### 25 **SUBSTITUTIONS**

Cllr Clark substituted for Cllr Wells. Cllr K Vickers substituted for Cllr Patterson.

#### 26 **DECLARATIONS OF DISCLOSABLE PECUNIARY INTERESTS AND PERSONAL OR PERSONAL AND PREJUDICIAL INTERESTS AND DECLARATIONS OF WHIPPING ARRANGEMENTS (IF ANY).**

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests and personal or personal and prejudicial interests.

No whip was declared.

#### 27 **TO TAKE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 3 NOVEMBER 2023 AS A CORRECT RECORD AND AUTHORISE THE CHAIRMAN TO SIGN**

**Resolved** – That the minutes of the meeting of this panel held on 3 November 2023, having been printed and circulated amongst the members, be taken as read and correctly recorded and be signed by the Chairman.

#### 28 **PUBLIC SPEAKING REQUESTS, IF ANY.**

There were no public speaking requests.

#### 29 **ANNUAL REPORT OF LOCAL ARRANGEMENTS TO SAFEGUARD AND PROMOTE THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 2022/23**

The Chairman welcomed Rachel Smith, Interim Director: Children & Families, Jemima Flintoff, Assistant Director - Education, and Tom Hewis, Assistant Director - Children's Standards & Regulation, to the meeting.

The Chairman explained that Rachel, Jemima and Tom had been invited to update members on the annual report on local arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. This was a key

**CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL**  
**6 December 2023**

safeguarding document, and the meeting allowed members to seek assurance that all necessary arrangements were in place to ensure the wellbeing of local children and young people.

Rachel provided a detailed presentation on the report, describing ongoing work to improve local arrangements further, including by strengthening independent scrutiny of all sectors.

The Chairman then led a discussion on the presentation, with the panel asking questions about the mechanisms in place to prevent and address all forms of child exploitation, local intelligence, and training. Rachel, Jemima and Tom responded accordingly, confirming that the local arrangements were robust and wide-ranging. A further discussion on crossovers between safeguarding and youth offending was held. Officers confirmed that the local rate of youth offending compared favourably with peers. Members reflected that the report was an excellent publication, and that the panel had confidence in the local arrangements.

**Resolved** – (a) That Rachel Smith, Jemima Flintoff and Tom Hewis be thanked for the presentation and for responding to the panel's questions; and (b) that the report be noted and welcomed.

**30 ADDED ITEM, IF ANY**

There was no added items for consideration at the meeting.

**31 ANY OTHER ITEMS THAT THE CHAIRMAN DECIDES ARE URGENT BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT MUST BE SPECIFIED.**

There was no urgent business for consideration at the meeting. The Chairman wished everyone present a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

SAFE WELL PROSPEROUS CONNECTED

## Fostering Annual Business Report 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31st March 2023

Report Author – Anna Heath, Lead Officer  
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| Status      | Date         | By Whom    |
|-------------|--------------|------------|
| Approved    | October 2023 | Tom Hewis  |
| Lead        | August 2023  | Anna Heath |
| Review Date | August 2024  | Tom Hewis  |

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## Fostering Annual Business Report Period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023

### 1. Introduction

In North Lincolnshire our **One Family Approach** aims to create a system that works for all children, young people and families, where we work together to enhance our partnerships and commission integrated help and support for children and young people.

Our ambition is for children to thrive in their families, achieve in their schools and flourish in their communities.

With a focus on One Council, One Family and One Place, and enabling strong and safe communities, North Lincolnshire Council has agreed with its partners a vision for all children and young people living in North Lincolnshire expressed through the North Lincolnshire Children's Strategy – 'Children and Young People's Challenge'.

North Lincolnshire Council believes that local family care is the best form of alternative care for most children who enter the care of the Council. It has therefore invested heavily in its fostering provision. Throughout 2022 – 2023, North Lincolnshire Fostering continued to receive excellent support from Elected Members both in terms of the Council's ongoing commitment to effective fostering and as Foster Panel Members.

We are of the view that a high quality of care is best achieved by providing foster care that protects children, promotes their rights and maximises their life chances. Central to the role of North Lincolnshire Fostering is a commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion. This commitment is inherent in our council values of equality of opportunity, excellence, self-responsibility, and integrity, and underpins our focus on prioritising the most vulnerable. Additionally, North Lincolnshire Council believes that it is our role, and indeed our responsibility alongside our partners, to challenge racism and prejudice in all its forms by upholding our values and the highest standards of behaviour, and by committing to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices to reduce inequalities.

The annual report should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Statement of Purpose 2023-2024. The Statement of Purpose sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which North Lincolnshire Council carries out the functions of North Lincolnshire Fostering. This annual business reports provides details of activity over the year 2022-2023 and plans for the forthcoming year.

This business report updates on the management outcomes and financial position of North Lincolnshire Fostering. (Fostering National Minimum Standards 25.7). The executive is expected to monitor the management and outcomes and to be satisfied regarding effectiveness and the achievement of good outcomes for children.

### 2. Progress and Achievements during 2022-2023

- **Achieving 'Outstanding' grading in Ofsted inspection** – The inspection of North Lincolnshire local authority children's services was undertaken by Ofsted in October 2022. The local authority achieved an Outstanding grading and within this, there was significant reference to the successes of fostering, including -

The 'One Family' and 'You Say Who' approach is embodied throughout the fostering service and by foster carers so that there is high aspiration for children to have a choice in deciding which family they can live with. As a result, leaders have ensured that children in care live locally and with local authority foster families.

- **A robust plan to recruit foster carers** - To achieve the ambition to recruit new carers and develop upon the previous years there has been the embedding of a dedicated

marketing officer. Recruitment officers have been raising the profile of fostering within the community, corporate parents and with local businesses. This post keeps the profile high and ensures timely responses to enquiries. The recruitment and embedding of a dedicated marketing officer ensures a targeted online presence which is noted to be the most effective current recruitment tool.

Every enquiry is tracked and supported by a dedicated team member who will support the potential applicants throughout the process, developing positive relationships from the earliest point. Supporting applicants in this way creates a speedy and efficient process for both stage 1 and 2.

- **Continued development of the integration of commissioning** – Development of a full time sufficiency officer provides dedicated capacity within the team, both in relation to family finding internally and the quality assurance and oversight of external provision. This has enabled the streamlining of processes around external provision to ensure children are receiving the highest quality care possible and that the local authority is achieving value for money in terms of externally commissioned provision.
- **High quality support for fostering families** – The full time sufficiency officer provides a consistent point of contact for foster carers in the absence of their allocated fostering Social Worker. Feedback from carers is that through this, they feel well supported and have access to an immediate response.

Foster carers continue to have access to weekly foster carer coffee mornings which are supported and arranged by the local Foster Carers Association (FCA). In addition to this, foster carers are able to attend bi-monthly meetings with managers within Children and Families, these are often also supported by guest speakers who provide relevant updates and information. Adapting to people's busy lives and utilising learning and new approaches we have offered a range of recruitment and support both face-to-face and virtually. We also offer a range of virtual training courses and have offered virtual recruitment events to support ongoing engagement.

- **Work with local businesses** - The coming year will see the relationships with local businesses continue to strengthen based on the work during 2022/2023. The area based targeted approach to recruitment and fostering friendly businesses has already led to new collaborations, advertising opportunities and discounts for foster families.

Development during the year has included larger employers supporting the recruitment of carers, which has helped promote and raise the profile including large chains that have advertised our events on their social media and hosted drop ins. This will continue to progress with the aim to create more fostering friendly employers across the area. The range of opportunities for young people and discounts for family has also continued to increase as part of our offer to families.

- **Further reduction of children living with external providers** - North Lincolnshire's use of externally commissioned foster families remains very low. This was also highlighted in the inspection of North Lincolnshire Local Authority Children's Services undertaken by Ofsted in October 2022 as an area of good practice - "Impressively the council has not used any external fostering placements for children in the last two years"

There is an extensive and robust process in place to reduce the need to place a child outside of North Lincolnshire provision based on the child at the centre and a partnership approach to meeting their holistic needs within their own community. The low number placed externally reflects the skills of carers in North Lincolnshire and



prior to consideration of any child for a commissioned placement all options within local provision must have been fully explored with robust management oversight, the flexible use of resources and formal decision making to ensure it is fully in line with the child's needs.

- No children were placed with external carers during the year and on 31st of March 2023 the number of children in care living in Independent Fostering Agency fostering families continued to be 3, maintaining the high performance in placing children within North Lincolnshire.

Children placed with fostering agencies externally;

2022/23 - 3  
 2021/22 - 3  
 2020/21 - 7  
 2019/20 - 9  
 2018/19 - 7  
 2017/18 - 11

Overall, only 1% of the children in care population live with externally commissioned foster carers.

There has been a further reduction in the number of children living in external residential provision. As of March 31<sup>st</sup> 2023, there were 2 children living in external residential provision which equates to 1% of the children in care population.

Placing children locally with our own carers is a key priority in both ensuring the best outcomes for children and achieving the priorities of the North Lincolnshire Council Plan.

- **Flexible training opportunities** - to further enhance foster carers skills and confidence to support children and young people throughout their life journey North Lincolnshire Fostering offers a mixture of direct and online training. Continuing to deliver "bite size" learning where foster carers can attend training sessions on topics pertinent to providing safe and nurturing care. This includes attachment, therapeutic parenting, UASC, understanding allegations, and NVR. This is part of a developing suite of opportunities for foster carers to access training appropriate to their work and family commitments.

This interactive and accessible training compliments the online learning suites available ensuring training for different learning styles. Fostering continue to consult with carers around training opportunities they wish to access. Foster carers have the opportunity to attend the wide range of training available to social care staff. Carers attended alongside Social Workers and other staff across the workforce reinforces their identity as professionals working with children and young people.

- **Supported lodgings expansion** - There has been a continued emphasis on supported lodgings recruitment, with dedicated Supported Lodgings awareness and recruitment activity. As at the end of March 2023 there were 4 supported lodgings hosts. In preparation for the implementation of the Supported Accommodation Regulations in October 2023, North Lincolnshire has taken forward the approach of oversight and approval of supported lodgings hosts via a multi-agency panel. This has similarities to the foster panel, but on a smaller scale, and allows for the scrutiny and independent oversight of approval of supported lodgings hosts.

- **Voice** – The voice and views of children and young people remains central to practice within North Lincolnshire. The AGM for the children in care council took place in January 2023. The council have consulted on the corporate parenting promise, interviewed staff and carers, and provided feedback in relation to shaping practice for the future.
- **Liaison with Foster Panel** - It was recognised in the year that feedback with panel would benefit from being more regular and two way. The Foster Panel advisor meets with both the panel chairs on a regular basis to ensure consistency across the panels. Feedback is now gathered from panel members collectively at the end of each panel and MS forms are used for those who attended panel or panel training. Panel is then updated with changes and innovations that occur from their feedback. This has included adapting and reviewing how the panel get feedback from young people. It has also led to altering the panel agenda to highlight the type of foster carer review being presented.
- **The North Lincolnshire Foster Carers Association** – The FCA remains strong and well presented at foster carer consultation events. The chairperson has been an FCA member for many years and a foster carer for over 35 years. They continue to meet on a regular basis and offer community events such as coffee mornings.
- **Private fostering awareness raising** - has been held successfully during the year with regular social media campaigns, training opportunities for children’s workforce and the dedicated awareness raising week in September. During this week all materials such as posters were redistributed across corporate parents, ensuring health and education and partner settings were fully informed. The week also invited professionals from across all areas to open training sessions held over the week. Professionals invited include: schools, school nurses, Children and Families, school nursing, health visitors, probation, housing, Ongo, police community services, education inclusion, fire brigade, CAMHS, education psychology, colleges, YOS, advocates, Delta, we are with you and more. A number of professionals from across a range of partners participated. Regular ‘phone in’ sessions were advertised to members of the public through our social media campaigns, enabling anyone to contact with a query. We also completed a roadshow of awareness raising stalls across the county to talk to those who may not know what it is.
- **Oversight of practice through thematic and file audits** – throughout the year, a variety of audit activity is undertaken to ensure both the best quality practice and compliance with regulatory requirements. This has found that North Lincolnshire Fostering is compliant in all areas and practice is consistently strong. The outcomes of audits are overseen by managers and inform the Case Audit Meetings attended by managers from across Children and Families.
- **Foster families are central to recruitment** - Families are key to the retention of carers - through buddy system and support groups - but also vital to recruitment. The website is updated with quotes and stories of real-life carers. Our carers also attend Skills to Foster Training and deliver training on the plan, including a session during the induction day. The carers also assist with our roadshows and drop in events. They have been pivotal in our strategy. Young people contribute to Skills to Foster Training talking about their experiences and interviewing prospective carers individually and as a group.

### 3. Feedback from foster carers, children in care and foster carers’ children

- The involvement of children, carers, family members and all involved in the fostering role is an integral part of the delivery of an effective, learning and developmental fostering. Feedback, consultation and involvement is sought and facilitated at every opportunity and is embedded with practice. This includes formally considering every foster carer's experience of North Lincolnshire Fostering annually through their contribution to their fostering review as well as regular feedback sought through supervisory visits by their Fostering Social Worker. Opportunities are also through the foster carer bi monthly meeting, coffee mornings, email surveys, events and the Foster Carers Association.
- North Lincolnshire Fostering actively seeks views, feedback and suggestions from foster carers, children in care, children of foster carers, birth parents of children and other professionals. This is embedded in day-to-day practice and also through a variety of opportunities including:
  - Bi-monthly foster carer meetings
  - The North Lincolnshire council foster carer facebook page
  - Annual reviews
  - Consultation events

Children in foster care are consulted through:

- Individual children's care plan reviews
- Children in Care Council and participation events
- Foster carer annual reviews
- Quarterly questionnaires
- Consultation events

Children of foster carers feedback is encouraged, including via:

- Supervisory visits
- Annual foster carer review

Birth parent feedback is encouraged, including via:

- Being consulted as part of the individual children's Care Plan reviews
- Care Planning Meetings
- Engagement with the Holding On Project

Feedback is regularly ascertained from carers through a variety of means, including supervisory visits, annual reviews and observations of staff.

**Examples of comments by carers include:**

*"The support offered continues to be invaluable, particularly with regard to the following key areas:-*

*Communication between all parties*

*Identifying needs and support for the children*

*Offering helpful differing perplexities and insights”*

*“the support from our FSW is amazing”*

*“fostering is everything we thought it would be and more. We feel privilege to help children. We wouldn’t be able to do this without the support from our FSW”*

*“thank goodness for our fostering social worker. We know they are busy and their time is very precious but they always make time for us and support us incredibly”*

*“support from our FSW is excellent. She always calls us back, emails or texts us as soon as she can. She always tries to find a solution to help us. She always listens to us. We couldn’t look after our young person without her support”*

*“Fostering is the best thing that I ever did, it has changed my life for the better”*

*“the assessment process felt quick, smooth and the worker was very easy to get along with. It felt like she was just coming around for a chat rather than completing the assessment. It was a true reflection and that it was written better than I could have written about myself”.*

*“Just wanted to say a massive thank you for the Skills to Foster course we have both been on this week, what a wonderful course and Kate and Catherine were amazing, we can’t thank them enough and we’ve loved spending the time with them and the other foster carers over the last 2 and a half days, the workers were so welcoming and made the course enjoyable and interesting”*

**Children in foster care have said:**

*"All of my foster carers were amazing."*

*"I enjoy everything about staying with my fostering family, especially playing with (other child) and going out. There is nothing I would change, I love staying with my short breaks carer."*

*"They helped me when I first moved out, still in contact. I was with them for 9 years, it was ace."*

*"I want to thank you all for your amazing hard work and that you brought me to live with my foster parents. Without your help, me and my sister would have been in the same place with our parents, feeling unloved and unhappy."*

*You have made it possible for me to see my real Dad which has made me mega happy too."*

*"My foster carers are nice, kind, helpful and they help me with my confidence in swimming. I also feel like I’m part of the family and that makes me feel really good."*

*"I love everyone in my family, they are like blood. Everyone is amazing in our house!"*

*"my foster carers are so nice to me. They are sweet!"*

*"the best thing about living with my fostering family is we have lots of animals and we have lots of cars. We also enjoy my sister and foster carers baking. It’s very good!"*

**Children of carers have said:**

*"The best thing about being part of a fostering family is I’m able to be proud to help people in this was."*

*"I often see my fostering Social Worker and she is a delight"*

*"I feel really good about our foster sister living with us"*

*"Dear my big little sister, I love you so much and my life would be so boring without you. So I wish you the best birthday ever and no matter what I will be by your side non stop until the end of our lives xoxo my big sister, happy birthday love from your little sister"*

*"I like being part of a fostering family and I think we do a very special thing and help lots of children"*

Foster carers are valued as core members of the team working with and caring for the child and North Lincolnshire Fostering ensures that there are opportunities for foster carers to consult with senior managers and council members through attendance at foster carer functions, bi-monthly meetings and coffee mornings.

All newly approved foster carers are encouraged to complete a panel evaluation form post attendance at panel. Feedback received has continued to be positive about the panel including how attendees were made to feel comfortable by the panel chair and panel members and that's it's less formal than they thought it would be. Feedback about the application process has also continued to be positive. With carers reporting that they felt they received excellent support from their assessing fostering social worker and recruitment officer throughout the process.

All attendees are encouraged to complete a course feedback form following completion of the **Skills to Foster training** course. Applicants are encouraged to comment on course content, presentation and venue. This feedback is used by the facilitator to influence future such courses held in the area.

#### 4. Challenges and Developments during 2022-2023

- Sufficiency has been highlighted as the most significant area of need within North Lincolnshire fostering over the year. This is a challenge being experienced nationally in relation to fostering with a 2021 analysis by think-tank the Social Market Foundation predicting a shortage of 25,000 carers in England by 2026. As outlined within other areas of this report, there is significant work being undertaken in relation to recruitment and retention of fostering families to increase sufficiency across North Lincolnshire.

This has been further supported through the development of the financial support package for carers, which during the year included planning to reimburse Council Tax for carers and funding of a temporary 'cost of living' additional ATA paid to all carers caring for children until increases to the national rate was set by the government commencing April 2023.

- Long term stability during 2022/23 was in line with previous years, but showed a dip on 2021/2022. The year end figure for children being in the same placement for more than 2 years and in care for 2.5 years was 68% (43/63) (the 2021/22 result was 74%). This result is below the latest National and Stat Neighbours results for 2021/22 both at 71%.
- Analysis of the children in this cohort identified that it was impacted due to children who had returned to family members, but had not left care, therefore experiencing overall a positive outcome of restoration. In addition to this, due to the figures only considering children aged under 16 at the year end, it does not incorporate the

significant number of young people aged over 16 who are experiencing stability within their fostering family.

- The Foster panel continues to take place virtually and this has worked well for foster carers and panel members, particularly in terms of enabling carers who work to attend virtually around their work commitments. The use of virtual panels remains under continuous review to ensure this is meeting the needs of carers, their families, panel members and the fostering team.
- The **market in relation to the recruitment and retention** of foster carers has continued to become increasingly competitive in North Lincolnshire as independent agencies have broadened their area to include North Lincolnshire. Our recruitment efforts have been strengthened through a dedicated marketing officer and recruitment officers. We have a robust recruitment strategy of monthly marketing campaigns highlighting areas of fostering and supported lodgings to the public through multi-media means. We have a strong social and local media presence and clear branding. Brochures and posters are frequently updated to remain engaging and relevant.
- **Advertising opportunities** during the year included; Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Radio interviews, newspaper, in-app advertising, free press, market stalls at community events, poster distribution and links with corporate parents. Prospective carers or supported lodgings providers can call in, attend virtual events, email or complete an expression of interest form on the website. We have removed the text option as this was not being used.

The year saw an impact on enquiries, transitioning out of the pandemic, however improvement is noticeable with visits to our website and interactions with our social media post increasing during the second half of the year. The number of approvals was significantly impacted upon, despite the robust recruitment plan with a reduction in new approvals. Those not progressing cited reasons such as change in circumstances or employment as uncertainties. Oversight has ensured that all enquiries are responded to in a timely way.

Moving forward, in October we are planning the launch of the 'chat with us' function on our website. September saw the first 'Friends of Fostering' newsletter, which members of the public can sign up to receive facts and information about fostering. To date, 66 people are signed up for this. Following their enquiry, a recruitment officer will speak with them and remain in touch throughout the application process as a familiar and supportive link, avoiding any delay or concerns.

- The **number of short breaks for children with disabilities** has reduced since last year as some of those accessing the support last year have since turned 18. At least 6 young people are accessing s17 shortbreaks. To ensure we are offering the services needed North Lincolnshire Fostering has worked closely with partners in the Children's Disability Team to review all referrals and develop a tracking and matching process. We have worked closely with children and birth families to attend matching meetings, meeting prospective carers and having a voice on the services they need.
- There has also been developments in relation to the branding of short breaks for children with disabilities, with this now known as 'short breaks+' rather than Butterfly short breaks. This is more succinct and offers a better understanding from the outset of the additional expectations of caring for children with disabilities.

## 5. Populations: Children in Care

North Lincolnshire Fostering meets the requirements of the sufficiency duty under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 by providing sufficient high quality foster placements to meet the assessed needs of children in the care of North Lincolnshire Council, including children with disabilities receiving a series of short breaks and unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children.

At the end of 2022/2023 there were 188 children in care, which is a slight decrease to the year end figure of 192 at the end of 2021/22.

Whilst continuing to be low, entrants to care during 2022/2023 increased compared to the previous year. The number of entrants to care during 2022/2023 was 78 episodes, this is higher than the 2021/2022 entrants when there were 63. During the year, 13% (10/78) of the children entering care were unaccompanied asylum seeking children, this is in line with 2021/2022 which was also 13% (8/63).

The number of children living with connected persons carers increased to 25 in 2022/2023, from 22 in 2021/2022.

Children leaving care aged 16 years and over who remained looked after until their 18th birthday is above Stat Neighbours & England averages. During 2022/2023, 90% (36/40) of young people leaving care aged 16 years and over remained looked after until 18 years, during 2021/2022 this figure was 74% (20/27)

## 6. Populations: Foster Carers

As of 31/03/23 there were 116 approved households and 235 places in total, this compares to 126 approved households and 255 places last year and reflects the challenges faced in recruitment and retention nationally. The number of approved households includes 87 approved mainstream carer households, 19 connected person households and 10 short break households.

### Foster Carer Approvals

There were 5 carer mainstream and short breaks households approved in 2022/2023, (compared to 6 new approvals in 2021/2022). However, as there was an increase in enquires in the second half of 2022/2023, it is anticipated that approvals will increase during 2023 as these carer's assessments are concluded. For 2022/2023 there were an additional 27 family & friends carers, approved or temporarily approved, compared to 16 in 2021/2022. For 2022/2023 there were 2 fostering to adopt carers.

### Enquiries

There were 102 enquiries in 2022/2023 compared to 78 enquiries in 2021/22. There was a spike in May which is linked to the increased advertising activity during Foster Care Fortnight and again in January following the Christmas and New Year campaigns. 39 of these enquiries progressed to an initial visit.

The conversion rate from enquiry to initial visit continued to be positive and comparable to the previous year. The number of connected persons assessments remained consistent, with 8 undertaken to completions within the year.

| Period<br>(figures at end of period)            | 2020/2021 | 2021/2022 | 2022/2023 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Number of enquiries                             | 116       | 78        | 102       |
| Number of initial visits                        | 53        | 33        | 39        |
| Number of households attending skills to foster | 45        | 26        |           |
| Total number of approvals (mainstream)          | 19        | 6         | 5         |
| Total Number of approvals (connected persons)   | 12        | 5         | 8         |

North Lincolnshire Fostering Team Managers have identified performance priorities and monitoring processes are in place to ensure optimum performance and attainment of targets set. This includes the use of monthly performance information which is shared with the team at team meetings.

### Resignations

There were 20 de-registrations of mainstream and short break carers during 2022-23. The reasons were:

| Deregistration reason<br>(Mainstream & short break) | Number of foster carer households |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Initiated by foster carer                           | 13                                |
| Family adopted the child/children                   | 1                                 |
| Moved to an independent fostering agency            | 3                                 |
| Initiated by Foster service                         | 3                                 |

The 13 mainstream & short break carer households that chose to resign were for the following reasons:

| Deregistration reason when initiated by foster carer | Number of foster carer households |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Circumstances related to birth children              | 1                                 |
| Carers health reasons                                | 3                                 |
| Retirement   | 2                                 |
| Other  | 7                                 |

The resignations in 2022/2023 are broadly in line with those of last year, where the final figure of resignations was 18. The reasons for resignations reflect the ageing fostering population in that a quarter of the resignations were related to health and retirement.

### Exemptions and Variations

These have been utilised where necessary to support a young person in an emergency or where it is considered in the best interest of the children. There were 14 households with a



variation and 7 carer households with exemptions in 2022/2023. There have been 10 (households) exemptions in operation at some point in the year; this compares to 5 for 2021/2022. This reflects the lower numbers of fostering households and higher numbers of resignations.

The reasons for the exemptions were as follows:

| Reason for exemption                      | Number of foster carer households |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Considered in child's best interest       | 6                                 |
| Sibling group                             | 2                                 |
| Child joining sibling                     | 1                                 |
| Child covered by Emergency Placement regs | 1                                 |

| Period                                 | 2019/2020<br>Total | 2020/2021<br>Total | 2021/2022<br>Total | 2022/2023<br>Total |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Number of new exemptions in the period | 4                  | 3                  | 4                  | 7                  |
| Number of new variations in the period | 12                 | 4                  | 13                 | 14                 |

### Recruitment Activity

Sufficiency remains positive as all children who entered care during the year were placed with North Lincs carers, those placed historically out of area and remaining in external placements has reduced over the year.

Recruitment in the year has included a range of strategies both virtually and physically.

Activity has included:

- Various poster campaigns,
- working with local businesses for offers and incentives including the re-launch of the Fostering Friendly Employers scheme in March 2023,
- social media campaigns, now also utilising LinkedIn to reach businesses,
- drop in events
- newspaper adverts
- Digital screens across the town centre include rolling adverts for fostering and supported lodgings on a rolling programme.
- Use of the digital screens in Hubs and NL Active centres,
- Businesses across localities have been contacted regarding fostering friendly schemes.
- Railing posters
- Updates to the website
- Social media campaigns advertising the joint fostering and supported lodgings information events taking place.
- Information events Bimonthly
- Social Media campaigns regularly run changing messages throughout the year
- News Direct Magazine and newspaper adverts have been placed
- Utilising the Early Years and Childminders newsletters
- Radio interviews linked to campaigns

- Sponsored advertising on social media (Facebook, twitter and Instagram)
- Updates to the website including review of the enquiry form
- Recruitment stalls throughout the year at festivals and other events

### Complaints and allegations

There have been 3 complaints received in 2022/2023. 2 complaints were received from children/young people and 1 was received from a child's parents. None were upheld.

There were no complaints in 2021/22.

There have been 4 foster carers been subject to allegations in 2022/2023, 3 made by fostered children and 1 by other sources. This is fewer than the year end number for 2021/22 which was 6.

| Categories of abuse | Number of allegations |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Physical abuse      | 3                     |
| Sexual Abuse        | 0                     |
| Neglect             | 0                     |
| Emotional Abuse     | 1                     |

4 referrals were made to the LADO and 2 Section 47 enquiries were made.

The outcome of the allegations are as follows:

| Outcome   | Number of allegations |
|---|-----------------------|
| Concern resolved – no further action  | 2                     |
| Continued monitoring for an agreed period                                     | 1                     |
| Concern remained, referred to fostering panel to review foster carer approval | 1                     |

### Incidents

All accidents and incidents are monitored monthly by a team manager and lead officer. There have been no notifiable incidents in the last 12 months.

There were 2 incidents of physical restraint by 2 carers during 2022/2023. The children were seen and have talked through the situation with their social workers. No concerns have been raised regarding the use of the intervention and all were addressed through de-brief meetings and reviewing safe care policies.

### Foster Panel

Over the last year the panel has convened as planned every month, usually twice a month, to consider new approvals and foster carer reviews. The panel continues to be compliant with fostering regulations.

The panel has two chairs, who alternate meetings, and act as vice chair. There are consistent panel members from a range of experiences and expertise including; health, foster carers, social workers, magistrates and education. All members provide positive feedback in relation to their ability to contribute to the panel, the quality of information they receive and the support

they receive from the panel advisors and chairs. Panel members have annual reviews and have access to training opportunities.

**A panel development day** took place for fostering and adoption staff and Panel members. The training looked at a trauma informed approach and was delivered by an external provider. Attendees were very positive about the training and it was very well attended. Future panel development days are planned, to include one joint with adoption and one specifically for fostering panel members, considering the use of standards when making recommendations.

Foster panel members have benefitted from the paperless panels as this enables virtual panels to run with ease. We now use Share Point to send paperwork digitally.

Panel feedback has included:

*'There is an improvement in children's views to foster panel'*

*'There is an improvement in attendance by foster carers'*

*'Reviews should be listed on the agenda as 3 yearly oversight, post allegation etc' – this is now in place*

*Carers described as 'asset to fostering'.*

*There are thorough assessments. Comprehensive, giving a good feeling of the applicants and wasn't repetitive.*

*FSW's know their families well.*

*Children's feedback where relevant, including birth children and pertinent in discussion/decision making.*

*More views of carers, children and children who foster have been presented to panel*

### **Support and Development opportunities to foster carers and the children in their care**

To ensure that foster carers feel valued, have the support, knowledge and skills they need, and able to achieve the best outcomes for children, North Lincolnshire Fostering offers a range of support and development provisions to children in care, foster carers, and their children. These include:

- A foster carer induction session within the first six months of approval, this includes guest speakers from a range of areas within Children and Families. The purpose of this is to support carers to understand the roles and responsibilities of other professionals in the context of expectations of them as carers. It provides the opportunity for discussion and information sharing with other new carers, alongside familiarising carers with colleagues in other areas.
- All new foster carers are offered an experienced foster carer 'buddy/mentor' to support them in their new role. As foster carers establish themselves within the fostering community, they are able to utilise support from within the fostering network. Where specific issues arise they may be linked to another foster carer with experience of similar situations.
- Tiered Fostering Meetings (TFC) are held with CAMHS, foster carers, education, child's social worker and the fostering social worker. This approach ensures that there is a team around the child well positioned to meet the child's individual holistic needs.
- Meetings are held between the foster carer, Fostering Social Worker and the child's Social Worker to facilitate information sharing and decision making.

- Fostering Support Workers within North Lincolnshire Fostering offer a high level of support to children in care and their foster carers to support their stability within the home. The support may range from taking the child or young person out for a recreational activity, provide a short break without an overnight stay with alternative carers, provide 1:1 support to a child or young person enabling them to attend activities and groups that otherwise they would not have been able to attend, supporting children who foster and use relational and solution focused practice to support children and their foster families. Within the year, a full time worker has been employed within this post to increase support capacity.
- All foster carers receive a visit from their Fostering Social Worker at least once a month as a formal supervision arrangement. They receive additional visits according to their needs and depending upon the needs of the children they are caring for. Regulation requires that an unannounced visit to a foster home should be undertaken at least annually.
- In recognition of the challenges and impact upon foster carers North Lincolnshire Fostering provides access to a counsellor, this has been utilised during the year.
- All foster carers have a Personal and Professional Development plan which is reviewed annually. During this process the carers' training and development needs are discussed and future training and development needs are identified and planned.
- A comprehensive training programme for foster carers is available and annually reviewed. It is to continue to include training for carers with children entering adolescence and with extreme attachment difficulties and has recently introduced "joint bite size" learning.

North Lincolnshire Fostering also provide the following:-

- Foster carer car loans. Foster carers are eligible to apply for an interest free car loan repayable over either forty-eight or sixty months
- A Christmas party for foster families, annual Flamingo Land trip, annual pantomime trip, annual children in care and care leavers award ceremony and show and annual funday
- Bi-monthly meetings with senior managers where guest speakers are also invited to attend to discuss topics, practice and issues as identified by the foster carers. This has included the development of specialist services.
- Regular sessions to support foster carers to complete their Training, Support and Development Standards increasing their knowledge, skills and confidence in caring for children in their care.
- A strong Foster Carer association offering regular meetings and coffee mornings.
- North Lincolnshire Council as a Foster Carer Friendly Employer provides an enhanced Special Leave Policy to carers by offering flexible working options to those North Lincolnshire Council employees who are foster carers and who care for our most vulnerable children including:
  - Paid leave to attend meetings, training and appointments relating to their role as foster carer and in order to meet the needs of the children in their care
  - Exploration of flexible working arrangements including shift changes where applicable

- Additional unpaid leave to deal with unexpected emergencies such as emergency placements.

North Lincolnshire Fostering continue to invite local businesses and organisations to become Foster Carer and adopter friendly employees and/or businesses and organisations signing up include, Ongo, DN Colleges Group, John Leggott College and Jerry Greens. To develop this further, networking takes place on a monthly basis through the local Business Hive, enabling us to speak to local companies about the benefits and social responsibility of becoming fostering friendly.

Specifically for the children in care living with foster carers North Lincolnshire Fostering provide:

- Support to attend the Children in Care Council providing them with the opportunity to meet, share their views and befriend other children in care of a similar age. The children in care council are consulted about the development of North Lincolnshire Fostering and interview prospective foster carers during the assessment process.
- Training on recruitment and selection, teaching them the skills they need to be an equal opportunities employer.
- An Annual Talent Show and awards event where children showcase their individual talents and received awards for their achievements throughout the year. This receives excellent support from Elected Members and Corporate Parents from across the Council and partners.
- Access to a help line or direct support from the Refugee council, this includes home visits to identify, discuss and explain the best way to meet the needs of UASC individual to their race and culture as well interpreter services and advice relating to home office rules and requirements.
- Take Part Thursday and Summer Activity Programme.
- Annual Corporate Parenting week events offer corporate parents the opportunity to meet the children and offer them a new experience. This year events were virtual and included a live celebration event, awards and a family quiz.
- Commissioned therapeutic services through CAMHS, Changing Lives and Banardos. This can be direct work with the child or indirect through support to the carer

### **Foster Carers' Reviews**

All foster carers are reviewed by North Lincolnshire Fostering at least annually and within the regulatory timescale. Where required, foster carer reviews are further considered by the Fostering Panel.

Reviews are chaired and reports written by the dedicated Independent Reviewing Officer on a 9 monthly basis ensuring that reviews are held in a timely way, exceeding national requirements. The reviews include an opportunity for the foster carer, children in their care, their own children and the child's social worker to share their views and opinions.

The foster carer review is comprised of reports from children, social workers, foster carers and the fostering social worker. The review also updates the health and safety checklist, Personal professional development plan and safe care policy.

Where the review highlights concerns, recommends a change to approval, is their first review or three yearly review the report is presented to the Foster Panel for consideration prior to agency decision maker approval.

## 7. Financial Management

The recruitment, retention and flexibility in the provision of foster carers is a key priority in achieving cost effective and excellent services to children. There continue to be substantial cost savings to the Council through the low numbers of children placed externally and the recruitment of high quality, resilient and flexible foster care placements is a key driver of this. North Lincolnshire Fostering is financially viable and has operated within the financial budget over the year. Fostering allowances are paid to all approved foster carers including connected persons (kinship carers) foster carers and former foster carers holding a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangements Order.

Allowances are also paid to carers (not formerly foster carers) of children subject to a Special Guardianship Order/Child Arrangements Order if eligible.

**Foster care allowances** are increased annually in line with any increase of the National Minimum Rate set by central government. Foster care allowances are based on a 2 scale system that reflects the skills of foster carers, their commitment to ongoing training, support & development as well as maintaining a commitment to the children in their care. The fostering allowance increased by 12.4% at the end of 2022/2023, in line with government recommendations.

## 8. Future Challenges and opportunities

High quality of care is best achieved by providing foster care that protects children, promotes their rights and maximises their life chances. To achieve this, North Lincolnshire Fostering strives to achieve continued improvement and is responsive to change. The increase in the number of children in care over the last 5 years nationally has led to many new independent fostering agencies and private residential homes being set up to respond to the increased demand, although the increase in children is not reflected locally.

It is clear that due to this demand, the private sector has been able to be selective in the children and young people they will care for and also the price that they charge to Local Authorities alongside the rates they pay to foster carers. This national pressure requires us to continually develop new approaches to how we prioritise enhanced recruitment and retention of carers. The cost of living increase has also impacted on the financial support required to retain foster carers.

We have received positive feedback from families regarding support available to them throughout the year and we need to ensure that our best advocates, our carers, share this within the community. By offering a service people are proud to work with the 'word of mouth' and recruitment strategies should continue to make fostering for North Lincolnshire appealing and accessible. We will:

- Use virtual and face-to-face recruitment means
- Offer a dedicated worker from enquiry
- Maintain 6 month timescale for assessments, exceeding national standards
- Work with businesses to both promote fostering but also to reward foster carers
- Ensure children and carers views are heard and acted upon
- Work with foster carers as our greatest advocates and ambassadors
- Modernise our posters with QR codes
- Keep in touch with interested parties through mailing lists
- Ensure all our communications reflect our values that children are at the centre of everything we do
- Positive matching processes and virtual family books to increase stability and positivity.
- Offer training that is varied and insightful

- Increase our corporate parenting offer

## 9. Planned Developments and Opportunities

- **Enhanced recruitment, support and retention** to carers through investment in North Lincolnshire Fostering will reduce the need to use external provision. This is planned to include:
  - Close working relationships with corporate parents to further build on and offer recruitment opportunities and support to young people
  - A strong presence within the local and wider communities that encourages people to consider fostering as part of a robust sufficiency strategy.
  - Building upon connections with local businesses encouraging fostering friendly employment and ways businesses can support foster carers e.g events or discounts.
  - Dedicated awareness weeks for targeted and meaningful marketing campaigns.
  - Ensuring community events continue as planned to have positive impact on relationships
  - Offering relational practice through consistent social workers and stable workforce
  - Offering therapeutic led training in person which is interactive and impactful
  - Ensuring that the voices of carers and children are heard and acted upon.
- **Development of Supported Lodgings.** This will build on and increase the choice and availability of accommodation for older children who either move on from fostering, have been cared for in other ways or present as homeless. The recruitment of Supported Lodgings providers has continued to improve. In 2022/2023 we launched a dedicated 'supported lodgings week' which replicates the successes of fostering fortnights planned marketing and authority wide approach.
- **The use of technology will continue to develop** and include virtual family books, virtual training and matching meetings taking on a Hybrid format.
- **Build upon support groups** – Support groups for carers and a bespoke one for connected persons are in place, the service will promote attendance at these to ensure community support and spirit.
- **Recruitment** – North Lincolnshire Fostering will continue to prioritise the recruitment of new foster carers as a key priority. This includes the use of social media, newspaper, radio and other on-line opportunities including Facebook, Twitter and web-based activity. Corporate parents will offer a role in recruitment through screen savers, public screens, vehicle advertising, fostering ambassador schemes. In addition, we will work with local communities and businesses to distribute information, raise awareness and target specific areas.
- **Support for children of foster carers** – foster families benefit from the positive interactions and welcome that is given by the birth children on foster carers. To support this group of children, the Come and Join Us group (CAJU) targeted at birth children in foster families continued to take place during the year and will be built upon during 2023/2024. In addition, children of carers will be consulted and involved in events and activities to ensure they continue to feel valued and part of the fostering

community. The children will also continue to be welcomed at the joint 'child and carer' training sessions.

- **The development of fostering family options** – in line with the One Family Approach and the development of alternative models that reduce the need to enter care, supported by the You Say Who model, North Lincolnshire Fostering will develop alternative foster family options for children that includes carers working in different ways with families, additional support to enable children to be restored to their family networks and short break foster care for children potentially on the edge of care whilst work is undertaken with their parents to develop strategies to care for their children on a permanent basis without the need for further intervention.
- **Continuation of “Take part Thursday” Sessions** for children in foster families where additional support is needed. Take part Thursday continues to be delivered in the school breaks and over the summer, creating a positive group for children who at times find groups difficult. There are and will be a number of exciting and fun activities to improve self-esteem, social development and resilience.
- Expand the delivery of **training to carers and children jointly** on topics such as attachment, CCE and CSE. Carers have voiced that joint training will enable them to have a shared language with children and open dialogue to understand each other their perspectives. It is felt this is best delivered in person and will continue in 2023/2024.

## 10. Summary / Conclusion

North Lincolnshire Fostering continues to be in a strong position to address the ongoing challenges in relation to recruitment and retention of carers to ensure that children and young people receive the highest possible quality of care. This is alongside providing a supportive, empathic and caring approach to working with fostering families. This is evidenced within the recent Ofsted judgement, in addition to the continued low numbers of children living within external provision.

North Lincolnshire Fostering and the wider Children and Families workforce is stable, knowledgeable in providing support to children and the help, training and support carers need. We benefit from a range of skills across the corporate parenting partnership, offering children and insight in to opportunities and support available to them.

The main focus over the next year is the continued focus on recruitment and retention to continue to provide a wide variety of choice within fostering families and to build upon the already flourishing fostering community. This projected increase in sufficiency will serve to also improve long term stability for children, whilst reducing the need for variations and exemptions within fostering households.



## Appendix 1 – Foster Panel Chair’s Report

Completed by joint panel chairs Norma Webster and Andy Bailey

### **North Lincolnshire Foster Panel Report from Foster Panel Chair for period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

National Minimum standards and Regulations for fostering require that panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency annually on the following:

- Quality of the reports being presented to the panel
- Whether there is a thorough rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of the suitability of prospective foster carers within the prescribed timescales.
- The continued suitability of foster carers and whether the terms of approval remain appropriate.

### **Panel composition and Number of Foster Panels held in this period**

Panels continue to be held on the third and fourth Monday of each month.

Panels can only be held when there are 5 members present and must include the Independent Chair, or another independent person if the Chair is not available, and a social worker with the required experience. Six or Seven panel members are usually invited to ensure that panels can proceed if one member becomes unavailable on the day. No panels were cancelled during this period due to being inquorate.

In this period 25 panels were held.

There continue to be 2 Independent Panel Chairs, who generally alternate responsibility for chairing panels – so that usually each act as chair for one panel per month.

Foster Panel Chairs’ Business Meetings continue to be held regularly. The first of these was held in January 2021 and they are now a regular feature, being held approximately every 4 months, and involving both chairs, the panel administrator and the panel advisor. These meetings were set up to try and help with consistency across the panels, to consider any issues as they arise, help with planning and as a way of ensuring panel chairs are updated about any developments within the service, or more widely.

As of the end of this period there were 23 central list panel members, including the panel chairs. During the year 1 member left – a social worker and long-standing panel member, who felt the need to leave due to her own workload. There have been three new social work members who have been recruited to the central list.

Panel members have a wide range of different professional and personal backgrounds including from education, health, social care settings, foster carers and people who have worked within court, criminal justice, the voluntary sector and welfare benefits settings.

Throughout the whole of this year – and indeed, since the the Covid 19 restrictions were put in place nationally in March 2020 - all panels have operated on a ‘virtual basis’, with panel

members, applicants, foster carers and social workers all joining the video call facilitated by the use of Microsoft Teams. There have been times when different technical issues have been encountered, including interruptions to calls, or people struggling to join. However, generally it is found that these issues are less prevalent and this method of working is a good fit for panel business – there is greater flexibility and negates the need for members and attendees to travel.

Throughout the whole of this period there has been a dedicated panel advisor - Emma Charlesworth who has been in that role since February 2022. This has provided great consistency and support to the panel as Emma has a good understanding of the issues, the local policies and practices.

### **Panel Training.**

A successful panel training day was held at the end of November 2022. The training was led by an external trainer, Helen Fearn, and held as a virtual video call event. The session was on the subject of Understanding Developmental Trauma. It was a well-attended session, with very positive feedback received.

### **Panel Business**

In terms of outcomes from panel recommendations to the ADM, in this period there have been:-

For 2022/23 there were 5 new mainstream approvals – this is the same figure as the previous year 2021-22 (although it is noted that this was a significant decrease on 2020-2021 when there were 18 new mainstream approvals). Additionally, there was one reassessment as a single carer and one new partner of an existing carer was assessed and approved. There was one mainstream assessment that did not get a positive approval from panel, and subsequently was not approved by the ADM.

In this period there were 13 connected person assessments which were presented to panel and approved (This is a significant increase from 7 in year 2020-21). Two Connected Person's assessments were not approved (in one of these cases grandparents were not approved, but aunt and uncle were approved at the same panel, so the child stayed in the family). One CP assessment was not approved as the applicants had not seen a translated copy of the report, they were approved by ADM when this had been done. One was approved following an appeal. One more was deferred for some further information which went to panel after this time frame – and was approved.

Panel also consider exemptions to current approval to address the need to ensure sibling groups remain together wherever possible.

The regulations require the agency to review approved foster carers on an annual basis and to make any recommendation in respect of their terms of approval. Panel considers all first annual reviews, every 3<sup>rd</sup> annual review for all carers, as well as all reviews where a change of approval terms is being considered, and situations where there have been practice concerns or allegations made in respect of the carers.

During this period panel considered 80 reviews, one of these being deferred.

There were 22 resignations in this period (there were 16 in the previous year). This included:- 7 carers resigning due to changes in family circumstances; 4 due to retirement / ill-health; 3 carers who had secured Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) for the children in their care; 2 who had adopted children; 3 carers who did not want to continue; 1 where the child went home to parents; and 2 carers moved to Independent Fostering Agencies for financial reasons.

There was 2 de-registrations in this period – one for a carer who was no longer able to meet fostering standards and the other carers moved to Australia.

### **Feedback from attendees.**

Following attendance at panel, attendees are asked to complete feedback sheets on their experience of attending panel. The form asks questions about attendee's experiences of panel; the arrangements for panel; how they felt they were treated; whether the questions were relevant; if they were able to express their views and any suggestions for improvement.

Since the panels became virtual, it has been more of a challenge to get these feedback sheets completed. It was noted in last year's report that there had been some improvement in the number of completed forms received– with the number of completed forms increasing from 2 in 2020-21 to 12 in 2021-2022. Unfortunately, there has been a significant decrease in the number of forms received, with the panel administrator having only received one completed form within this period.

The form that was received (from a panel held in September 2022) included only positive answers to the closed questions about how they found panel and did not give any detail or further comments / suggestions.

### **Quality of the reports considered by panel**

The reports tabled at panel include the Prospective Foster Carer's reports, Connected persons reports, annual reviews, change of approval and long term matching reports and exemptions. The chairs and panel members agree that the reports generally continue to be of a very high standard – feedback is routinely given about this (below).

Foster carers are reviewed annually and these reports should include reviews from the Fostering Social Worker, the Child's Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer, the Foster Carers, the Child in placement, Children in the household, health and safety assessment and training records. Panel recognised and fed back to the agency that there are times when reviews have not had included feedback from some of the above sources, including of the views of the Children Looked After or the Children in the household. A tracking process has now been put in place so that there can be monitoring of overall feedback received for reviews, including feedback from carers, feedback from children in placement, feedback from children in the household and from the children's social workers.

Foster carers are encouraged to attend panel when their reviews are being considered. This is not a requirement, and it is also noted that in all cases they will have already had a review chaired by a Reviewing Officer (when it appears foster carer attendance is consistently very high). In this period, in 30 of the 80 reviews heard by panel at least one carer attended panel. This equates to 37.5% of reviews having carer attendance – this is a decrease on the figure for last year (48% in 2021-2022).

For all new approvals, representatives from CIC (Child in Care) council interview prospective foster carers and complete and score a report from their perspective as 'looked after children' to assist panel in making a recommendation.

A panel feedback form has been designed as a way of panel giving feedback to the service on issues related to the presentation of cases considered by panel. It was previously identified that these forms were not consistently being used, and so a more robust system is now in place for this, with the designated panel advisor ensuring that the forms are always completed at every panel. The form invites panel members to comment on the following:- the standard of the written reports; areas of strength; areas for further development; analysis of diversity; verbal presentation.

In summary, the feedback from all these feedback sheets is overall very positive and has included the following positive and not so positive feedback:

#### Positive

- The assessment was well evidenced and written. This helped to reach a decision.
- Carers work really well to support children's heritage including providing cultural food, celebrating cultural days and taking the oldest child to Lithuania on holiday.
- FSW's were knowledgeable and answered all questions
- Reports were concise and not repetitive.
- Panel member commented on the high level of support ND provides to the foster carers she works with.
- Recognising children as individuals came though well
- The standard of reports are of a very high standard.
- It was felt that the FSW's know the family well
- It was felt that diversity was covered within each assessment/ review highlighting how the diversity needs of young people are being met.
- Panel would prefer individual reports for sibling groups from CSW's.
- Panel commented on case 1- connected person assessment. It was felt to be very well balanced and there was very good exploration throughout the report
- Panel felt there has been a long delay from review and presenting to panel
- Panel felt that an update should be required if there is a delay, explaining the reasons why and an update provided on any changes since the review has taken place
- When a change of approval was requested this was careful and considered and in line with what the carers and birth children could realistically manage.
- FSW's were knowledgeable about their cases
- very well written, excellent quality safe care policy. Social worker referred to the fostering standards and how they met these was clearly evidence.
- assessment was well written and comprehensive. It showed lots of reflection from the applicants.
- Carer is evidently supportive of a young person cultural background and this is described well in the review paperwork.

#### *Not so positive feedback*

- Addendum still had track changes visible.
- Wording of sexuality if the child choose to be...' panel queried this as its not a choice. We must be mindful of wording and terminology used.

- Not as many views on children and children's social workers.
- There is some duplication in reports, for example between CSW and FSW report.
- Lack of foster carers attendance.
- Slight delay in cases presented to panel. Advised oversight is taking place twice a month now to prevent any delay.
- There is use of acronyms in the IRO report
- Review's would benefit from being presented with a title – for example change of approval, post allegation at the top of the report.
- Comments made by LC about CSW not being contactable and not being as involved with the children as they should have been. Panel have asked for this to be passed on to the correct team
- Finances - this is becoming a theme

Panel members are also provided with a form to complete after each panel giving their feedback from that experience. It is intended that these are used to help reflections within panel members annual appraisals, as well as providing opportunity to reflect on possible improvements for the running of the panels. It remains the case that very few of these forms are completed. Panel members are being reminded about these forms and their purpose – to highlight areas that are working well or are in need of improvement. There are, however other forums for expressing any views about how panel functions - at the end of every panel meeting there is opportunity to reflect together on the panel, and this is also discussed within panel members' annual appraisals and is discussed within panel training days - which may explain why panel members are not completing separate forms currently.

### **Summary**

This year has been another period of stability and consistency for the panel and the way it functions. There has been minimal change to the makeup of the panel, with the same two chairs, and largely the same panel members. These panel members have, between them, a good range of experience and demonstrate that they have a good understanding of panel's role in focussing on the issues and the questions that need addressing. Panel members work well together and the required questions are agreed together and are framed sensitively, and follow up questions are asked appropriately where this is required. There continues to be useful debate within panels to aid consideration of how far fostering standards are being or can be met.

The Foster Panel Chairs' Business Meetings, which were introduced last year have continued to be a regular feature. They are one way of ensuring the chairs are routinely updated over developments within the service, and these minuted meetings have provided a forum for discussing how panels function, with the aim of achieving further improvements.

Following discussion in the panel chairs' business meeting, (and in accordance with guidance contained in CoramBAAF practice note 70) there is now increased focus on using the Training Support and Development Standards (as opposed to the National Minimum Standards) to help inform panel's considerations and the recommendations as to whether a foster carer can be supported to fulfil the essential requirements of the role.

Panel continues to be very well supported by the administrative arrangements in place. Panel particularly benefits from having a dedicated panel administrator and minute taker who is experienced in the role, provides an excellent standard of minute taking and able to ensure,

for example, that the written information is always sent out in accordance with the timescales and any associated issues are addressed effectively.

All panels have been held with a professional advisor present, and in the support of the dedicated panel advisor has provided robust and consistent professional advice.

Overall panel activity has been slightly higher than the previous year, largely as a result of there being an increase in the number of potential new connected carer approvals to be considered by panel in this year.

In all cases panel continues to provide feedback to the service in respect of the quality of the written and verbal presentations to the panel. The reports provided to panel continue to be consistently of a very good standard, and this is reflected in the feedback given by panel to the agency. Panel often sees comments from foster carers that they value the work done by their supervising social workers and that they feel valued and supported by the service. There is a strong fostering team, particularly with a number of social workers who have been in place for some time, who are highly skilled, understand the issues and have a good knowledge of the foster carers they work with.

It is noted that feedback from panel to the service this year has included a comment of a 'slight delay' in a case being presented to panel (i.e. since the actual review meeting took place). However, panel have noted that, overall, there has been improvement in this area. This and this is said to be a result of a new process that was set up in response to feedback from the panel and discussed in the business meetings, whereby there is now routinised regular oversight of all reviews held to ensure they are being presented to panel within a timely manner.

It is disappointing that there has been further drop in the number of carers attending the presentation of their reviews to panel this year. The carers are encouraged to attend by their social workers, but the panel is aware that this may also be partly influenced by the fact that reviews are presented to panel more frequently than is an absolute requirement: - the service follows good practice by enabling panel to have oversight of every third review for all carers, for which it is to be commended. Carers do attend the reviews with the reviewing officers, they do attend panel where there are particular issues (such as following concerns) and panel can defer their considerations to facilitate the attendance of carers in particular circumstances where this is felt to be necessary (and has done so on occasion previously).

It is similarly disappointing that the panel has received only one completed feedback from attendees to panel. These are routinely provided to all attendees, and there have been reminders given asking them to complete them.

These two issues – the attendance of carers to reviews and the lack of feedback from those who do attend – have been added to the agenda for the upcoming panel business meeting, to look at ways to address them.

A current issue for the panel is upgrading the way in which information is shared with panel members, with the previous process of secure emails, being phased out in favour of the more secure use of panel members accessing shared folders and documents (Sharepoint). There is to be further discussion about the potential further benefits of increasing the use of

Sharepoint, for example to provide all panel members with access to a library of resources that could help them in their development as panel members.



Andy Bailey

Independent Chair



Norma Webster

Independent Chair

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