



# Annual Report of Durham County Council Fostering Service - 2020/21



## What is the Durham Fostering Service?

In Durham we pride ourselves on knowing our children and young people well and supporting our foster carers to be the best they can. We understand that it takes a special person to be a foster carer and with the right support, encouragement, commitment, and passion together we can achieve something great. Our fostering service is the driving force to ensure this happens and that all our foster carers and the children and young people in their care benefit from a range of people who are as passionate and committed as they are. We are exceptionally proud of our foster carers and the children and young people in their care. Its amazing when we can talk about and show case the great work people do. Much of this can be seen in or heard as part of our radio, news, and social media campaigns.



As a fostering service we have responsible for:

- Making sure we recruitment and assessment of foster carers and connected carers.
- Ensuring we provide support, supervision, and training to all of our foster carers including connected carers and family to family.
- Ensuring we have enough safe and supportive foster families for the children and young people of Durham who are well supported nurtured to help different children and young people with a range of different needs, at the time when this is needed the most; whether this is a foster family for a short period of time, to help in an emergency right through to a ensuring our foster carers can care for and love a child right through to adulthood and into their early adult years as part of our staying put offer.
- Ensuring we help children and young people live in their foster families for as long as they need to and provide the help and support when things get tough.

In 2020 we set out to achieve some important priorities which would help our current and future foster carers as well as the children and young people in their care. We set out to:

- To increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.
- Review the marketing strategy to attract and retain a wider group of fostering families who are able to offer a range of fostering options for our children looked after.
- Improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service so our children and young people can live with their long-term carer sooner.
- Reduce the number of moves from one foster carer to another for children and young people and to ensure when a child or young person did move in with their new foster carers we got this as right as we could for all concerned.
- Improve our recording processes and how we used the data to better understand how we are doing as a fostering service and where best to prioritise our work.
- Review the training and support offer to our foster carers so they have all the skills, knowledge, and access to support they need to best meet the needs of the children and young people who live within their fostering family.
- To evidence the good work, we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide and to make more of the brilliant things our fostering families achieve.
- To ensure our foster care reviews are timely and where there is delay the reason for this are understood and resolved at the earliest opportunity.

And then covid hit .....it is fair to say it has been a challenging time for everyone and this meant we had to very quickly change the way we did things to keep everyone safe but also to ensure that we continued to support our foster carers, the children and young people in their care and the foster team. The fostering team moved to a home working model which meant face to face visits and work was reduced and the use of virtual visits, supervision and sessions were



developed. Training went virtual or eLearning. And panels were held virtually by Teams. But amongst all of this we made progress. Great progress and we all achieved some wonderful things such as virtual Christmas card competitions, family film nights, supporting our experts by experience to deliver training to potential carers, an audience with the corporate parenting panel chairs and children in care council and of course we continued to make progress against our priorities.

## Who's in the Fostering Service?

All mainstream foster carers and connected carers are supported and supervised by a qualified Fostering Social Worker. Their role is to recruit, assess and support foster carers in line with their needs and inline with the fostering regulations. During this year we have continued to have the following people support this work:

- All our foster carers.
- A Strategic Manager who is responsible for working in the service and with others to drive the strategic priorities of the wider service and fostering forward.
- A Service Manager who has day to day responsibility for driving the fostering service forward and supporting everyone to get things done.
- A Recruitment Team who are responsible for working with our colleagues in marketing to attract potential foster carers and who are responsible for the recruitment, assessment and initial training and support to new foster carers.
- Two Fostering support teams, who support and work with our foster carers and colleagues from across the service to ensure we have a great set of foster carers who get what they need from us when they need it.
- A Connected Carers Team who support the assessment of family and friends who are hoping to be carers for the children and young people known to them. This team did not exist at the start of 2020, we introduced it to meet demand and ensure our mainstream carers continued to get the right level of support they needed and the connected carers progressed through their assessments in a timely way.
- A Placement Team who have the privilege of working on behalf of our children and young people to find them the best foster carers and residential homes for them when they need to live in their new home for a period of time which is right for them.
- And to help us do all of this we have our fostering friends and colleagues from the Children in Care Council, Corporate Parenting Panel, the marketing team the human resources team, the training team, the data and performance team, the systems team, the Independent Reviewing Officers team and our fostering panel chairs and members.

One of our fostering campaigns focused on meeting the team..... this went out across Facebook but also went live across the Department of Educations websites as part of fostering fortnight. It was a great hit, please take a look at <https://m.facebook.com/DurhamFostering/posts>



In Durham all our foster carers receive financial support for the hard work they do. We refer to this payment as a Payment for Skills (PFS). The PFS model has four levels linked to skills and competencies and in addition to allowances, weekly fees are paid to foster carers who are on Level 2, 3 and 4 of the PSF. All foster carers, irrespective of type of approval i.e. long-term carers, emergency carers, respite carers and so on.....also receive a weekly child age related allowance payment. This means our foster carers have enough money to support and care for their foster children. The PFS model sets out practice requirements, expected training and development opportunities at the different levels.

We support our Durham foster carers by running regular support groups which have the opportunity for foster carers to hear about new developments across the service, to benefit from some additional training or guest speakers and of course share their experience and wisdom with others to ensure we all benefit from a what works approach. The support groups have proved very successful, especially when we went virtual, as more carers have been able to attend and they have been able to be countywide enabling more foster carers to get to know each other and offer support, share ideas and knowledge. The guest speakers have been well received and have loved coming along to the support session and it's been great to hear our foster carers making suggestions on future topic's and asking for more information. Our newly appointed fostering trainer has been a great hit and has already started to get the ideas from foster carers off the ground. His predecessor is a hard act to follow but had given him a great start.

The fostering service and the Independent Reviewing Officer Service (the IRO service for short) have gone from strength to strength this year, forging a alliance which has ensured timely foster carers reviews, training and briefing sessions for the fostering social workers and the foster carers on 'getting the best out of your review' and some good old auditing work to ensure we have a tight grip on improving practice standards across the service. Our two dedicated independent reviewing officers for foster carers annual reviews ensures that the foster carers have the best support possible and that they continue to meet the fostering standards and by having dedicated people our foster carers feedback that they feel supported by a level of consistency. The IRO's regularly praises our foster carers for all the hard work they do, the training they are offered and their commitment to the children they care for. The support offered by the FSW's is also regularly recognised and praised. The innovation and creativity of our foster carers during covid has been noted in everything from the creation of boats in the back garden, to pop up classrooms, through to turning conservatories into holiday destinations to virtual quiz nights and so on. And of course, everything else they do.

## What have we done to increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers?

The major challenge during 2020-2021 for Durham Fostering Service and nationally for others has been the recruitment of new foster carers. Factors such as covid and a change in what people consider as good careers has impacted on the number of enquiries we have received over the year, however whilst enquiries have reduced the conversion of enquires progressing to applications and approvals have increased from 28% to 62.5%. This has been helped by tightening up our processes, implementing swifter response times, having dedicated staff responding in real time and being as helpful as we can from the start.

**Table 1 – Recruitment figures for 2020/21**

	Initial Enquiries	Expressions of Interest	Initial Visits	Application Forms Received	Foster Carers Approved	Ongoing
2019-2020	353	122	68	25	7	10
2020-2021	278	88	49	24	25	10

We are pleased to say we have continued to complete the Form F assessments within the regulation timescale, which is 8 months from someone applying to being assessed and presented to panel. A great well done to everyone involved as this is important for our foster carers to know we are getting right for them from the very start.

Sadly in 2020-21, 16 of our mainstream foster families left us. The reasons for these ranged from significant health issues either with respect to themselves or close family, retirement, starting a new job which means they cannot continue to care for new foster children the way they know they need to be cared for and a small number as a result of Standards of Care concerns. No one left us because they wanted to continue as a foster carer but with someone else.

## How do we attract and retain a wider group of Fostering Families?

Due to the restrictions placed on us during the covid period we have had to think quickly about the different ways to market and promote the recruitment of foster care. We met with our colleagues in marketing and we focused on enhancing our social media campaigns, radio adverts, digital campaigns, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), virtual events and local magazines such as Durham County News and Police Life. Our team manager in the recruitment team has been heavily involved in these campaigns and is now the voice of Durham Fostering having now appeared on multiple radio campaigns, the tv as part of look north, on the DfE website and much more. We have also seen a great level of support from our foster carers and the children and young people who live in fostering families coming

forward to be part of the campaigns, they too have been on tv, in the local press, on radio and of course all over social media attracting new foster carers. We have also been successful in a recent bid which has meant we have been able to appoint a temporary marketing person who will ensure we are maximising all the opportunities we can and being at the top of our game when it comes to recruitment a range of carers.



We have held regular virtual Q & A sessions and a year-long digital campaign which has been well received by those in attendance helping us to ensure we have seen progress in the number of people who express an interest and become foster carers. There were still periods of increased advertising over key times of the year where targeted campaigns have been used to attract carers, for example fostering fortnight. We continued to use real carers and real stories in our campaigns and really pushed forward our challenge against the stereotyping of foster carers demonstrating our inclusive approach. Our targeted campaigns focussed on foster carers for teenagers, brothers and sisters, children with complex needs and long-term fostering families.

It has been very important to us that we continue to support and value our foster carers not only to retain our experienced carers but also because they deserve the support and recognition for all they do. This of course links to ensuring our children and young people who live within their fostering families help us shape the service and what we do.



We have a number of unique selling points in Durham Fostering Service which includes:

- A wide range of children requiring foster placements
- Full Circle and Clinical Psychologist
- The benefits of being a large Local Authority with all the support this provides
- A comprehensive personal development package
- Virtual Support Groups
- Competitive financial package
- Fostering Family Retention events
- M8's group for carers own children
- An active Children in Care Council providing training for prospective carers, and involvement in recruitment activities, highly valued by prospective carers
- The involvement of existing foster carers in supporting/ mentoring prospective carers
- Independent Advice and Mediation Service.
- We place value on supervision, support, and timely foster carers review.

Retention events in 2020-2021 have had to be virtual but this has not stopped us, in fact it made us more determined than ever. We have had quizzes, competitions, clap for foster carers, posted seeds to grow plants with the children and young people, developed what to packs, had film nights and Christmas carol nights. Our colleagues in the virtual school funded 'cool packs' with loads of cool things inside, which were dropped off to each household by our fostering social workers.

Our foster carers and the children and young people who live in their fostering families have been amazing during the pandemic, managing to home school the children and young people in their care as well as keep them entertained when they couldn't go out and mix with their friends or have face to face family time with the parents, brothers and sisters and extended family. The amazing transformation from face to face family time to virtual family time has been great and our carers have really engaged in the digital world to help the children and young people in their care keep in touch with their loved ones. Stories such as parents sending a kiss in a cloud to their child and the carer showing the child the cloud coming over for them to catch the kiss brings a tear to your eyes when you think about how the importance of good relational practice and care is being thought about from our amazing foster carers. Compliments from careers and the birth families has increased during 2020 and 2021 showcasing such examples of good and respectful care.

## How many foster carers do we have?

As can be seen from the table below, we have more mainstream carers at the end of 2020-2021 than we did at the beginning.

**Table 2 – Total number of carers at various levels for 2020/21**

Date	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Total Number of Carers
1 <sup>st</sup> April 2019	1	19	224	1	245
1 <sup>st</sup> October 2019	1	16	223	1	241
31 <sup>st</sup> March 2020	1	23	224	1	249

Over the year the number of all children looked after rose from 902 on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to 946 on 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021. The table below shows that the number of children with foster carers has dropped over the year and although the number with connected carers did rise in the middle of the year that has dropped back to what it was at the start of the year. The number of children with IFA foster carers has risen again over the year although only by 7. Our demand on independent fostering families, residential care and supported living has increase, somewhat to do with a reduction in foster carers willing to support more children in their homes, usually linked to covid and in particular the challenges which periods of lock down have brought and due to the increased needs to care for relatives or where their older birth children require support or have returned from university.

**Table 3 – Number of children in placement type 2020/21**

Date	Children in In House Foster Care	Children in IFA Placements	Children with Connected Carers	Total Number of Children in Foster Care
11 <sup>th</sup> Mar 2020	430	159	136	725
28 <sup>th</sup> Oct 2020	405	166	156	727
25 <sup>th</sup> Mar 2020	396	166	137	699

As the lock down eases it is envisaged that more of our Durham children and young people will be live with our in-house fostering families offering them more stability. This along with increased recruitment will strengthen our range of options, ensuring we help the right child / young person to live with the right foster family for them.



## How we ensure we help the right child / young person to live with the right foster family for them.

Over the last year there has been a continued focus on family finding and ensuring we help our children and young people to live in the right foster family for them. To achieve this, we introduced Forever Friday – this is our fortnightly family finding clinic which is lead and driven forward by the consultant social workers in the team. Their mission is to focus and drive forward all family finding activity across the fostering service, focusing on finding appropriate permanent carers for children and young people in line with their plan for permanence without delay. This has resulted in an increased understanding of who we are family finding for, exactly what they need and a relentless focus on finding the right carers – supporting them and nurturing the relationship.

We have realigned our recruitment approach to strengthen foster carers thoughts around permanence from the onset, making this part of the recruitment campaigns and ensuring all new foster carers are assessed and approved at panel for permanence, even if at the beginning of their fostering journey their preference is short term placements. This reduces delay if a child or young person bond with their careers and it develops into a long-term arrangement.

**Table 4 –Family Finding Activity 2020/21**

Date	Ongoing Active family Finding	Matching report in progress
31 <sup>st</sup> May 2020	32	40
25 <sup>th</sup> March 2021	26	49

## **Supporting foster family stability when things get tough**

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021, 13 young people who lived in with their long term foster carers (of which there were 11 fostering house-holds due to some of the children living together in one home) needed support as a result of the carers saying they were struggling to continue to care for their foster child. Of the 13, 12 had a pre-disruption meeting and disruption meeting and nearly half of all of the children and the foster carers benefited from additional support services to try and support the foster carers and the children and young people to continue to live together. Covid and the risks of infection were the main reason why four of the fostering families were no longer able to care for their foster children, other reasons were attributed to behaviours presented were too challenging for the carers at that point in time or they had felt they had to put the needs of their birth children ahead of the needs of their foster child. All disruption meetings are chaired by an IRO to ensure that patterns and themes are picked up and learning is gained from the issues highlighted, ensuring these were fed back into support sessions, supervisions and training, alongside what else we can offer as a wider service. In relation to our IFA families 9 children had to move from their long-term foster family due to the reasons highlighted above.

During the same period, an additional 22 children and young people who lived in a short term or with emergency carers moved to new carers in an unplanned way. The reasons for the unplanned ending were either directly related to Covid or due to bereavement in the fostering family. Across the IFA's where our Durham children live 3 of our young people moved on in an unplanned way.

Learning from this and ensuring strengthened approaches to support our carers is a key priority for us going forward and whilst we have continued to make improvement in this area until there are no unplanned endings there will always be more to do.

## **What have we done to improve our data and performance information?**

In 2020 – 21, the Systems Team (our tech people) have worked really hard to redesign the Fostering module of liquidlogic to make sure we have a effective recording system which meets our needs and its great to say we achieved that. Without stopping we moved straight across to developing our dashboard, these tell us in real time what we have done and what we need to do. The dashboards are now live, and we are busy cleansing our data to make sure it is right and tells us the right information at the point in time when we need it. The dashboards and data now tell us everything we need to know from the number of children living with their foster families, to who's isolating due to covid, timescales for supervisions,

and a whole lot more. Whilst we always held this information it was not in one place and it often took a long time to enter the data correctly and extract it to answer the questions we have. The only dashboard we have left to finalise and run reports from is the connected carers dashboard – however this will be achieved in the next reporting period. Our performance data is shared with individual fostering social workers as part of their supervision and team meetings, we scrutinise the data as part of the monthly performance clinic's both in the fostering service and as part of the wider service and we share the data as part of the service briefings with the fostering team, panel members and partners to ensure everyone understanding what we are doing well and what we need to concentrate on and of course, who needs to do what and by when.

## **Signs of Safety/Success.**

The Signs of Safety/Success practice model is becoming more established across the Fostering Service, we have practice leads in each team who lead and motivate the teams to drive forward SofS and all of our staff have been trained. Our practice leads attend regular workshops and then come back to the fostering service to feedback and support their colleagues to improve and develop. Reflective supervision and group supervision is now embedded in our practice.

We redesigned our forms and documents using the signs of safety/success language and model, including the foster carers supervision documents, foster carer review documents and family finding form. Foster carers have received some training and support to ensure they understand change in the language, documentation, and approach. We recognise that there is more training needed for our foster carers in relation to Signs of Safety/Success and we aim to achieve this by ensuring it runs across the training offer for 2021-2022.

## **Review of the Training offer to our Foster Carers**

Like all other aspects of the service offered to foster carers, training was impacted upon by the pandemic, national lock downs and restrictions. Foster carers have had to home school their children and young people, with partners sometimes working from home too!

Training reverted to online courses, reading and research, fostering social workers lead development workshops (bite sized), webinars including open university sessions, and guest speakers attended support groups. Foster carers also accessed training on a variety of websites including Open University. Experienced foster carers and care experienced young people are involved in the Skills to Foster training and we were able via Teams to continue to include them. The feedback from the foster carers who attended this training was

amazing and our care experienced / experts by experience also lead training for the police service which was equally well received.

We have now appointed a new fostering trainer who is currently reviewing all training and ensuring we pick the pace back up now the restrictions are lifted. Keeping what's worked well and reintroducing the things we could not do that equally worked well. To help make this happen we have been successful in winning two bids, one for laptops and an IT trainer for foster carers and another bid for a specialist / bespoke training programme for foster carers which will be called 'Strengthening Care'.

## **Continued Focus on the Voice of the Child and Carers.**

This is something that is central to the whole service and every individual part of the service from beginning to end. To ensure we truly understand what children need and what they are wanting to tell us, we ensure we involve them and listen to them every step of the way. Our children and young people work with their social workers to write their care plan and the foster carers work with them to achieve the goals. Our children and young people are key in sitting alongside us when we recruit, when we train foster carers, when we design training such as the strengthening care programme and recruitment training, when they feedback and challenge us about the service and what we do or how we do it. An example of this is the challenge which was set to ensure we all contributed to raising the profile of children in care, as a result of this we now share as part of the corporate parenting committee a 'proud moment' which is the opportunity for us to show case something great our children in care have done. During covid this was broadcast live from Durham County Council as part of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

To ensure all our children and young people have their voices heard, not just those who attend or contribute to the Children in Care Council we have supported the roll out of the Mind of My Own app. This enables children to share their views in readiness for their Looked After Reviews, Foster Carer Reviews and with their social worker if they have any worries or queries about anything at any time. All of the fostering team attended the workshops to understand how to use it and how they can support children and young people to use it. Our foster carers attended briefings and workshops too so they can support our children and young people to use it. The feedback from Mind of My Own since its launch has been very positive.

We don't just focus on the voice of the child who is looked after, but we also work with and support the birth children of our foster carers. During the training of prospective foster carers, a training session is offered specifically to carers sons and daughters which is age appropriate. This offers them the opportunity to meet other's whose parents are undergoing the assessment process, to share their views, ask questions and talk about any potential concerns. Foster carers children were very clear about how they feel when a child or young person moves on from their home and how they felt they weren't considered or thought about in this process. As a result of this the M&S group was formed which offers support as it was designed by them, for them and it is run how they want it to run. We are the enablers supporting them to achieve.

## **And, so what?**

The past year has been very difficult for everyone due to the Covid pandemic which resulted in national and local lockdowns, schools closed and then national and regional restrictions. This has impacted on children, young people, foster carers and fostering social worker alike in a variety of ways, not just physical health from the illness but emotionally from losing loved ones and being isolated from family, friends, and colleagues. Everyone has had to quickly learn a new way of working, from working at home, virtual visits, and meetings and to virtual family time with issues around confidentiality and managing risk. However, it will take more than a global pandemic to stop us..... Durham Fostering Service has completed a lot of positive work and has had positive achievements over the past year which have contributed to some great outcomes for many of our children, young people, and their foster families and of course their birth families. In fact, some of our foster families were so impressed with how well we had supported them during covid they wrote to their MP to tell them about the great job we did as a Council.

We have continued to support our foster carers well, offer them a training package, especially when starting on their journey, ensuring the voice of the child is embedded in all areas of practice including the voice of the children of our foster carers. We work closely with the Children in Care Council and listen and take on board their views and ideas. We work closely with our experienced foster carers who share their experience across the service and in our recruitment campaigns. We have made progress in embedding Signs of Safety/Success and improved our systems and processes, which are the tools we need to enable us to continue to improve our service moving forward, we have improved supervision, review timescales and family finding. We have seen less carers leave us, more join us, stronger voices and a refocus on the importance of being a foster carer. Our drive is relentless, and we will continue to evolve and grow, not only in our achievements but our ambition. Our priorities for 2021 – 22 are set out in our fostering service plan and I would urge you to take a look and please don't forget to spread the word.....Durham is a fostering family .....come and be part of it and tell others about it too.

## Appendix 1

The Children Act 1989 requires a local authority who are looking after a child, to place that child with a foster carer, if it is not possible to arrange for the child to live with a parent or family member. The local authority's duties in relation to the fostering service are set out in the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011; the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and the Statutory Guidance contained in Volume 4 of the Children Act Guidance. The Regulatory Framework for the inspection of fostering services by Ofsted is contained in the Care Standards Act 2000.

The work undertaken by the Service is governed by legislation which include:

- Children Act 1989
- Children Act 2004
- Children & young Persons Act 2008
- Care Standards Act 2000
- Fostering Services Regulations 2011
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 2011
- The Children Act Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, placement and case Review 2010 & Updated 2013 & Updated 2015.