

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
CABINET MEMBER**

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE FOSTERING ANNUAL BUSINESS REPORT 2021 - 2022

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the Cabinet Member with the annual North Lincolnshire Fostering Business Report 2021 – 2022 giving an overview of progress, performance and management.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Our One Family Approach aims to create a system that works for all children, young people and families and our ambition is for children to be in their families, their schools and their communities.
- 2.2 In line with this, the Council believes that local family care is the best provision of alternative care for most children or young people who enter the care of the Council. We have therefore continued to support and invested fostering provision.
- 2.3 North Lincolnshire Fostering operates within the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, Care Standards Act 2000 and The National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Fostering.
- 2.3 The business report provides the Cabinet Member with information and assurance regarding the effectiveness of fostering in North Lincolnshire and the outcomes achieved for children.
- 2.3 It is a requirement of the above standards that an annual fostering business report is produced. The Fostering Annual Business Report 2021 – 2022 reports on the management, outcomes, key developments, populations, financial position, challenges, opportunities and plans of the fostering service in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standard 25.7.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 The Fostering and Children in Care Commissioning Service continues to provide high quality and timely foster care services to children in care and those accessing short breaks. Children are supported to remain in their community within local foster family provision. The recruitment of carers continues to be a key priority driven by new and innovative ways to build on and improve the number and quality of carers available and the support offered.
- 3.2 In line with the one family approach, children are supported to live within their own family networks where possible.
- 3.3 The chair of the North Lincolnshire Fostering Panel is also required to provide an annual report on the quality and progress of the Fostering Panel. This is also included within the report.
- 3.4 The Annual Business Report details the progress made in seeking to provide the highest quality care for our children, the developments, outcomes and plans for the next steps. The contents of this report include:
- Details of populations of children and carers
 - Progress and achievements
 - Feedback from carers and children
 - Details of improvements over the year
 - Financial considerations
 - Challenges and opportunities faced
 - Actions for the coming year
 - Summary
 - The Panel Chair's report

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Annual Business Report details the key areas of progress over 2021 – 2022. This includes:
- Plans and developments to continue to build on and ensure there are innovative actions and plans to recruit foster carers
 - The offer and support to carers to retain the robust North Lincolnshire fostering community
 - The Integration of the Fostering and commissioning teams during the year
 - How carers and children continue to be engaged with and listened to as partners in ensuring the best fostering
 - Building on and developing engagement with local businesses and communities

- A continued focus on place-based provision and, through this, the successful further reduction of children living with external providers
- Continued improvement in stability for children
- The offer to carers to ensure they have the understanding, skills and knowledge to be the best carers, including training and learning opportunities.
- The functioning and development of a robust North Lincolnshire Fostering Panel

5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)

5.1 North Lincolnshire Fostering continues to meet 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.

5.2 The completion of the annual business report is in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards.

5.3 There are no additional budget requirements identified in this report.

6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)

6.1 North Lincolnshire Fostering continues to contribute to the Council priorities through ensuring place-based care that enables children to live within their communities, have safe care that helps them achieve positive outcomes and feel safe and well, contributing to resilient and flourishing communities and providing value for money.

7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

7.1 N/A

8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

8.1 Views of children in care, Children who foster, foster carers and Foster Panel members are considered and analysed within the report. Regular consultation indicates that children are experiencing loving and supportive foster carers where they are happy. Carers are experiencing a supportive community and are complimentary about the support available from the service including the training provided. Foster panel is consistent and in line with the regulation.

9. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 The Fostering Annual Business Report 2021- 2022 provides information and assurance of the progress, outcomes achieved and further development of fostering in North Lincolnshire. The Cabinet Member for Children and Families is asked to note the progress made and support and endorse the plans for continued development:

DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Church Square House
SCUNTHORPE
North Lincolnshire
Post Code
Author: Paul Cowling
Date: 16th August 2022

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report –

North Lincolnshire Fostering Annual Business Report 2021 - 2022

SAFE WELL PROSPEROUS CONNECTED

Fostering Annual Business Report 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022

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Status	Date	By Whom
Approved		Cabinet Member for Children and Families
Lead		Paul Cowling
Review Date		

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Fostering Annual Business Report Period 1st April 2021– 30th March 2022

1. Introduction

We are proud of our place and our people and 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 services for children and young people.

Our ambition is for children to be in their families, their schools and their communities.

Within this, the One Family Approach - Helping Children and Families in North Lincolnshire 2020-2024 document sets out how services support children, young people and families to participate, find help online and in their networks and communities, promoting independence and maximising opportunities. 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 provision of alternative care for most children or young people who enter the care of the Council. It has therefore invested heavily in its fostering provision. Throughout 2021 – 2022, North Lincolnshire Fostering continued to receive excellent support from Elected Members both in terms of the Council's ongoing commitment to an effective fostering service and as Foster Panel Members.

We are of the view that a high quality of care is best achieved by providing a foster care service that protects children, promotes their rights and maximizes 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 2022-2023. 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 financial year 2021-2022 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 of the service and to be satisfied regarding the effectiveness of the service and the achievement of good outcomes for children.

2. Progress and Achievements during 2021-2022

- **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 an additional recruitment officer and dedicated marketing officer. Recruitment officers have been raising the profile of the service within the community, corporate parents and local businesses. This post keeps the profile high and ensures timely responses to

enquiries. The addition and embedding of a dedicated marketing officer ensured informed and targeted virtual 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.

- **Integration of Fostering and commissioning** - 2021-2022 was an exciting time for the team as the Children in Care Commissioning Team joined with North Lincolnshire Fostering. By combining the expertise of the commissioners within the service we have been able to share and utilise family finding skillsets with a strengthened approach to matching. The creation of the Placements Team Manager as part of this also creates the oversight required to ensure there is no delay in family finding using all necessary resources available.
- **Engaging with carers** - 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. This includes live events and activities and also virtual parties and celebration events to ensure continued connectivity. 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 work commenced this year. The area based targeted approach to recruitment and fostering friendly businesses has already led to new collaborations, advertising opportunities and discounts for foster families. Large chains have advertised our events on their social media and hosted drop ins.

Development has included larger employers supporting the recruitment of carers, which has helped promote and raise the profile. 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 is very low compared to other areas. 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 in an externally commissioned foster placement within the year.
- On 31st of March 2022 the number of children in care living in Independent Fostering Agency fostering families was 3 maintaining the high performance in placing children within North Lincolnshire.

This has shown a positive improvement over the last 5 years:

Children placed with fostering agencies externally;

2020/21 - 7

2019/20- 9

2018/19 - 7
2017/18 - 11
2016/17 - 15

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

There has also been stability of children living in external residential provision (remained as 4 children, 2 % of children in care population) and no further children were placed in this provision during the year.

This is a key priority in both ensuring the best outcomes for children and the delivery of excellent, cost-effective services to the communities of North Lincolnshire.

- **Placement stability for children in care has improved** resulting in more children in care achieving long term stability. 74% of children in care for more than 2.5 years have remained with the same carer, these young people have experienced stability and this is an improvement from last years positive 69%.

Children who have experienced 3 placements during the year also remained low at 8% of children.

This is supported and achieved by a developed and effective approach to providing carers with the understanding, skills and awareness of the impact of attachment both in the development, needs and behaviour of the children in their care and their role as carers in providing positive attachments for the children they care for. This is underpinned by the understanding of children's own family networks and sense of belonging.

This includes:

- Specific training on attachment within the carer's induction, initial training and ongoing training and development
 - Support and training from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
 - Advice and support to individual carers by their dedicated Fostering Social Worker
 - Bespoke packages and support for carers utilising the team around the child approach supported by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and other professionals
 - Training for staff to develop enhanced understanding of attachment and the role of foster carers
 - Individual therapeutic work with children based on their assessed needs
 - The use of Family Support Meetings to support stability and promote attachment
 - Additional individual support to carers that helps them to care for children with complex needs and attachment issues
 - Oversight and challenge by Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure that meaningful attachment is embedded within the child's plan.
 - Effective use of the community through peer support and buddying.
 - Community events offering inclusion and support
 - Groups for children in care and children who foster
 - Consistent support officers developing meaningful relationships with children
 - Meaningful engagement with young people and foster carers.
- **In house foster family provision:** As at the end of March 2022 192 children were in North Lincs care, of these children 156 were in foster care (81%) and 98% of which were living with in house approved foster families. This is an increase from the previous year.

The service has maintained a family first position in matching children to North Lincolnshire Foster Carers

Children placed with North Lincolnshire Foster Carers:

2020/21 - 78% of the overall care population
 2019/20 - 74% of the overall care population
 2018/19 - 75% of the overall care population
 2017/18 - 76% of the overall care population
 2016/17 - 74% of the overall care population

Effective matching, placement choice and the stability of care for children is a key priority in achieving positive outcomes for children, meeting local need and reducing costs through expensive external provision.

- **Flexible training opportunities** - to further enhance foster carers skills and confidence to support children and young people throughout their life journey the service offers a mixture of direct and online training. The service continues 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 E-based learning suites available ensuring training for different learning styles. Following consultation and feedback new courses were added this year including ‘caring for children of a different culture’, ‘Fostering induction day’, ‘delegated authority tool’ and ‘Supporting Children with Gender identity/ Transgender Awareness’

- **Learning opportunities** - Fostering have worked alongside our children’s homes Kingfisher and The Cygnets to agree a process and expectations agreement for prospective and approved carers to shadow the children’s home staff. The learning opportunity allows for carers to meet children with more complex needs to both provide support and engagement in the home and also in order to build up their understanding, skillset and awareness to breakdown any potential barriers.
- **We have reviewed methods of support offered** - we gathered feedback from carers regarding their view of the new developments that were implemented during Covid 19 measures. This included feedback around visiting patterns and virtual working capabilities. This reflects foster carers busy households and recognises stability. We have utilised consultation with carers to understand how visits help support their household and have implemented the option of a combination of face-to-face and virtual visits in line with their child’s needs and care plan. Carers feel this meets their needs and their need for flexibility. It also ensures continued oversight and assurance in relation to providing the best care to children. Additional virtual training also allows flexibility for those wanting to utilise this
- **Staying Put and supported lodgings expansion** - The supported lodgings service joined the team in 2020 and has continued to grow, benefiting from the strong recruitment team in the Fostering and Commissioning Service. Dedicated recruitment months saw the spotlight placed on supported lodgings and the number of providers has grown. The service is now supporting 4 providers who are supporting three young people. There are also 8 young people remaining with their previous foster carer under ‘staying put’. All are either in employment or education and have the opportunity to remain until 21 (or beyond) should they wish. We have an increase in young people

attending university and see aspirational young people coming of age and following suit.

- **Voice** – Peer support for children is recognised as a way to positively promote children’s identity and self-esteem. National restrictions meant that the usual offer of activities were revised for the year. North Lincolnshire Fostering worked adaptably as the needs of families changed in line with national changes. A strong sense of community has been maintained throughout supported by competitions for the children, regular virtual activities such as games, guest speakers and learning opportunities. We also held a virtual Christmas party which the children really enjoyed and a virtual celebration event. Activities on offer have been for birth children and children in care.
- The AGM for the children in care council took place in January 2022. The council have consulted on feedback forms, interviewed staff and carers, consulted for corporate parenting board and have voted to board member representatives.
- **Thorough matching** – Managers and staff have ensured robust matching processes have been built upon through the use and development of matching meetings. These now take place as standard practice ensuring all information is shared in the important decision of matching. The combining of the matching meeting with the matching risk assessment ensures that support plans are in place at the earliest opportunity. The council supports the ethos of ‘one placement no moves’ and ensures that young people are with carers where they can remain for as long as they require. This means we are considering permanence that is right for the child at the earliest opportunity. During the year 18 young people left care due to SGO, 7 to a foster carer.
- **Robust feedback development** - Consultation with the foster carers on a wide range of topics such as education and engagement occurred quarterly. This included carers completing surveys where the data could be easily analysed and acted upon. This virtual approach was trialled with young people for reviews last year. An electronic consultation form was also devised and provided as an option to young people. The children in care council have fed back this is a good idea and have reshaped the questions in the forms. The trial was initially for fostered children however, due to its success, it is now also used for children of foster carers and for foster carers.
- **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 now 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 forms such as the health and safety form based on their views.
- **The North Lincolnshire Foster Carers Association** – The FCA remains strong and well presented at foster carer consultation events. The carers have voted on a re-shape and also a new chairperson. The new chairperson has been an FCA member for many years and a foster carer for over 35 years. The new FCA have updated their materials to show their names, photographs and numbers. 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's services, 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 services 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.

- Regular detailed **file auditing** to ensure both the best quality work and compliance with regulatory requirements has found that records are of good quality, the child is at the centre and the service is compliant in all areas. The outcomes of audits are overseen by managers and inform the Case Audit Meetings attended by managers from across services and Assistant Directors.
- **Foster families are central to recruitment** - Families are key to the retention of carers - through buddy system and support groups - but also vital to the 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 service. 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 the service 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 face book page
- MS surveys
- Annual reviews
- Quarterly questionnaires
- 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:

- North Lincolnshire Children Who Foster Group (CAJU)
- Annual foster carer review

Birth parents feedback is encouraged, including via:

- Being consulted as part of the individual children's Care Plan reviews
- Care Planning Meetings

Carers have been positive about the approach and adaptations taken throughout the year. Regular feedback is received following training and is positive about their relationship and support from their fostering social worker.

Examples of comments by carers include:

'We have met lots of nice people since our approval and while going through the process, people in the fostering family are very supportive and willing to help when and where possible. It has been really nice to meet others while doing any training and learn from others and their experiences. The support is amazing, everyone we have had contact with have always been very supportive and helpful. The training available has been extremely informative and we have found it interesting'

"They did a fantastic job on matching. There were a few minor hiccups at the beginning with payments but this was resolved quickly and efficiently. Support has been good. So far I am very impressed by the support"

'The induction training day was really useful with a wide range of professionals there to share information, especially the information from the current experienced carer'

'I would like to thank [FSW] and everyone else who has been involved in C's journey over this past year. Your all lovely people, this has been the worst year as a family of our lives, and the support that has been received from you has been phenomenal, nothing has ever been too much trouble, this has all been alien to me and I can't thank you enough over this past year for the support I have received and what you have done for C. I'm so grateful we have a happy ending. Thank you for all your hardwork'

'I would like to express my gratitude for the professional support given throughout the year, delivered in a non-intrusive manner that nevertheless offered positive challenge and support.'

"[fsw] continues to be extremely supportive of me in my fostering role and this motivates me to remain a NL carer"

"I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your work with us !! You have always responded to any of my questions queries or issues by message, call or Email quickly & always made it very easy to discuss everything with you & make us reassured under your care .

You are such a credit to your work & your warm & friendly personality makes it easier for especially new Foster carers to feel supported”

“The provision of family support meetings arranged by [FSW] emphasized that we were one part of a very professional and caring team around [the children]. The meeting also provided a communication tool for all involved with the children”

Children in foster care have said:

“[Foster carer] knows me better than I know myself...she is the best carer I have ever had”

“really supportive, kind, caring and helps me when I need it”

“[my carer] is very kind and caring, we can joke about and have fun”

“my carer is kind, I like living with her”

“It’s fun, I am happy, and I can horse ride”

“anyone would be lucky to have them but I am the one they chose out of everyone, I owe them everything”

“I am cared about, they are helping me grow up”

“at take part Thursday I don’t have to explain myself, we are all the same”

“corporate parents give us options to help us be successful in life and achieve our goals. They set us up for life”

“they are the best I love them.... Dinners and hugs are the best”

“I like Christmas best because I get lots of presents and dinners, I like having a bath now and don’t cry when having my hair washed now. They are the best, I love them and they love me”

Children of carers have said:

“Our FSW is like part of the family”

“I get upset sometimes but you’ve got to do, what you’ve got to do... I’m happy at the minute”

“it’s exciting to meet new children so when [child] came it was a new experience... I love that my family is a foster family and can help other children”

“I enjoy being part of a foster family”

“I don’t want to be treated differently to the other children, I like being part of the talent show”

“it’s kind of weird because sometimes they ask to play games I don’t understand”

“it’s different but it’s nice to have someone else here”

“the impact on the family has been very positive”

“I have had 18 years of love and support so it is important for my parents to offer them [fostered children] support”

“I like to foster young girls and boys, I have learnt from my sister that teenager girls are kinda dramatic”

Foster carers are valued as core members of the team working with and caring for the child and the service 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 2021-2022

- Throughout the year the biggest challenge to support and recruitment has been the long term impact of covid 19 on foster families. We have seen people's caring responsibilities, their jobs and their financial situations all change throughout the pandemic. The beginning of the year saw a significant drop in enquiries as people adjusted to their new lifestyles. Following a review of the social media strategy and implementation of creative ideas from the new recruitment manager the second half of the year has seen the trend begin to change.
- The one family approach has seen children continue to be supported to remain within their community as no children were placed in externally commissioned placements in the year. Children's care plans were supported ensure children return to family or move to permanence in a safe way.
- The service has adapted all practices to virtual means and have succeeded in doing so, making some of the changes permanent as they were well received by foster carers. This includes the opportunity to undertake virtual visits, meetings and training. A hybrid approach helps carers take up various virtual opportunities that suit their family and working lives. Some meetings have returned to physical and community events are back in place. Foster panel remains virtual but this will be reviewed in 2022/23. The panel has adjusted well and over the year introduced new processes to the virtual way of working which has helped it to become seamless.
- Maintaining links with the community has been achieved through innovative means when large physical gatherings were not possible or safe. The following actions kept the service linked with carers and children throughout the year. They were adapted in line with service need and feedback:

Virtual Bi monthly meetings were in place until it was assessed as safe to return face to face. Guest speakers continue to attend the meetings including education inclusion and case management service managers- this ensures their voice is heard the lead areas are connected to the community.

Regular email communication about events, training and activities have remained including the use of MS teams surveys and spreading positive messages.

Increased children's virtual sessions were revised throughout the year. The two participation groups took place together and included guest speakers such as mental health professionals. Summer 2021 saw a revision in risk management which allowed physical groups to resume. Take Part Thursday ran in all the school holidays with activities such as photography, uniformed services days and CAJU resumed monthly. The take part Thursday events targeting addressing issues which have risen during the pandemic, as such the sessions also included guided ranger walks, a day at changing lives and sports and health days

Virtual Bitesize training via MS teams have been maintained and met with positive feedback. Virtual training has remained in place but compliment a range of physical training sessions. Topics are chosen from carer/panel and young person feedback and national minimum standards.

Virtual Skills to foster training through MS teams continued until physical sessions could resume in the year.

Virtual meetings including family support and matching. The ability to hold meeting virtually has seen an excellent level of attendance from a range of agencies. Carers have commented they appreciate the flexibility that virtual meetings offer them and these remain in place.

Virtual panels have been in place since March 2020. They have enabled carers to attend with the support of fostering social workers.

A Virtual Christmas party was enjoyed by children and their families. The DJ the families are used to hosted the event and prizes were delivered to families.

A takeover event at 20:21 visual arts centre was hosted by corporate parents. Crafts were on offer in addition to workshops from a local artist teaching young people how to do his art. There were also a range of music teachers and instruments about to teach young people how to play.

MS forms Surveys have enabled us to reach out to all carers and gather feedback on a range of matters including annual events, virtual support and emotional wellbeing.

A virtual fostering celebration event took place in 2021. This fell in line with the ending of Fostering fortnight. Households who registered for the event were sent treats and cakes to eat. Videos were made by corporate parents to say 'thank you' and children gave feedback about why fostering is such a positive in their lives. Feedback from the event was positive, and many saying it was emotional and made them feel proud.

Corporate parenting week offered a range of activities for young people in October including museum visits, arcades and sports sessions. These were put on by Corporate parents. The week also saw a round table event re-launching our promise and the Awesome kids awards. The young people were recognised for their achievements over the year and showed off their talents that they had rehearsed several months prior.

- 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 the service to the public through multi-media means. We have a strong social and local media presence and clear branding. Advertising opportunities have included; Facebook, Twitter, Radio, newspaper, in-app advertising, free press, Market stalls, poster distribution and links with corporate parents. Prospective carers or supported lodgings providers can call in, attend virtual phone in events, text in their interest, email or complete and expression of interest form on the website. 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. Some physical recruitment events were cancelled due to the risk of covid 19 however physical events has resumed as normal throughout 2022. We have risk assessed and attend events where possible and increased virtual recruitment. The year saw an impact on enquiries however improvement came towards the end of the year. The number of approvals was significantly impacted upon, despite the robust recruitment plan, and there were only 6 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.

- The **number shortbreaks for children with disabilities** has remained high in the year. Many families benefit from the shortbreaks and they have continued to take place in line with government guidance and following risk assessment. At least 10 young people are accessing s17 shortbreaks. To ensure we are offering the service needed the service has worked closely with ISDC 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 service they need. A short breaks will drive forward the changes made on the tracking and matching process, reform our processes and work on specific recruitment campaigns. We have also identified families with accessible or adapted homes are required and this is factored in the recruitment plan for 2021/22.
- The **number of resignations** has increased in 2021/22 compared to 2020/21 and 2019/20. The number of resignations were low in 2020/21 with many choosing not to resign or accept placements whilst the pandemic and national restrictions were impacting on daily life. The majority of resignations were due to changes of circumstance such as work and homelife. Although the number of resignations is high the number is on par with previous years where covid is not a factor; 2018, 2017 and 2016. A significant proportion of the resignations in the year have been due to a change in personal circumstances including moving area, birth of further birth children, new jobs, longer hours and other factors impacting on carers practical availability. None of the resignations were cited as being due to issues or concerns with the agency. Only one impacted on children as the carers moved to another country.

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.

As of 31st of March 2022, there were 192 children in care, this is a decrease on the 2020/21 end of year figure of 207.

The number of children entering care episodes has also decreased with there being 61 episodes of entry to care during the year compared to 64 in 20/21. All children have been accommodated by North Lincolnshire provision suggesting a good level of sufficiency.

The number of children living with connected persons carers reduced slightly from 30, to 22, however has begun to change towards the end of the year with higher levels predicted for 2022/23.

2021/22 saw a consistent approach to staying put as 8 young people remained with their previous carer as of March. All are in education or employment, several are at university and remain supported by their foster carers.

6. Populations: Foster Carers

As at 31/3/22 there were 126 approved households and 255 places in total, this compares to 141 approved households and 291 places last year and reflects the challenges faced in recruitment and retention during the first half of 2021-2022 following the lifting of restrictions.. At 31/3/22 there were 97 approved mainstream carer households, 15 connected person households and 14 short break households.

Foster Carer Approvals

There were 6 carer mainstream and short breaks households approved in 2021/22, compared to 18 new approvals in 2020/21. For 2021/22 there were an additional 16 family & friends carers, approved or temporarily approved, compared to 25 in 2020/21.

Enquiries

There were 78 enquiries in 2021/22, compared to 115 in 2020/21. The reduction in enquiries was primarily during the first 2 quarters of the year and appeared to have a direct link to the lockdown restrictions and the lifting of restrictions. It subsequently increased with particular spikes during September, December and February. This reflects the turn in the curve that is predicted to continue for 2022/2023.

The conversion rate from enquiry to initial visit continued to be positive and comparable to the previous year. The number of connected persons also increased in the second half of the year. The year commenced with 1 ongoing assessment and ended with 14 underway reflecting positive changes expected to continue for the coming year.

Period (figures at end of period)	2019/20	2020/20	2021/202
	20	21	2
Number of enquiries	123	116	78
Number of initial visits	64	53	33
Number of households attending skills to foster	20	45	26
Number of mainstream assessments ongoing at the end of			3
Number of connected persons assessments ongoing			11
Total number of ongoing assessments			14
Total number of approvals (mainstream)	13	19	6
Total Number of approvals (connected persons)	17	12	5

North Lincolnshire Fostering Practice Supervisors 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

The number of resignations increased in 2021/22 (18) compared to 2020/21 (8) and 2019/20 (6). The majority of resignations were due to changes of circumstance such as work and homelife. Although the number of resignations is higher than the previous year the number is on par with previous years where covid was not a factor; 2018, 2017 and 2016. There were 18 de-registrations of mainstream and short break carers during 2021-22. The reasons were:

Deregistration reason (Mainstream & short break)	Number of foster carer households
Initiated by foster carer	15
Family adopted the child/children	1
Family took out an SGO for the child/children	1
Initiated by Foster service	1

*The 15 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
Moved area	2
Retirement	3
Other	9

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. Although the number of variations were more than in 2020/21 (which was unusually low) they were in line with 2019/20 and consistent with averages over several years. All were approved by ADM and Panel.

Most were required for short periods in order to support siblings to remain together.

Period	2019/2020 Total	2020/2021 Total	2021/2022 Total
Number of new exemptions in the period	4	3	4

Number of new variations in the period	12	4	13
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Recruitment Activity

Sufficiency remains positive as children are placed with North Lincs carers and are placed locally, those placed out of area and 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,
- social media campaigns,
- drop in events
- newspaper adverts
- We have had a poster campaign at 7 of the large supermarkets.
- Digital screens across the town centre include rolling adverts for fostering and supported lodgings on a rolling programme.
- We also have advertising on council vehicles across the LA.
- 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 evenings at Dunelm in February and March.
- Information events Bimonthly
- Social Media campaigns regularly run changing messages throughout the year
- Direct Magazine and newspaper adverts have been placed
- Radio advertising
- Sponsored advertising on social media (Facebook, twitter and Instagram)
- Updates to the website including review of the enquiry form
- Recruitment stalls at StJohn Market throughout the year, stall at festivals and other events

Complaints and allegations

Within 2021/22 6 concerns have been scoped in to the managing allegations procedures. Four have concluded during the year and none have been substantiated or led to de-registration. This is in line with the previous year (5). All have been reviewed and actions taken are considered appropriate.

All carers are offered de-brief meetings which can enable them to ask questions about the process and offer feedback in relation to the support they received. Carer is access independent support through the Fostering Network funded by North Lincolnshire Council.

Although no IRM applications were made in the year one application ended in the year. The IRM provided feedback to the LA about their induction and recommended this was reviewed for connected persons. All connected persons now attend the whole skills to foster training. All carers are also expected to attend an induction day training which has been introduced as a follow up from the skills to foster, complimenting their 1-1 sessions with their FSW. The session includes information from experience carers, medication training, family training and updates carers about 'you say who' and participation events. This is lead in a multi-agency way and has been praised by those who attend.

Incidents

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

Three foster carers used physical intervention to manage a child's behaviour. 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 the role of the panel and panel members and was led by external trainer Joan Hunt. Attendees were very positive about the training and it was very well attended. MSforms was used to encourage training reflection and these will further inform panel member reviews.

20 attendees completed feedback from the Panel training. All were positive and graded an increase in their understanding as a result. The subject knowledge scores (out of 10) pre-training were- 2-9 with the majority scoring 6/7. The scores post training were 6- 10 with the majority scoring 8 or 9.

All the feedback followed the theme of: 'The trainer was really engaging and despite the training being virtual her enthusiasm remained throughout. She was also encouraging of questions and sensitive to peoples thoughts and feelings' and 'Enjoyable, information - rich input'

Foster panel members have benefitted from the paperless panels as this enables virtual panels to run with ease.

Panel feedback has included:

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

'There is an improvement in attendance by foster carers'

'Panel packs would benefit from being in an order and numbered for panel members ease of use'- this is now in place

Carers described as 'asset to fostering'.

Care leaver contributed to the skills to foster about leaving care processes which is positive.

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

Sound value base is clear

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:

- 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 the service 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.
- 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. During 2021/22 such visits were undertaken at least on a quarterly basis thereby exceeding this national minimum requirement.
- In recognition of the challenges and impact upon foster carers the service provides access to a counsellor, this has been utilised during the year.

- The service facilitates a group for children of foster carers self-named as the 'Come and Join Us' Club (CAJU). It has been recognised that support to this cohort of children is important as the impact on birth children is a major factor in placement disruptions. The frequency and duration of when the group meets has adapted throughout the year following feedback and government restrictions.
- 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.
- Learning opportunities at KFL and Cygnets are in place to support carers to observed skills and develop confidence

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 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 British Steel, ONGO, Humberside Fire and Rescue, CAMHS, Deli and Dine and The Bank hairdressers.

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 the service 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 the service 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. The service 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. The number of Special Guardianship Order/Child Arrangements Order arrangements being supported is increasing year on year and this brings with it a financial pressure.

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. North Lincolnshire Council's "Staying Put" policy was reviewed during 2021/22 maintaining an equitable allowance system payable to both former in-house and agency foster carers offering a "staying put" arrangement to their former foster children reaching the age of 18 years. This continues to work well.

A small number of bespoke financial packages have supported children to remain with internal foster carers where they have needed to alter their employment in order to offer stability to the young people in their care. This ensures young people remain with North Lincolnshire approved foster carers and remain in their locality.

8. Future Challenges and opportunities for the Service

High quality of care is best achieved by providing a foster care service 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 pick and choose 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 develop a new approach to how we deliver Fostering Services that prioritises enhanced recruitment and retention of carers. The cost of living is increasing nationally and locally and this may impact on financial support required to retain foster carers.

There was some impact experienced during 2021/2022 on carers following the restrictions due to Covid 19 leading to a reduction in enquiries during the first half of the year and an increase in resignations due to changes in their lives. This began to change during the second half of the year supported by a further increased focus on recruitment, including targeted and increased advertising, new messaging and face-to-face / virtual approaches, and is projected to continue. Due to this, it is anticipated that the approvals for 2022/23 will be significantly improved upon 2021/22.

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 physical 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 the service with the continuing support of the Cabinet Member for Children and Families 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.
 - Ensure community events continue as planned to have positive impact on relationships
 - Offer relational practice through consist social workers and stable workforce
 - Offer therapeutic led training in person which is interactive and impactful
 - Ensure voices of carers and children are heard and acted upon.
- **Development of Supported Lodgings** within the service. 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. 2022/23 will launch a dedicated 'supported lodgings week' which will replicate 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** –fostering service 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, the service 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 development of the CAJU has been welcomed by the children and their parents. This group will continue to build and develop. In addition, children of carers will continue to 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, the service 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 2022/2023.
- Corporate parenting will be further strengthened through the **introduction of a Corporate Parenting co-ordinator**. This person will connect the communication between corporate parents and young people, ensuring that what children need and want is being understood by corporate partners. Through the cross working there will be an increase in opportunities for young people and fostering recruitment opportunities.

10. Summary / Conclusion

With the support of the Council leadership, North Lincolnshire Fostering is in a strong position to continue to build and develop to meet new and emerging challenges. The service has continued to demonstrate that it is able to meet the needs of children in care within North Lincolnshire as evidenced by the continued low number of children placed with external providers and stability for children within foster families.

Building from this base means that the service – as part of the wider Council, Children and Families and North Lincolnshire partnerships – we are able to creatively respond to the needs of families whilst meeting our regulatory requirements. North Lincolnshire children remain within their community and as a result have access to a range of learning, social and emotional developmental opportunities. We have maintained a strong and consistent community meeting the challenges in both recruitment and retention for part of the year, building on and ensuring a focused response to meet these. The success of this is shown in the increased enquiries during the second half of the year. North Lincolnshire have ensured that children were not impacted upon as a result of these. Children continue to remain in the place of North Lincolnshire, stable within families and achieving positive outcomes.

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.

Our focus is to now spread the word of the positive impact that fostering for North Lincolnshire has on children in care, children who foster and the wider community. With key recruitment messages focusing on place, the local community and the children of North Lincolnshire. North Lincolnshire Fostering as part of one Council will continue to work with partners to build on the positive progress made and 2022/2023 is projected to show improved retention and recruitment.

Within North Lincolnshire our children, foster carers and workforce have shown great resilience, adaptability and commitment which will grow in to the next year.

11. Panel Chair Report

North Lincolnshire Council Fostering - Report of the Foster Panel Chair for period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022

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 quoracy.

In this period 21 panels were held - one panel was held in the months of July, August and November 2021

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

One development in this period has been the decision to hold regular Foster Panel Chairs' Business Meetings. The first of these was held in January 2021 and they are now a regular feature, being held approximately every 2 months, and involving both chairs, the panel administrator and the panel advisor. These meetings were set up to provide 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 20 central list panel members, including the panel chairs. During the year 2 members left and 2 joined - the 2 who left were foster panel members who changed jobs and were no longer able to attend. There were 2 new panel members who joined within the year.

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 since 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, but these have been overcome and the panel has been able to adapt well to working in this way.

In this period the previous panel advisor left the Local Authority and North Lincolnshire Fostering Service Manager acted as Panel Advisor. Both advisors were familiar with the role and experienced advisors. A new recruitment and assessment manager is in post from February 2022 and will resume the role following induction.

Panel Training.

A successful panel training day was held November 2021. The training was led by an external trainer, Joan Hunt, and held as a virtual video event through Microsoft Teams. The subject of this was the role of panel the impact of values / hidden bias and the lessons from Serious Case Reviews.

It was well attended (21 attendees) by panel members and others involved with panel, including assessing social workers. The training was well received and positive feedback was received.

Panel Business

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

For 2021/22

5 new mainstream approvals heard. (This is a significant decrease on 2020-2021 when there were 18 new mainstream approvals).

7 connected person assessments were presented to panel and approved (This is a decrease from 12 in year 2020-21).

Long term matches were approved for 3 foster households, involving 6 children (2 sets of sibling groups of 2, and 2 single matches).

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. During this period panel considered 84 reviews.

There were 16 resignations heard by panel in this period. This included carers retiring, and carers who had secured SGOs for the children in their care.

There was 1 de-registration in this period, for a carer who was no longer able to meet fostering standards due to health issues.

Panel also considers extensions to the temporary approval of connected person's foster carers (under Reg 25 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010). In this period 6 such applications were considered and positive recommendations made.

Feedback from attendees about their experiences at panel

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. There has, however, been some improvement in this year on obtaining completed feedback form from attendees – with the number of completed forms increasing from 2 in 2020-21 to 12 in 2021-2022. All of the feedback received was very positive about the experience of attending panel:- all attendees indicated that they were given details of the panel in sufficient time; all felt they had enough opportunity to express their views; all felt they were treated with courtesy and respect. Comments made included the following:-

It was fair and sensitive

A lot less formal than we were expecting which was nice, the panel made us feel at ease and all seemed interested in what we were saying.

The meeting was chaired perfectly well.

Well run and flexible in the moment when new information came to light

Norma is very approachable and gives you plenty of opportunity to explain how the year has been, also lovely to be thanked for what you do. Was good to get a question on the EHCP and the process around this as this is showing that the panel are keeping an eye on this which I feel is needed as the EHCP seems to not be communicated as well as other parts of the care plans and reviews.

it was a good meeting with a wide range of questions.

The only suggestion made on improvements to panel process was the following:

We would prefer in person, this is the 2nd time virtual which is ok as we live in a more accessible world but we feel the importance of the panel should mean in person as its a key part of making decisions

This feedback about the attendees' experience of coming to panel is very encouraging. It is still a relatively small sample of those who attended who did provide their comments. Chairs have given attendees reminders about completing feedback forms, and it is good that there has been a rise in the number of them received, but this could still be further improved.

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.

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. This has shown an improvement in the reports presented at both review meetings and panel.

One matter raised with the agency last year from panel, was that there had not always been sufficient attention given to evidencing the voice of the child – particularly the views of the child in placement. Since this was raised, there has been a significant improvement in this being routinely provided within the paperwork and presentation to panel.

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 meeting chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (when it appears foster carer attendance is 100%). In this period, in 40 of the 84 reviews heard by panel at least one carer attended panel. This equates to 48% of reviews having carer attendance. Whilst this is an increase on the figures for the preceding year (carers attended in 39% of the reviews heard in the year to April 2021), it remains an area for continuing focus and improvement for the service / panel.

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 comments :

- *Well written and detailed assessment*
- *Plenty of feedback from children*
- *Dual heritage issues well covered in reports*
- *Thorough reports, reflected in panel having few questions*
- *Lots of carer feedback and they felt well supported*
- *Thank you for numbering documents*
- *Role of second carer was well evidenced*
- *Recommendation for change of approval was not clear in report and needed clarifying questions*
- *Through, comprehensive*
- *Excellent independent social worker report that was very well balanced. Clear recommendations made.*

- *Report thorough and gave a good flavour of the carers*
- *Thorough report, read well. Short, but all info there and not repetitive, best out of reports today*
- *Report very thorough, 85 pages long, so too much detail in some areas, but some good analysis*
- *Thorough report although nothing on the offence in 2010. Also inconsistencies re smoking and drinking,*

Panel members are also provided with a reflection 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 has been noted that very few of these forms have been completed. Panel members have been reminded of the need to complete these, but it is also noted that at the end of every panel meeting there is opportunity to reflect together on the panel, which may explain why panel members are not completing separate forms currently.

Summary

Overall, this has been a 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. Questions 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.

Panel is well supported by the administrative arrangements in place. Panel has particularly benefitted 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.

Whilst this period has seen a change in the panel advisor support to panel, the chairs feel that this has been handled well. All panels have been held with a professional advisor present, and it was helpful that the manager with previous panel advisor experience covered all panels in the period before the new dedicated panel advisor was able to take on the role.

Overall panel activity has been a little lower than the previous year – two fewer panels were required, and this is mainly as a result of there being a reduction in the number of potential new approvals to be considered by panel in this year.

A positive development in this review period has been to hold regular Foster Panel Chairs' Business Meetings. As well as ensuring the chairs are routinely updated over developments within the service, these meetings have provided a forum for discussing how panels function, with the aim of achieving further improvements. One example of this leading to greater consistency in aspects of chairing has been in discussing how questions are shared within panels. They have also been helpful with identifying areas for development for the panels and the service, such as over the collection of feedback or how the child's voice is represented to panel. The meetings will continue to be a regular fixture.

In all cases panel now provides 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. The panel routinely sees that foster carers in North Lincolnshire express that they feel valued and supported by the service and they are supported to develop their skills and practice by a staff group committed to providing quality training, support and supervision.

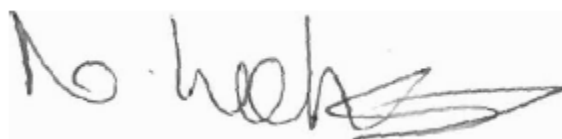
There has been some improvement in this period in respect of the collection of feedback from panel attendees to inform practice. It is notable that this feedback is overwhelmingly very positive, but it still remains a relatively small sample of attendees who have provided this feedback, and this continues to be an area for further improvement – chairs will need to routinely encourage attendees to complete these, and also remind workers to try to obtain these from the applicants / foster carers.

There has been improvement in obtaining appropriate contributions to items considered from all sources, including from carers, the children and young people who are looked after, their social workers, and the other children or young people in the household.

One area for continuing improvement is to increase the number of carers who are supported to attend the panel for the presentation of their reviews. Whilst there has been a slight improvement with this, it remains the case that less than half of reviews presented to panel have the benefit of having at least one carer present.



Andy Bailey
Independent Chair
25/07/2022



Norma Webster
Independent Chair
25.07.22