

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023





OUR SERVICE

The Fostering Service is a regulated service and subject to inspection under the Care Standards Act, 2000. The Service's priority is providing children with confident and supportive carers.

Leicestershire County Council's carers are part of our "Fostering Family", an ethos we have continued to build upon over the last three years by listening and responding to our carers, being transparent in our decision making and policies and procedures.

The Fostering Service has two functions – recruitment and retention.

Our successes for 2022/23 have included:

Approved: 16 Mainstream Foster Carers, 4 Supported Lodgings Providers, 18 Independent Visitors

- Implemented a dedicated duty system to support our carers, place more children in house and maintain 75% utilisation
- Increased the utilisation of in-house placements compared to use of independent fostering agencies
- Increased our capacity to assess and support independent visitors by appointing an additional worker
- Maintained placement stability via the Dedicated Placement Support Team (DPST) working with over 71 families
- Supported 3 carers to achieve a Diploma in Therapeutic parenting
- Continued to develop our Mentoring Scheme for new and inexperienced carers. We offered mentors to 14 carers in assessment, of which 12 accepted and will support through the assessment process and their first year of approval.
- Continued to offer our carers the right support at the right time to support stability.
- Increased numbers of Independent Visitors to provide support to our children and young people - approving 18 new IVs. Total number of IV is 68, matched to 73 young people.
- Developed our Fostering Newsletter for potential applicants who are considering fostering now or in the future
- Excellent staff retention
- The development of the kinship assessment team and IVA work has seen the numbers of children achieving permanency through SGO increase (total SGO achieved: 50)

The Fostering Service is managed by a Service Manager and Assistant Service Manager. These roles ensure that both recruitment and retention receive the same high-quality management oversight and service development.

Efficient ways to communicate are established, ensuring carers are given the most up to date information from the service, one of these being our private Facebook group, which is still used to disseminate information and to share good news stories, links to key research, good practice guidance and general wellbeing.

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

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

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

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

The Annual Report will provide feedback from the whole service, highlighting how we progressed our plans from last year and new targets for the forthcoming year.

This report should be read alongside the Market Position Sufficiency Statement for 2021-23 which provides the basis for commissioning decisions, setting out our intentions for improving life chances of children and young people in care. The statement sets out the current position and our objectives for placements for children and young people from within our internal services and those we source from the external market.

Other key documents include:

- Children and Family Departmental Plan 2020-2023
- Continuous Improvement Plan – The Road to Excellence 2021-2023
- Workforce Development Plan 2020-2023
- LCF Partnership Plan 2021-2023
- Voice Strategy 2020-2023
- CFS Equality and Diversity Guidance
- Ofsted Report 2019 (Inspection of children's social care services) and Focused Visit 11 May 2023

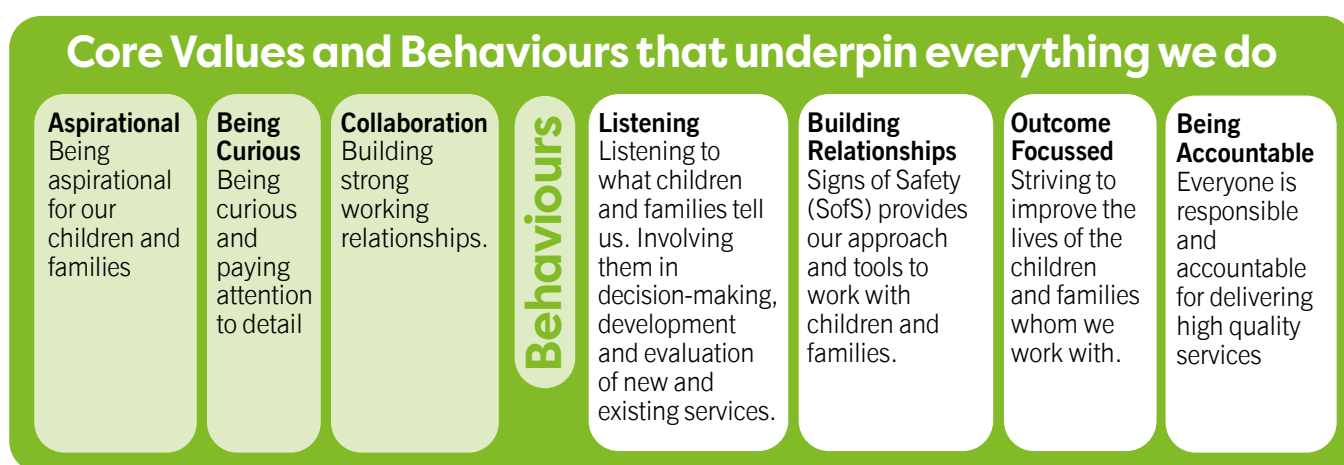
Ambitions

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

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

Core Values

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



Objectives

- Create sufficient placement options to enable choice of placement for looked after children in Leicestershire County Council, which will meet needs, and support good outcomes, now and into the future.
- Meet the recruitment targets agreed on an annual basis
- Contribute to the overall Council savings through sufficiency and utilisation of carers and reducing the amount of time children spend in care.
- For all Children and Family Services employees to recognise their contribution to supporting the recruitment and retention of foster carers and recognising their value as part of the professional service delivered to our children in care.
- We will continue to look for further opportunities to develop our carers and introduce the therapeutic model to all our carers. At the time of implementation, we had just secured funding to provide training and support from the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting.
- Develop hybrid model of foster panels incorporating both virtual and in person panels.
- Introduce face to face foster carers forums and meetings following local and government guidance.
- Review our Practice Standards across the service ensuring we recognize diversity, equality, and inclusivity.
- Evaluate “A Place to Call Home”, the regional USAC recruitment for foster carers and Supported Lodgings Providers.
- Increase Reviewing Officer capacity as a net growth of foster carers continue.
- Continue to develop a Signs of Safety Approach to all areas of our service, including reflective supervision and embedded into practice.

LCC Children and Family Service works to a key set of principles that underpin our work with children and families. These are:

- Where it is right to do so, all children will be supported to remain within the care of their families or communities with connected carers.
- Where this is not possible, early permanence with adoptive families or foster carers will be sought to promote a sense of emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging.
- Children and young people's voice will be respected, and we will actively seek their engagement in decisions about their needs, their future, and the provision of services.
- High quality placements and provision of support to parents and carers to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Where possible and right to do so, children and young people should be placed within Leicestershire, with Leicestershire carers to maintain a sense of connectivity with their community.
- Parents and carers are an integral part of the service, to be involved in planning for the child and service provision to ensure that the very best care is provided to our children and young people.

What we did to achieve this

- We welcomed the end of any restrictions due to Covid and, where possible, held meetings in person, including summer activities and our annual celebration event for carers. It was a fantastic event with all enjoying the opportunity to put on their glad rags and join us for an evening of entertainment, it was fantastic seeing everyone and we received very positive feedback.
- Some carers identified they don't want an adult only event, so next year we are looking to hold a family event.
- We approved 16 foster carers (including 3 IFA carer transfers who had made an active choice to be part of our fostering family, recognising the level of support our carers receive).
- In terms of foster carers leaving the service we lost (25) Mainstream Foster Families. They resigned due to having the time to reflect on their personal circumstance. None expressed dissatisfaction with the service and support they had received.
- For Supported Lodgings we saw a significant reduction of approvals. 4 households were approved, compared to 12 the previous year.
- Hybrid of recruitment activity was developed, using Facebook and the dedicated Fostering Leicestershire County Council website, Instagram, adverts played on Spotify.
- A WhatsApp account was set up so that carers could text us when making requests for information.
- Virtual and in person Information evenings were held.
- Fasttrack system for applicants who were already carers within an agency (IFA Transfers) or fostering with another local authority (OLA) was used.
- Skills to foster, mentoring meetings and assessments returned to face.
- The DPST, the Fostering Service's unique selling point, has continued to develop and has continued to support placement. The team supported 71 placements during the year, helping families to stay together, supporting 5 young people into family-based care or into independence from residential placements, and supporting 2 young people to return to their birth families.
- A full time Assistant Service Manager was appointed to support the development and utilisation of our Children's Innovation Partnership (CIP) with Barnardo's to run children's homes on behalf of Leicestershire. The role will also provide strategic oversight to the management of the homes.

Identified Targets from 2021/22 Annual Report

The Fostering Service works to an intensive recruitment strategy with the aim of achieving the following targets:

Recruitment Targets:

25 Mainstream Foster Carers	2 Specialist Carer	7 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 34)
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Approvals:

16 Mainstream Foster Carers	0 Specialist Carer	4 Supported Lodgings Providers	(Total 20)
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Summary of Recruitment:

Nationally the recruitment of foster carers has been a decline with the number of potential carers progressing into assessment and approval, local authorities and agencies struggling to meet the numbers coming through pre-Covid. Within Leicestershire we also experienced a decline in potential applicants coming forward. Our approval targets we felt were realistic, but as the year progressed, we could predict our numbers for approval would not meet the set targets. We have reviewed applications and can recognise the themes of the strain on the economy, Covid recovery period, investment needed in supporting Ukrainian refugees and a national recruitment shortage.

We will review all applications to identify if there have been any missed opportunities but feel confident our quality assurance processes have brought the right applications through to assessment

We anticipate some of these themes will continue but as a fostering service we want to build our carers will focus on the support, training, and team around the child we have within Leicestershire. We will continue to set ourselves ambitious targets.



FUNCTIONS OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE

Our Fostering Service consists of five separate teams

- Recruitment – fostering and adoption
- Assessments – Fostering
- Team around the Child
- Kinship
- Dedicated Placements Support – Placement Stability, Independent Visitors, Supported Lodgings Scheme, Staying Put, Specialist Foster Carers

THE RECRUITMENT TEAM

Welcoming – Informative – Efficient – Innovative – Flexible

Meet the Fostering Recruitment Team:

Denise
Recruitment Manager

Emma
Initial Visit Assessment Worker

Marie
Initial Visit Assessment Worker

Janyce
Enquiry Co-Ordinator

Katie
Recruitment Support Coordinator

Alice
Initial Visit Assessment Worker

WE ARE family

Allison
Foster Carer

Leicestershire County Council

Fostering
Leicestershire.com

The Recruitment Team consists of:	
1 Team Manager	
1 Recruitment Enquiry Co-Ordinator (Fostering)	
1 Recruitment Support Co-Ordinator (Fostering)	
2 Initial Assessment Workers (Fostering) plus 1 casual part-time	
1 Recruitment Enquiry Co-Ordinator (Adoption)	
1 Recruitment Support Co-Ordinator (Adoption)	

Our Fostering & Adoption Recruitment Team are the forefront of our service. This team's objective is to engage with members of the public who are interested in becoming foster carers or adopters with Leicestershire County Council.

The team provides a dedicated resource which manages all forms of contact, including contact by telephone, mail, website, text message enquiries. Regular public events and 'pop-up' events around the county are held to welcome members of the public to find out more about fostering and adoption which are also the responsibility of this team.

Virtual & physical 'Find out about fostering' events held during 2022/23:	16	Total households attended:	64
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The team provide a comprehensive 'filtering' process at the 'front door' of the service, ensuring that we are transparent, open, and honest with enquirers as well as maintaining the highest level of quality, to be progressed to the Assessment Team.

The team manager works closely with colleagues in the Communications Team to create appropriate and cost-effective recruitment campaigns, based on projected demand and need, using various social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. More traditional methods are also used, such as posters, postcards, and banners, radio campaigns, adverts in local publications and local business and staff intranets.

This team strives to provide a welcoming, friendly, swift, efficient, informative, and honest service. Every enquiry is dealt with in a fair and non-discriminatory manner, representative of the key values and behaviours of Leicestershire County Council.

During 2022 – 2023 we:

<p>Received</p> <p>259</p> <p>Requests for Information</p>	<p>Completed</p> <p>61</p> <p>Initial Visits in applicants' homes</p>	<p>Progressed</p> <p>39</p> <p>applications to Stage 1 assessment</p>
<p>Approved</p> <p>16</p> <p>mainstream carers</p>	<p>Approved</p> <p>4</p> <p>supported lodgings carers</p>	<p>Approved</p> <p>18</p> <p>independent visitors</p>



This year has been one of adaptation, flexibility, and determination for the Recruitment Team. The country's recovery from Covid-19, the subsequent impact on the 'cost of living' and a general sense of financial instability, has meant that we have had to adapt, reflect, and consider different approaches to recruitment to engage with potential applicants.

An evaluation of what is working was completed, including identifying the potential 'barriers to fostering', points of delay and frustration for potential applicants, for example, between recruitment and the beginning of assessment, and identified ways to reduce this and improve the user experience.

Working with our colleagues in the Communications Team, the website was reviewed. Our webpages were updated, refreshed and our new images added, particularly focusing on the page's most frequently visited and points of disengagement.

We even appeared on the back of a bus.

Leicestershire County Council hosts the Fostering Network's East Midlands Fostering Recruiter's Forum, which see representatives from neighbouring local authorities coming together on a quarterly basis. This forum has reflected on recruitment methods, results, and techniques with a shared purpose of supporting regional local authority fostering recruitment. During a time of great uncertainty for fostering recruitment, the forum has provided insight into the East Midlands and UK wide activity, allowing each member agency to compare their performance at a more local level.



'Find out about Fostering' slides were refreshed to provide a fresh and bright image:



Pop-up events across the County:



Pop-up events are promoted on social media in advance and are an opportunity for people to say hello and have a chat about fostering. 13 Pop-up events at locations across Leicestershire have taken place through the year, including Fosse Park shopping centre, LCC Jobs fair, Bradgate Park, Leicester PRIDE, Leicester Racecourse Family Fun Day & Beacon Hill country park.

We launched our 'Thinking of fostering' newsletter: now at 120 subscribers!

An innovative way to engage with people who are thinking about fostering but are not ready to take their enquiry any further at this time. Our 'Thinking about fostering' newsletter features detail about the application process, case studies from foster carers and focuses on the benefits of fostering with LCC. This is emailed directly to subscribers' inbox each month. This keeps applicants engaged and when they are ready to progress further, they come to us.



The Communications and Media Team regularly release stories to the media and features regularly in Leicestershire matters (delivered to every home in Leicestershire).

Over 2022/23 some of these have been:

- Ami's story (Ami was previously a child in care with us) focusing on the benefits of Specialist One2One carers. This was also created into a social media campaign:
- Carer case studies, caring for children and young people with varying needs
- Articles about 'Find out about fostering' and 'pop-up' events



- Radio campaigns
- Geographically targeted campaigns. Using the words from Ami, one of our previous children in care who is now an adult, we created a campaign to be shared with people living in Leicestershire when they were listening to music.
- Leicestershire Matters

Sponsorships: A new way to engage with the public – and support healthy choices for children in Leicestershire



During this 'reflective' year, it has been necessary to consider new methods to engage with members of the public. This year, we introduced 'sponsorship' of children's football & rugby clubs across the county.

This has enabled us to support and empower local children to take part in healthy activities. In return for our investment, the clubs wear their new kits with 'fosteringleicestershire.com' displayed on their journeys around the county to different clubs for their games. Part of our target audience is families, and we know this is an excellent place to find them! Advertising boards are set up around pitches and the services attends their open days and events.

An example of pitch advertising boards:



Each club shares the service's posts on social media too, particularly details of our 'Find out about fostering' event. The engagement has been positive and provides a new way to reach people, whilst supporting children too. Following an evaluation of this, we hope to extend this scheme to other activities across Leicestershire.

We were proud to sponsor Leicestershire first girls football team:



Myth busting social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) campaigns:

Foster care Fridays – social media campaigns:

Our myth busting Monday's and Fostering Friday have proven a valuable way to engage on social media, on a regular basis. We focus on myth busting and 'did you know?' points.



To be more flexible to people's lives we started 'Late night Tuesday evening' and 'Fostering Saturday' mornings:

In our busy world, we are working towards providing more flexibility and always making it 'easier' for people who may be interested, to get in touch in a way, or at a time, which fits with their lifestyle. This year, our 'Tuesday evenings' and 'Saturday mornings', have proven valuable. Even if people are not getting in touch with us on these days, it is useful to offer people an alternative for us to call them back then.



We held a photo shoot:

To ensure our photographs used in campaigns are current and relevant, photoshoots are held. Volunteers who work for LCC joined us with their families and friends – creating some fantastic new images for our campaigns. Here are some of the images used in new campaigns and material:

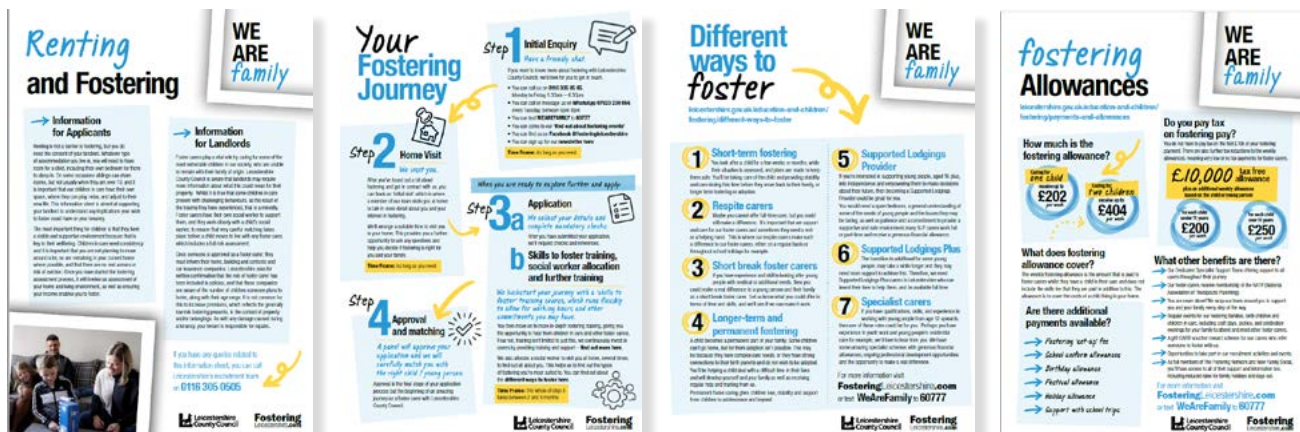


Creating 'Tik-Tok' videos:

Venturing into Tik-Tok – this year saw the creation of a video about attending our 'find out about fostering' events to ensure people feel welcome and know where to go. We have seen a steady increase in people attending our events.

Creating information to share (based on what we know can be barriers or worries about fostering):

During our conversations with people thinking about fostering, we have noted some of the common aspects that we are asked about and created some simple PDF's that can be shared by email with our applicants. These have also been added to our website as downloads for people to access.



Looking back – looking forward:

2022/23 was very much a year of recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We reflected on what had worked in terms of gaining enquiries from members of the public, what was working currently and what could work in the current climate and created fresh, innovative campaigns.

Working alongside other teams within the Service closely has been invaluable and provides us with clarity in what we were striving for, in terms of recruitment of foster carers to meet the needs of Leicestershire's looked after children and young people.

We have continued to provide honest and clear information to members of the public who are thinking about fostering in a fair, inclusive, and positive manner. Our team keep morale high, to ensure we remain happy and positive in our work and share this with all enquirers.



We are ready to go again!

“ FC Gemma: ‘Communication from both social workers has been fabulous. Our social worker, Jade, is very dedicated’ ”

“ FC Sarah: ‘Beth has been superb in supporting us throughout the year, in suggesting different ways to overcome challenges that we have faced’ ”

Kids on foster carers:

“ Bella (12): ‘They are kind, caring and funny’. I love my bed ... it is so comfortable! ”

“ Maia (5) ‘I like my foster mummy making good pancakes ... going swimming with her ... having my friends over. I want to stay with her forever and ever!’ ”

“ Baily (6) likes it when ‘Sheila takes me out to the woods ... how she loves me and my sister and when she gives me hugs’ ”

“ Kimmy (15) says that she loves the placement, says that she feels safe. She said that she feels like part of the family. ”

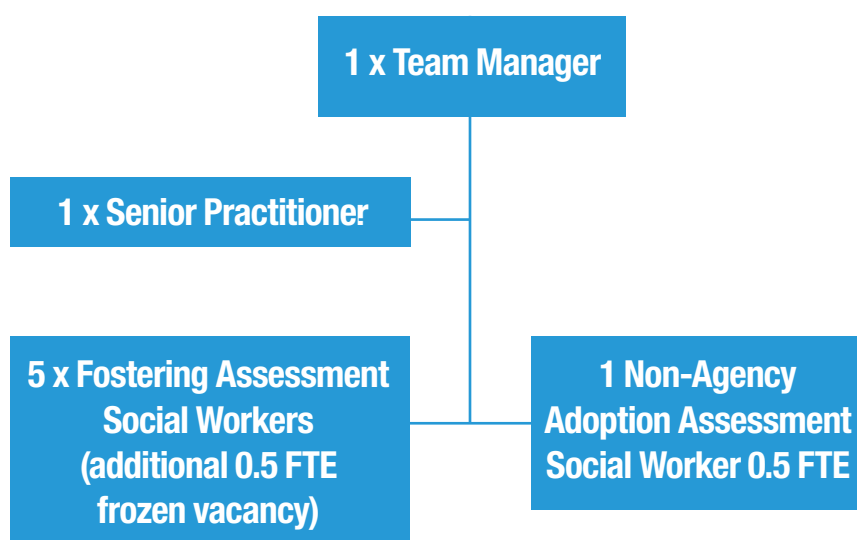
“ Poppy (12) Poppy looks forward to day trips with Jackie and Mick in the school holidays. Poppy has talked to me about Jackie and Mick’s grandchildren and how she loves spending time with them, she is always bursting with pride when talking about Jackie and Mick’s grandchildren. Poppy has told me that she is looking forward to her holiday in the summer and visiting Pompeii. ”

THE FOSTERING AND ADOPTION ASSESSMENT TEAM

The Fostering and Adoption Assessment Team are responsible for:

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

Assessment Team Staff Structure:



Staff Satisfaction and Stability of the team:

The Assessment Team are a stable and experienced staff group; no staff have left the service area in the last year. The Assessment Team have welcomed a student into their service in the last year and with several members of staff keen to support the development of students, we expect that this will be an experience which is repeated in coming months. A fixed term, part time officer will join the team to support the non-agency adoption assessing social worker. This social worker will continue to work with families on the waiting list for this service; this worker is likely to join us in the first quarter of the 2023-24 financial year. We maintain high level of communication with families on the waiting list. In terms of support to staff, assessing social workers receive regular monthly supervision with these taking place 85% of the time. Monthly team meetings are held, and there is dedicated time for development e.g., monthly POD meetings and joint CPD Day. There is a strong thread which runs through all our work as a team, and this is the idea of development, for example, work with Coram BAAF regarding private fostering. Work with partners continues including within health, external agencies such as Fostering Network and Coram BAAF, and colleagues in neighbouring local authorities, in our endeavours to drive development and performance in this service area. Development is enhanced (both as a team and individually) by team members having 'Champion' roles for different areas of work such as Signs of Safety, Private Fostering, and Equality and Diversity.

Another thread which runs through all that we do is being available to support and share ideas and good practice. This is reflected in feedback from team members about their experience of working for the Fostering Service and the Assessment Team ~

What do you like about working for the fostering service and the Assessment Team more specifically?

“ ‘I really like how supportive the service... I have never felt like I can't ask for advice or support from staff in the service.’ ”

“ ‘I like working for the fostering service as there is a sense of all teams working for the same aim – safe care and stability for vulnerable children, the whole service feels a cohesive and supportive service.’ ”

“ ‘This is a very supportive team who make time for each other, willing to give advice and assist where we can.’ ”

“ ‘I like we are a small team, but we all get on and are supportive of each other and I never feel out of place.’ ”

Is there anything else you would like to add about the stability of the team and your satisfaction in your role?

“ ‘Between us, we have knowledge, skills and experience we are able to share, and we are available to support each other.’ ”

“ ‘I have felt listened to throughout and that's really made a difference to my role. Overall, I feel very satisfied in the team and my role and like that we have things to look forward to as a team such as team days, fuddles etc.’ ”

“ The fostering assessment team has a great group of workers in it who are always there to help each other and are keen to continually learn and develop their skills, and a supportive and approachable manager. ”

Overall Assessment Team Performance

Targets and Performance

Data is included below for private fostering and non-agency adoption, as well as for mainstream fostering, to highlight the other work completed by the Assessment Team, however, this additional data will not be considered in depth within this report but serves to highlight the additional functions completed by the team.

MAINSTREAM FOSTERING ASSESSMENTS 2022-23		
	Target / KPI	Actual
Approved Carers	25	16

The service had set targets for the recruitment of mainstream carers and even though numbers entering the assessment period were lower than expected conversion from assessment start to finish is above average - conversion rate is 64%. For those prospective carers who withdrew, reasons include significant life events that have impacted upon them like health and change of family circumstance. For some this has meant we have put their assessment on hold and then re-commenced, for others we have had to agree to ending the process.

In total, the Assessment Team have worked on 27 private fostering assessments over the course of the 2022-23 financial year. We have provided a breakdown of the extent to which we have worked with these private fostering households below:

- 8 assessments during this financial year have ended in a positive recommendation. Of these,
 - 4 carer households were transferred to TAC
 - With 2 carer households, the children left and returned home to close family members at the point where the assessment was concluding
 - With 2 carer households, the child turned 16 as the assessment was concluding
- 3 negative assessments
- 7 carer's cases were closed after an assessment started but before it finished (because the private fostering arrangement ceased)
- 6 private fostering households were being assessed on 31.03.23
- 3 carer assessments closed after the referral for assessment was received, but before the assessment had commenced.

NON-AGENCY ADOPTION ASSESSMENTS 2022-23	
Adoption Orders Granted	10

Our Aims for 2022-2023:

1. Although nationally there are more approved places than children in foster care, 'this does not mean that there are sufficient appropriate placements for children' Ofsted (2021). In 2022-23 – as well as achieving our target - we want a greater focus on identifying strategies for the recruitment and assessment of the right type of carers, to meet the demand for required placement type in Leicestershire.
2. We will continue to set ambitious recruitment targets with a continued drive to place more of our children with our in-house carers. We have set targets of:

25 Mainstream Carers (to achieve at least 16)	5 Supported lodgings host families	2 Specialist Carers
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The DfE plan, within the next six months, to launch a national foster carer recruitment campaign to recruit 9,000 additional foster carers over the next 3 years (McAlister, 2022) and part of our recruitment and assessment work over coming months and years, will be to respond to these proposals. Leicestershire will benefit from the national research and its findings.

4. We need to start recording the recent difficulties which we are experiencing with GP surgeries and delays with their progression of adult health assessments (4 x assessments delayed so far since January 2022 because of delayed health assessments), so that we can report these concerns to our colleagues at the Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust.

The Assessment team has a positive working relationship with the office who process adult health assessments, and this issue resolved.

5. Work with our MOSAIC Team to ensure the new dashboards report accurately.
6. Mentoring – We operate a mentoring scheme for our prospective carers, our aim is that 100% of our carers be take up the opportunity to have a mentor during assessment and the first 12 mths of approval.



TEAM AROUND THE CHILD (FOSTER CARE & KINSHIP CARERS)

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

The Team Around the Child consists of:
Team Manager
1 x FTE Senior Practitioner (covering duty) 1 x PT Senior Practitioner (3 days per week)
8 x Supervising Social Workers
Duty team: 1x FTE Senior Practitioner (as cited above) 2 x Support Workers

Retention is the responsibility of the TAC team, and we continue to work hard to ensure that all carers feel supported, valued, and respected by the service. Currently we have 124 approved fostering households, which includes the approval of 16 new households, the resignation of 25 households (which is a reduction of 11 fostering households reported in the 21/22 annual report).

One of the main focuses of TAC is to ensure optimum utilisation of fostering households, and that Leicestershire's children are placed with Leicestershire foster carers, provide the right care at the right time. Our utilisation target for the year is 75% and this has been achieved and exceeded on a regular basis with 80% of our placements in use. Our team will continue to support the duty team to achieve this target and offer the required levels of support to our carers.

Whilst 22/23 has been another positive year for the Fostering Service, there continues to be a shortage of foster carers especially those who are able to offer care to siblings, teenagers and out of hours provision. The shortage faced by Leicestershire is in line with the national statistics and fostering network have cited:

“With record numbers of children in care and around 12 per cent of the foster carer workforce retiring or leaving every year, The Fostering Network estimates that fostering services across the UK need to recruit at least a further 7,200 foster families in the next 12 months alone. There is a particular need for foster carers to look after teenagers and sibling groups”.

This year has seen an increase in the number of resignations received by the service, there have been 25 resignations compared to previous years of approximately 10-13. A number of these resignations were expected and the vast majority due to a change in the personal circumstances of our carers. It has been noted that the aftermath of Covid 19 Pandemic had an impact upon several people in many ways. This as well as the financial crisis we believe (evidenced in exit interviews) has led to an increase in resignations. Exit interviews are offered to all carers and are an essential part of our learning and understanding of how carers experience the service, and we encourage people to engage in this process. Any comments are considered by management and help to shape the future service.

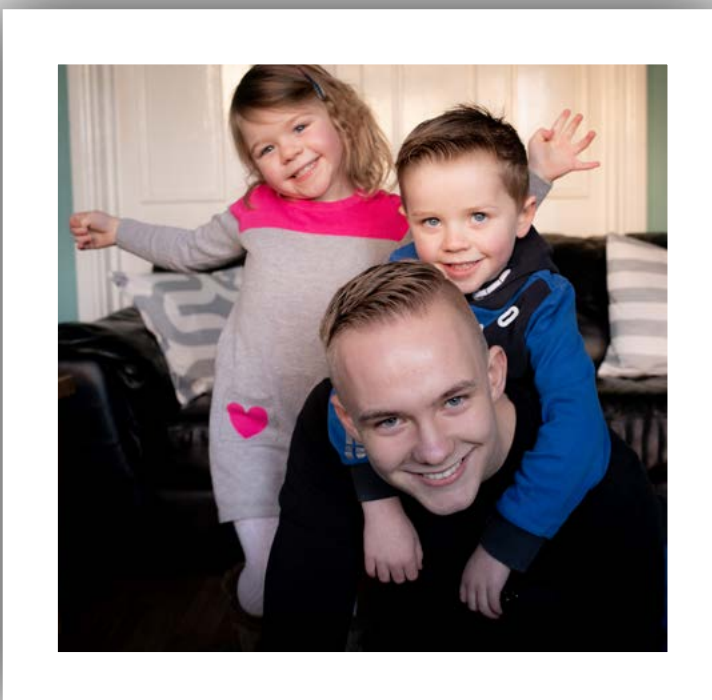
What we did well in 2022/2023

- We continued to care about our carers and their families and offered them a good level of support and supervision through a minimum of 6 weekly supervisions and regular contact. This helped us to identify where there were additional areas of need for any member of the fostering household.
- We have a good understanding of our carers; their families and we remain committed to supporting them to achieve our children's full potential.
- We continued to offer consistent SSW allocations and for many carers and children this has been the most stable working relationship within the team surrounding them.
- We continued to work well with the assessment team and ensured that there was a good handover at the point of approval, SSWs were allocated prior to panel in order to support this process and we have good working relationship with the assessment team.
- Most of our carer's report that they feel well supported and have a positive relationship with their SSW.
- We have started to work towards implementing well-being plans so we can better understand our carers support needs and how as a service we can support the fostering family more effectively. In doing this we are able to pre-empt instability and prevent compassion fatigue.
- We recognize the important role that our birth children play and the importance of providing them with support and showing that we value their involvement and care. Birthday cards are being sent out to all children and a 'children who foster council' is being established. We have offered children who foster events with one of the sessions targeting the older children.
- Training and support plans are being implemented for all carers following annual reviews and ratification from ADM. These plans identify the areas of support, work and training for the forthcoming year and the plan that will be reviewed at each formal supervision.
- The duty team continue to work hard to ensure that matches are well made, carers are being kept informed about potential children matched to them and there is more consistency in the matching process and feedback from carers is positive.
- We continue to meet our utilisation target of 75% and we work hard to ensure that carers are matched with children within their terms of approval.
- We respond swiftly to crisis 'and offer support where it is needed, stability meetings are arranged as soon as possible, and support plans reviewed in a timely manner.
- We continue to work well with other professionals and relationships with CIC and locality are overall positive.
- We recognize the importance of supporting out male carers and hearing their voices, we have established a 'Men who foster' group which is running monthly.
- We have supported 3 carers to complete the diploma in therapeutic parenting and remain committed to supporting other carers to become therapeutic caregivers, improve their learning and develop their skills.
- Leicestershire Fostering have contributed to a piece of large- scale research developed by the Ann Freud Centre and Hereford University. Several carers completed a 10-week reflective programme. This was well received, and carers reported that it was informative and helped them consider implementing new caring strategies. Carers reported it facilitated strategies to help them pause and reflect to consider situations from a different perspective.
- We continued to offer annual events to celebrate our carers and acknowledge the important role they play in caring for our children. The celebration evening was well attended and enjoyed by all.
- Regular events are offered throughout the year by DPST, and these are attended by some of the SSW.
- Senior managers have attended the locality groups and meet regularly with locality leaders to share service information and hear what our carers are telling us.
- We have secured a 12.5% payment increase for all of our carers.

What we Plan to do in 2023/2024

- Performance meetings will be data driven and effectively led ensuring learning is taken back into practice. Systems continuing to be refined from this learning.
- Senior Practitioners will be developed to both contribute, present in the absence of the manager and share learning with the team.
- We will hold Quarterly Consultation Evenings to share information about the service and listen to responses to any proposed changes to service delivery. This will also present an opportunity to gain carers input in any policy changes.
- We wish to reduce the number of carers that are currently on hold to utilize all the placements available to the service.
- Payments - carers are often paid incorrectly, and this causes a lot of additional work and upset for the carers and staff. We will continue to work with finance to address any issues and liaise with senior management regarding the importance of prioritizing amendments to Mosaic to change to the system ensuring correct payments are made and on time.
- All carers will have a meaningful well-being plan which clearly outlines what support we need to provide to ensure that all carers feel supported to meet their own needs and those of the children in their care.
- All SSW and carers will be trained in Compassion Fatigue, what are the signs and how to avoid the impact.
- We will develop and launch a Well Being Strategy or our fostering And Supported Lodgings hosts.
- Carers will be offered a Well Being Day focusing on self-care strategies
- All carers will have a training and support plan which will be reviewed every 4 months to enable a review of the support being provided by the service.
- We will establish the children who foster council and ensure that the voices of our birth children are heard, respected, and valued. We will run regular events to thank them for all that they contribute to fostering.
- We will continue to show that we value our carers through all the work that we do but in particular the provision of thank you events such as the annual celebration evenings.
- Continued work with our carers to ensure that they feel supported and are proud to work for LCC





The Kinship TAC consists of:

0.8 Team Manager
2 x 0.5 Senior Practitioners
4.2 x Supervising Social Workers
3 x FTE
2 x 0.6

Kinship TAC and Mainstream TAC work closely together offering the same level of support and intervention. Supervising Social Workers (SSW) working with kinship carers, often face the difficult task in helping a carer adjust to the role of being carers, in addition to being grandparents, sisters, aunts, uncles, and support carers in managing the often-complex dynamics within their birth families, whilst ensuring the needs of the children are met. Our kinship carers are based primarily in Leicestershire, but some are much further afield. When and where necessary our SSW's work alongside children's social workers to ensure children receive the care, they need to keep them safe and achieve the best possible outcomes. A key support to the stability and effectiveness of kinship care is the Dedicated Placement Support Team, who work with carers in developing their understanding and responses but also providing one to one support to children and young people. A challenge for the team has been staff sickness which has meant we haven't always been able to provide the consistency of support that we strive to do.

We have seen a continued downward trajectory of kinship carers being approved and this is primarily due to the focus on securing permanency at the earliest opportunity via SGO's and to a lesser extent Care Arrangement Orders (CAO), as part of care proceedings. In March 23 we had 68 Kinship fostering households, compared to 83 in March 22, with 8 Kinship Carers progressing to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), supporting the long-term permanency for those children with family members. During the year, 4 kinship caring households have been de-registered following concerns, 2 of whom appealed to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM). In both cases the IRM upheld the Agency Decision Maker's (ADM) decision. 3 kinship fostering households progressed to Staying Put.

THE KINSHIP ASSESSMENT TEAM

The Kinship Assessment Team consists of:
1 Team Manager
1 Senior Practitioner
4 Full time assessing social workers (Currently 3 - 1 beginning with team July 23)
1 Full time SGO specific assessing social worker
1 part time social worker – private fostering focus
1 Full Time assessing IVA social worker
2 Part time assessing IVA social worker
1 Full time stage one support worker
1 part-time SGO support worker (Beginning Feb 24)
x1 Vacancies (Full time assessing social worker)

The Kinship Team has undergone significant change and growth as part of the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future program and over the course of the following 12 months.

The Kinship Team work jointly across locality service areas at the point of the initial viability assessment (IVA) being required – this provides a robust and balanced overview of the current circumstances for the children, and early assessment of the carers factoring the National Minimum Standards, alongside the exploration of all other options for Connected assessments, including Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders. We have developed this area of the service to incorporate a continued program of training for locality teams and includes a monthly “surgery” based within each locality office, to strengthen the partnership and cohesion across the service. We have a dedicated pod of social workers from within the team whose sole focus is on the completion of the IVA – with an aspiration to be completing 100%.

Alongside the enhanced support package for our SGO carers, we have continued to expand the access to training and support for all carers during the assessment period, with a We are Family skills (over-view) training day, followed with access to specific focused learning and development training, this not only strengthens the assessment and confidence of our carers, but most importantly ensure that carers and children do not feel vulnerable in dealing with unfamiliar situations as a result of caring for family and friends who have experienced trauma and loss.

We have an appointed and SGO assessing social worker, solely to complete those assessments that have been identified for Special Guardianship Care, this provides consistency across the assessment area of all Connected assessments with comprehensive, thorough, and detailed assessments completed – individualized understand and support the specific needs of each family but standardized in quality and expectation. As per our aim from 2022/2023 we have now expanded this offer to include the completion of Private Law Special Guardianship assessments – these currently are completed as/when capacity allows.

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

Of 132 assessments (including active cases up until end of April 2023)

48 SGO only assessments have been completed		
34 Positive recommendations	11 Negative recommendations	3 undetermined (in early-stage assessment)
51 All options assessments		
17 positive recommendations	18 negative recommendations (Of these 18 – x2 elected to progress to panel the remaining 16 withdrew)	14 Undetermined (in early stage of assessment)
10 Fostering only		
6 positive recommendations	4 negative recommendations	0 Undetermined (in early stage of assessment)
23 Did not progress through the full assessment following IVA		
6 were jointly completed – in five cases assessment progressed through majority of assessment prior to withdrawing with only one of the six withdrawing in early stages		15 singular IVA - Majority were not clear about what they were agreeing too or long-term assessment for care/ minimal info covered in IVA

From April to March, we have had 17 SGO's made for 23 children (including sibling groups remaining together) – these are all from SGO only assessments and all options assessments where they have withdrawn from fostering.

The strength of this provision includes:

- Kinship Team is alerted to the possibility of placements at the earliest opportunity
- Support is provided to the locality to understand the processes involved
- Support is provided at the Family Group Meetings to ensure prospective carers understand the role of a foster carer and what will be expected of them and to allow for consistency consideration of Fostering Regulations in all assessments

Robust and comprehensive Initial Viability Assessments are undertaken, strengthening the assessment processes, and ensuring informed decisions are made early.

Our plans for 2023/24 include:

- Further development of our assessments using feedback from our carers, panel, and ADM to improve the quality of assessments using a strengths-based model and identifying risks and vulnerabilities and how we can mitigate them
- Develop our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity model into all our assessments recognizing the diversity of our kinship carers.
- Continue to develop our training to other service areas regarding kinship care
- Continue to progress Special Guardianships where there is a pre-existing relationship.
- Training in localities for the use of kinship placements and the different regulatory requirements.

THE DEDICATED PLACEMENT SUPPORT TEAM

Leicestershire's Dedicated Placement Support Team (DPST) has been in operation since 2016. The aim of the team is to support placements to achieve stability, for any child in care, which includes working across the full range of placements that our children in care live in. The team works holistically with everyone in the home, recognising the importance of giving everyone a voice, and helping them to reach their own resolutions and outcomes. The support workers in the team carry their own case load, so can be creative in their engagement, as well as flexible. Support can be offered at weekends and evenings, this can involve working with children and young people directly, or indirectly, by supporting the people looking after them. The team is also an additional listening ear, which is available to support carers when times become difficult. Practice within the team is trauma informed and relationship based. Ofsted recognised this service as one of Leicestershire's "Unique Selling Points" in our 2019 inspection and we are very proud that another Local Authority in the East Midlands is planning to set up a similar service.

The team consists of:

1 x Assistant Service Manager

1 x Team Manager

4 x Supervising Social Workers

7 x Support Workers

1 x Independent Visitor Co-Ordinator

1 x Independent Visitor Support Worker

The team is responsible for:

- Supporting and promoting placement stability for young people living in our specialist foster care provision for young people at risk of residential care or stepping down into family-based care as part of their transition to adulthood.
- Supporting our Mainstream Foster Carers and young people where there have been placement stability concerns.
- Preparing return home trajectories and offering support at evenings and weekends to maintain the arrangement.
- Recruiting and support Supported Lodgings Carers.
- Supporting Staying Put Arrangements where there are no other foster children in placement. This includes both internal and external carers.
- Working with carers to understand the therapeutic needs using Thera play techniques.
- Providing activity events to engage with both carers, foster children, and birth children.

Placement Support

- Over the last year the team have worked with:
- 84 children, who are living in 71 families, along with their carers.
- We have supported 4 young people to return home.
- We have supported 1 young person to step down from residential.
- We recruited two full time support workers for the team.
- The team primarily works with families who need to achieve stability.

Supported Lodgings

- We currently have 34 SLP carers, 79% of whom can offer a full-time placement, others are able to offer respite.
- There are currently 28 young people in an SLP placement, and 8 vacancies.
- We have 1 potential carer in assessment.
- We have ensured our Supported Lodgings Providers have access to all training and support forums including portal, online training, and support groups.
- Within the SLP cohort there are 5 specialist UASC carers who are providing 3 young people with a placement.
- Over the last year we have gained 4 Supported Lodgings Providers, and another is due at panel in April.

Staying Put

- We currently have 40 young people remaining in their placement beyond the age of 18.

Specialist Foster Carers

- We currently have 5 carers under this scheme offering 7 places.
- We currently have 7 young people in placement.
- Caseloads remain low in recognition of the support Leicestershire's specialist carers provide.
- Our Supported Lodgings Team run support groups for carers bimonthly and other events during the year.

Developments on Plans for 2022/2023

- We had a recruitment target of 5 SLP, we approved 4, and have 1 about to come to panel.
- We had a recruitment target of 6 Specialist Carers and approved 0, we have 1 coming to panel in May.
- We recruited one further Pathway carer and re-approved our current Pathway carer as a couple

THE INDEPENDENT VISITOR SCHEME

The scheme supports children in care. Children aged 7-21 who are identified as benefiting from the service, the scheme provides positive friendships and role models for our young people placed in foster care and residential care, with many friendships being maintained after young people have moved on from care and are living independently. The scheme assists with placement support and stability for both Mainstream and connected carers.

What our children say:

“ I trust her with my whole life... I am surprised by her generosity, and she never forgets my birthday... she helped me with my self-confidence, and she gave me lots of emotional support ”

“ My IV took me fishing and it was good. I would never have done this without him ”

“ My IV is easy to talk to and fun to be with... he has helped me get into football ”

What our Independent Visitors say:

“ Helping a young person grow in confidence and self-esteem is very rewarding ”

“ I'm proud to be an independent visitor and proud to be part of their lives ”

“ We have great fun together, a beautiful bond, lots of adventures, and I get to unleash my inner child ”

The scheme is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, and ongoing support of the independent visitors (IV) and the matching of young people referred to the scheme.

During this period the scheme has:

- Recruited a full- time support worker to support the Independent Visitor Coordinator, this appointment has allowed the scheme to enhance current practice and develop new areas of the scheme.
- Raised the profile of the scheme both internally through attending staff team meetings, and externally through leaflet drops and attendance at events for LCC
- Continued to provide positive matches for children, and to provide positive endings for those relationships that are no longer wanted/needed. The children matched in Leicestershire exceeds the national picture per head of CIC as referenced by the NIVN National Data report
- Created opportunities for IVs to meet through network events and social events, we did our first event with IVs and the young people they visit in January of this year (bowling) approximately 50 people attended, the feedback from all was positive, and we have a Tennis event scheduled for the summer.
- Invited IVs to fostering events, summer picnics, Christmas party, craft events
- Provided 2 stand-alone 1st Aid Training courses for IVs
- Evaluated the scheme through feedback forms and listened and acted on IVs and young people's voices
- Created opportunities to shine a spotlight on the amazing work IVs do. We now have a regular feature in the fostering newsletter, created a suite of videos of IVs talking about the role and its rewards to use for promotional purposes and to share with those enquiring and being assessed, and gathered testimonials from IV's and young people to use to promote the role
- Connection with LCC strategic volunteering department enabling connections with other volunteering schemes and an opportunity to share ideas, areas of good practice and develop the scheme further
- Been an active member of the NIVN and had a regular and consistent presence at regional meetings and attended the National conference in Birmingham
- Strengthened links with the recruitment team and comms team
- Consistent weekly POD meetings with staff on the scheme
- Created information sheets to enable IVs to develop their awareness/knowledge on specific topics including internet safety, mental health, and young people to name a few.
- Continued to use the WhatsApp group that was started during the pandemic this is regularly used by staff on the scheme and IVs to share information and keep connected
- Invited guest speakers at IV Network Meetings
- Sent birthday cards to all IV's

Current numbers on the scheme:

Independent Visitors

- We have 72 IVs however 4 ceased being visitors in this period due to personal circumstances
- We have approved 18 new IVs in this period, up by 7 in the last period
- We have 8 in assessment and 1 waiting to be assessed
- The service currently has 68 approved IVs

Young people

- 73 young people are matched with an IV
- 23 have been matched in this period (5 in res, 2 in supported accommodation, 16 in mainstream/kinship placements) up by 15 in the last period
- 23 are waiting to be matched of which 5 are in OOC placements (18 males, 5 females) this is up by 7 from the last period although this is in part due to raising the profile of the scheme further and receiving more referrals.

Challenges in delivery

- Recruiter of male IVs and the number of male young people wanting a positive male role model continues to be an issue and is a national challenge. We are targeting recruitment to try and increase interest from this group,
- Recruitment of IVs for children in Out of County (OOC) placements remains a local and national issue. We are striving to address this through regional and national discussions. The Care Review highlights the needs of YP to identify significant others in their lives – IVs fit well into this review, and we have used this message to collaborate with children's social workers to explore matches for young people in OOC placements who have links with adults in their wider network
- Recruitment of IVs for children with disabilities and additional needs remains a local and national issue. We are striving to address this through regional and national discussions and looking to strengthen links with LCC disability teams and special needs schools to explore options for recruitment.

Our Plans for 2023/24

- Utilising the help of existing IVs for recruitment, particularly males and those with skills/ knowledge of disability.
- Strengthen links with comms team to promote the scheme through other forums, such as next door, LinkedIn, and Facebook advertising
- Develop further our training offer to IVs through guest speakers at network events and providing additional written resources alongside existing training opportunities
- Develop offer to care leavers, this is available but is currently on an ad hoc basis
- Develop offer to OOC and disabled children
- Produce new leaflets, posters, and promotional resources



REPORT FROM THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

Our fostering reviews are completed by two part-time Fostering Reviewing Officers. Reviews take place at minimum every twelve months and can be held more frequently if there is a change in circumstances in the foster home, or if extra help is needed to ensure that fostering standards are met. Staffing issues have meant that over the last year not as many of our review meetings have been face-to-face as we would have liked.

Overall, our looked after children continue to express satisfaction with their foster carers. Their voice and views are a key part of the review process, and they regularly share that they see their placement as their home, and that they are encouraged to play a full part in family life.

Understanding the views of the foster carers' own children continues to be a priority. As well as supervising social workers glean their views as part of review meeting preparation, there is an emphasis on supervising social workers speaking to them on an ongoing basis throughout the fostering year about their experiences of being part of a fostering family.

Our foster carers are largely satisfied with the support offered by their SSWs. This support remains especially crucial given the high turnover of children's social workers within the Council. There is an acknowledgement amongst management that communication with foster carers around aspects such as delays in permanence planning and court decisions can be timelier from the permanence and children's social work teams.

Our foster carers value the visibility and availability of management; Team Managers Rachael Young, Fred Luneta and Assistant Service Manager Heather Hughes in particular. They are available to step-in and assist with issues or problems, when necessary, whether by chairing placement stability meetings, or more informally.

Foster carer training remains largely online. The response of our foster carers to this is mixed. Many value the flexibility of our online courses, especially being able to arrange their learning around their childcare commitments. Others miss the group learning aspect and chance to 'bounce ideas' off their foster carer colleagues.

Priorities for 2023/24

- All foster carer reviews to be held face-to-face, rather than virtually
- Foster carers need to be paid the right allowance, on time
- Children's social work and permanence teams to update foster promptly on permanence planning and court decisions/timescales
- Training offer to include a mixture of in-person, and virtual courses and learning

Ben Marchant

Fostering Reviewing Officer

LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTER PANEL CHAIR REPORT

This report refers to the functioning of Leicestershire County Council Fostering panel for the year 2022/23. The Fostering panel is constituted under the Fostering Standards Regulations (England) 011.

Independent Panel Chair's Comments:

Sue Tribe

Since over the past year at panel, we have increased our membership to reflect a more inclusive team, and this is a strength we would wish to continue to build on.

We have undertaken training that looks at the purpose of panel and the questions we ask, to ensure we are relevant to current thinking and trends.

Alongside this we have undertaken 2 other trainings. One on working with the Travelling community and one that looked at some aspects of trauma.

Although panel is well informed generally, these trainings were helpful in giving us space to reflect on our practice.

Currently panel is a hybrid one. We meet face to face for some panels and online for others. This gives flexibility for Carers and Social Workers and seems to be a model that works well

We have sadly said goodbye to one Adviser, Julie Hall who was a great advocate for panel and welcomed another, Becky Edser. We have also had a change of ADM too!

I look forward to working closely with the new ADM and Becky to promote good practice at panel and to developing excellent working relationships to ensure the best outcomes at panel for all.

Panel continues to offer Independent, robust oversight of cases that come to panel, and we fulfil the role of critical friend to the Local Authority when needs be.

Over the next year I very much look forward to continuing to develop our independent work in Leicestershire to a high standard and one that protects and safeguards Leicestershire's children and supports their carers.

Mohammed Patel

Panel have played a crucial role in the scrutiny of cases being presented. We increasingly notice the complexity of some of the cases coming to panel. The experience the panel members bring from a range of professional disciplines and personal background has meant we ensure any children placed for fostering is in the best interest of the child. We now have a young care leaver on panel who has provided some valuable insight into the experiences of looked after children.

We have continued with virtual panels but also now offer face to face / hybrid panels once a month. Panel members appreciate the benefit face to face panels can offer to applicants/carers and helps panel members to interact.

We continue to play a crucial role in identifying areas of improvement service can make in respect of the quality of the paperwork and practice.

It's been a pleasure the chair panel over the last year. We continue to explore widening our panel membership to include people from more diversified communities.

1. Summary

- The agency has a Central List of panel members, in accordance with Fostering Regulations, Guidance 2011.
- We have two Panel Chairs, four Vice Chairs and social work representatives
- Earlier in the year the decision was taken to move to a hybrid model: offering a mixture of face-to-face Panels and virtual Panels. This solution is working well, and feedback has been positive. This will continue to be monitored to ensure this model suits the needs of the service, applicants, carers, and social workers.
- Although Panels are scheduled four times a month, it is normally the case that 3 are held a month. Panels A and C are Chaired by Mohamed Patel and panels B and D by Sue Tribe.
- There has been a continued focus to develop the diversity within our Panels to reflect the communities we live and work in, thus providing a broad knowledge base and experience. This has included recruitment of a young adult who has experience of being in care, who has proven to be a real asset to our Panel. However, it's acknowledged that there is further work to do be done.
- The number of kinships foster carers seeking approval has continued to fall, this is primarily due to the focus on securing permanency via SGO's and a lesser extent Care Arrangement Orders (CAO), as part of care proceedings.
- There was a change in Panel Advisor in March 22.

2. Panel Development

- Panel members, Chairs and Vice Chairs continue to be subject to annual appraisals, identifying areas of strengths in practice as well as areas for development, including training needs.
- Panel members are expected to attend a least one training event per year. During the year panel members attended the following training:
- Gypsy Romany traveller awareness training. Facilitated by Jackie Duffy from Leicester GATE in July 22.
- Trauma awareness training. Facilitated by Practice Excellence team in October 22.
- Training specific for Panel members on assessments, panel's role, responsibilities, and questioning. Facilitated by LJP training and Consultancy on March 23
- The Panel Advisor is a member of the East Midlands Panel Advisers' Forum, which provides the opportunity to discuss and share good practice.

3. Task of panel

Panel makes recommendations on whether to approve prospective carers or whether they continue to be suitable to be foster carers; these recommendations go to the Agency Decision Maker who then ratifies or rejects panel's recommendations thereby deciding. This qualifying determination allows applicants the right of appeal to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

The panel work includes:

- Applications for prospective foster carers
- Application for family and friends (Connected Persons) carers child specific.
- First Annual Reviews and including changes to terms of approval, standards of care and significant changes within the fostering family.
- De-registrations/terminations of carers.
- Regulation 24 extensions.
- Quality Assurance.

4. Overview of work presented to panel

- During the year 22/23, 39 Panels were held (the same as in 21/22) and 9 Panels were cancelled, due to no cases being on the agenda.

i Foster care approvals (mainstream, some with multiple TOA)

Type	New Carers
Long- term	0
Short – term/respite	5
Parent and child	0
Short-term only	8
Respite only	2
Specialist Carers	0
Deferred	1

ii Family and Friends

Family/kinship	10
Support care for Family and Friends/Connected Person/ Respite Connected Carer	1
Not approved	5
Withdrew application	2
Deferred	4

iii Reviews

Annual Reviews

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

2 six months review following presentation at panel

2 reviews were deferred

Reviews following concerns

6 reviews following concerns were presented to panel this year. Panel recommended that 2 were deregistered.



iv Terminations of approval

Resignations

During the year 2022/23, 44 Foster/Kinship Carers have submitted their resignations.

Reasons given are as follows:

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

Deregistration

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

5. Complaints

No complaints were received

6. Feedback to panel

Observers

Staff are given the opportunity to observe Panel. As part of their induction, staff new to the Fostering Service and/or social work students are encouraged to observe. The aim largely being to demystify the process, particularly for those who have a pending case to present to panel for the first time.

The Agency Decision Maker also observes each panel Chair once per year, specifically to observe the Chair as part of the chair's annual review.

Panel Evaluation

We strive to ensure applicants, carers and social workers feel they are treated fairly and with respect, that panel members are clear in their questioning and in their recommendations. To monitor and evaluate Panel functioning we ask attendees to provide feedback regarding their experiences of Panel. These responses are correlated and presented back to Panel members. This provides the opportunity for discussion, reflection, and learning, as well as areas for development.

Examples of positive feedback:

“ ‘The panel were very approachable, I felt that they really put the prospective carers at ease which really helped them to feel relaxed.’ (Supervising Social Worker) ”

“ ‘I appreciated panel chair - Sue explaining to the foster carers the outcome of panel and taking questions from the foster carers. As a worker, I felt supported.’ (Supervising Social Worker). ”

“ ‘Lots of positive recommendations to further our fostering journey. We felt well regarded and the show of appreciation for our efforts from the panel was encouraging. Thank you for a pleasant experience.’ (Mainstream foster carer). ”

“ ‘All the panel members were great; giving me time to reflect on my answers.’ (Mainstream foster carer). ”

“ ‘All a good experience, it nice to be able to thank our social worker via the panel for her support throughout the year.’ (Mainstream foster carer). ”

Feedback with challenge:

“ ‘We feel the way the questions were asked were not clear and were ambiguous. We are not professionals and the way in which Panel presents itself appears very rigid and in no way took account that we are straightforward working people just trying to care for our grandchildren, we have not entered mainstream foster care, and it felt as if panel made no allowance for this. We were kept waiting for 45 minutes which we consider totally inappropriate and added to our anxiety. Not only being kept waiting but being in the presence of virtual panel did not help us feel at ease and increased our anxiety.’ (Prospective Kinship Carers). ”

“ ‘I was under the impression we would be able to discuss our experiences and truths to panel. Our opportunity for our voices to be heard were removed and a decision made without any input from ourselves. While I accept that panel can only react to information provided, as a carer we have been left with no support and nowhere to turn during this process, due to systemic and cultural behaviours. No one independently has listened to us or acted/investigated our concerns. I would implore panel in the future always spend time with carers regardless of if procedurally other action is required, to understand their experiences and treatment prior to panel.’ (Mainstream foster carer). ”

Quarterly Panel Meetings

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

7. OBJECTIVES FOR 2022/23

1. Fostering Panel Practice Standards to be reviewed.
2. Ongoing work to ensure consistency across panels.
3. To continue developing diversity within our Panels to reflect the community we live in, including care experienced individuals and the inclusion of kinship carers.
4. To explore using Panel as a 'reflective tool' providing independent advice and guidance for Assessing Social Workers on complex cases that may be presented to Panel in the future.
5. Training for panel members to develop their understanding of the complexities surrounding Kinship care and training on LGBTQ+ community to better understand how carers can meet the specific needs of children and young people.
6. To include Panel members in the Fostering Service Day training.
7. To involve the Children in Care Council in developing a set of 'child focused' questions that Panel can draw upon when questioning prospective and approved carers.
8. To develop ways that ensure feedback from Panel attendees is measurable, thus helping identify themes, strengths and vulnerabilities and areas that need be improved upon.

THE FOSTER CARER ASSOCIATION

The Leicestershire Foster Carer Association (LFCA) has been running for several years. This followed the establishment of a committee who had determined the areas where foster carers and their families could be better supported.

Many of our LFCA have fostered for the service for several years and bring to the association a wealth of experience. The membership of the association remains low as we have seen carers join locality groups based within their own localities.

We have encouraged more membership but have seen carers using locality groups more regularly. LFCA will link into locality groups for additional support.

We advise our LFCA when there has been an allegation to ensure additional independent support is available.

Developments for 2022-2023

- Regular attendance at the Foster Carer Forum.
- LFCA to be invited to attend locality groups to seek new membership and promote their role.
- LFCA to continue to support carers if subject to an allegation / investigation.

OUR LOCALITY SUPPORT GROUPS

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

Our locality groups meet in person, either at a carer home or at a neutral venue,

Most meet monthly, they are very social groups and are facilitated by the carers. Details of the meeting times are advertised in our Newsletter. When a new carer is approved, their details are provided to the coordinator to make contact and welcome to the support group. Many of our coordinators are also mentors so new carers are quickly inducted into their local group.

We have also re-generated a monthly kinship care support group, which is continuing to grow its membership.

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

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

COMPLAINTS AND ALLEGATIONS

We continue to provide many forums for carers to raise and resolve issues. Both the Team Managers from the Team Around the Child, and Kinship will meet with carers to discuss any concerns. The Service Manager is also available to meet with carers both as a group or an individual foster family.

During 2021/22 we received formal 5 complaints.

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

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

- 2 were upheld in relation to support needs from child's worker / not agreeing with timeliness of plans.

During 2020/21 we had 11 allegations of those:

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

During 2022/23 outcome of referrals to The Independent Review Mechanism:

- 3 referrals were made to the IRM
- Of which the panel agreed with the recommendation
- None were issued with guidance to the local authority.

OUR QUALITY ASSURANCE

Within our Fostering Service we seek to ensure that all areas of our work achieve excellence, we have developed our review paperwork to gain further feedback and will continue to develop this.

As a service we constantly look for evidence to evidence the impact we make gaining feedback at every opportunity.

Twice yearly we hold Service Days where the whole team can reflect upon our achievements, develop our learning and where is the evidence of the impact we have made. Our two events last year were focussed on being a trauma informed service and service reflection and development.

Across the service we undertake audits both for our service and across Childrens social care. The audits are then used to develop the key areas within the service.

The findings from the audits are then presented back to the team with a timeline of improvements. Our focus this year has been reflecting how Equality and Diversity and Voice is reflected in supervision of both staff and carers.

The audits form part of the departmental Quality Assurance Strategy, to consistently raise practice using effective management oversight. A report is provided to our senior management team with actions to be followed to ensure improvement.

A FINAL WORD FROM THE SERVICE MANAGER, JOSS LONGMAN

The beginning of the year commenced with our delayed foster carers recognition event, held at the King Power Stadium in May. This is our opportunity as a service to say Thank You to our all of carers - mainstream foster carers, kinship foster carers and our Independent Visitors. Over 150 attended and enjoyed the evening, speeches and being treated. Activities to engage now we are able is important to us as a service, to be visible and available for our carers. Throughout the summer we held various picnics for our carers and staff to meet. Retention is as important as recruitment in ensuring that are carers remain with us and feel supported post approval.

We held consultation events so carers could meet with managers to learn of service updates and for us to hear their voice.

An area we will be development is working with our colleagues in adoption to produce Practise Standards for children moving onto adoption, understanding the crucial role our foster carers have in preparing our babies for their forever homes.

With increased support from our media and communications team we will continue to drive our recruitment campaigns, with a focus on siblings, teenagers, and children with additional needs.

Our placement stability remains strong, and the support we offer households is embedded within our service, we regularly gain this feedback from our foster carer reviews, QA alerts and emails of recognition sent from the Assistant Director.

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

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

As a group of managers, we continue to expand, and we look forward to a new part time Team Manager joining the service to manage the Supported Lodgings Scheme.

Our motto of “We are family” continues to run strong within the service, where support is available when and where required.

For the forthcoming year:

- Continue to use all forms of media in our intensive recruitment campaign to achieve stretch targets:
25 Mainstream Carers (net 16).
2 Specialist Carers.
5 Supported Lodgings.
- We recognise that these targets are lower than in previous years recognising the current downward trend nationally in recruitment. We have targets for enquiries, Stage one starts and approvals which we monitor monthly in our performance meetings.
- Focussed audits on voice – monitoring the quality of feedback from children, social workers, and IRO’s for our carers in reviews.
- Continuing to develop our trauma informed practice to both our workers and carers
- Strengthening our reflective practice in supervision of workers and carers.
- Registering our Supported Lodgings scheme with Ofsted to enable its practice from October 28th, 2023.
- Implement automated performance reporting post approval using Tableau reporting and dashboards. We have 50% currently in operation.

We recognise we have lost a number of carers this year, many of which had not provided a service to us pre-Covid, and have reflected upon their decision to continue fostering, it is with regret for the loss, but this has not significantly impacted upon our utilisation, which has been consistently high at 75-78%.

We are looking forward to our Fostival, a Well-being festival for our foster families, supported lodgings providers and Independent Visitors, we have lots of wonderful activities planned for the whole family including a sleepover at a local campsite.

I feel so impressed with our service, that we have staff passionate to get the right outcomes for our families, who have enduring relationships with our foster families and children.

We look forward to the year ahead.



Joss Longman



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