



Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2021-22



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Introduction

This report provides a description of the structure, an overview and summary of the activity of the Fostering Service during 2021-2022.

In Durham, we pride ourselves on knowing our children and young people well and supporting our foster carers to be the best they can be. 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 great things with the children in our care and their families. Our fostering service is ambitious, and we seek to be the driving force in ensuring that all our foster carers and the children and young people in their care benefit from the people who are around them 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. When we can talk about the achievements of the children in foster care and of the foster carers it is both humbling and motivating. Much of this can be seen in or heard as part of our radio, news, tv advert and social media campaigns.

The recruitment of foster carers to meet the demand is a considerable challenge and it is acknowledged that this is a national difficulty. For children in Durham who come into care, or those whose plan is to remain in care, this can make it more difficult to find the right fostering home to meet their needs. Investment in the service to address these challenges has been requested.

Durham County Council Fostering Service is responsible for:

- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers and connected carers
- Ensuring support is provided as well as supervision and training to all our foster carers including connected carers.
- Ensuring the provision of safe and supportive foster families for our children and young people who have a wide range of different needs and providing the opportunity to keep brothers and sisters together wherever possible and appropriate.
- Providing a range of homes with foster carers with a varied skill and experience base.
- The range of foster homes offered includes respite and short term breaks which includes Family and Friends households specialising in offering support to children with disabilities and their families; placements with foster carers who have particular experience and skills in transition to permanence through adoption, return home or placement with family; placements providing permanence through long term fostering, providing a family based model of care to support children and young people through to independence and beyond, as part of our Staying Put offer.
- Promoting placement stability and providing the appropriate help and support when things get difficult.

In 2021 we set out to achieve some key priorities to help our current foster carers and the children and young people in their care. These were:

- 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 can offer a range of fostering options for our children looked after.
- Improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service.
- Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and strengthen the matching arrangements for them.
- Use reporting data to better understand how our fostering service is performing and prioritising key areas of activity across the service.
- Review the training and support offer to our foster carers.
- Evidence the good work we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide.
- Ensure all foster care reviews are timely and where there is delay the reason for this are understood and resolved at the earliest opportunity.

Fostering Service

All mainstream and connected foster carers are supported and supervised by a qualified social worker (Fostering Social Worker) meeting regulatory visiting and supervision requirements. The Service continues to have Service Manager who oversees and manages the running of the service. The service is further supported by a Strategic Manager who takes responsibility for driving the service forward and planning for future need.

The Recruitment and Retention Team, work with marketing to attract and recruit potential foster carers. They assess and train them and provide the initial support to new foster carers. They also organise and run events across the year for our foster carers and children and young people to show our thanks for all of their hard work as part of our retention strategy.

There are two Fostering Support Teams, one for the North of the county and one for the South. They support all our foster carers with good quality supervision and make sure they have all of the support they need, when they need it.

Due to the volume of demand in relation to assessing and supporting our connected carers, we developed a second team, with a dedicated team manager. This was to ensure that there was robust management oversight of the assessments for our connected carers and those who became Special Guardians. This has been effective in improving the timeliness of the assessments and the provision of the support matched to the specific needs of connected carers.

The Placement Team works with the Families First, Pre-birth, Children with Disabilities and Children in Care Teams and the Fostering Teams to find the best match possible for any child or young person who needs to live with foster carers.

Whether this be when they initially come into care or if they need to move for any reason and this can be either in a planned way or on an emergency basis.

In relation to financial support for our foster carers, Durham operates a Payment for Skills (PFS) model for its approved foster carers. All foster carers irrespective of type of approval are supported via weekly child age related allowance payments. The PFS model is currently under review.

In order to ensure that our foster carers are receiving a competitive rate that reflects their skills and experience, we commissioned a review of our PFS's model and the outcome of this is currently being considered with recommendations due to be shared and plans to implement mid-2022.

We also support our foster carers through regular support groups which were held virtually via teams when Covid restrictions were in place but are gradually moving to face to face. We are going to offer a hybrid model for support groups given the success of the virtual ones as they have allowed a lot more people to attend. However, we also know that a lot of our foster carers have missed face to face support groups, which allow for more informal support and make for easier and more relaxed conversations. The Launchpad, which is a support group specifically for new foster carers in their first year has continued and has progressed to some face-to-face groups more quickly at the group's request. This is a small group of carers which makes organisation for these groups a lot easier. Guest speakers have been invited to the support groups covering new topics those that carers have requested more information on.

Training has also progressed down the hybrid route as again virtual training allows a lot more people to participate at any one time. Our Workforce Development Lead has worked very hard over the past 12 months to pull together a comprehensive training package. He has also worked with the Systems team to enable our foster carers to access all training via the Durham Learning & Development Hub. This allows them to keep a record of all of their training in one central place and makes it easier to access for their reviews etc. One full programme of the Strengthening Care course has also been completed with really positive feedback and a second is planned for June 2022. We have continued to run our Skills to Foster Training with the help and support of our experienced foster carers and care experienced young people are involved in the Skills to Foster training.

We work closely with the IRO service, which is independent to the Fostering Service. The main service they provide is one of ensuring that our foster carers are reviewed every year by an Independent Reviewing Officer in line with the fostering standards. We have 2 dedicated Independent Reviewing Officers, and they ensure that the foster carers have the best support possible and that they continue to meet the fostering standards. The IRO regularly praises our foster carers for all the 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.

To Increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.

The major challenge during 2021-2022 for Durham Fostering Service and nationally for other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies remained the recruitment of new foster carers to the service. Even as restrictions lifted the number of enquiries remained lower than the previous 2 years.

Table 1 – Recruitment and Retention figures for 2021/22

	Initial Enquiries	Expressions of Interest	Initial Visits	Foster Carers Approved
2019-2020	353	122	68	7
2020-2021	278	88	49	25
2021-2022	210	146	76	29

Although Initial Enquiries were low, the team has worked hard to make sure that 'Expressions of Interest' were higher than previous years approximately 40% more than in 2020-2021. Initial visits were 35% higher than the previous year and we actually approved 29 new foster carers which was a significant achievement given the number of initial enquiries and also the national shortage.

In 2021-22, we de-registered 21 foster carers giving us an overall increase of +8 mainstream foster families. The reasons for the de-registrations varied from significant health issues either of themselves or close family, retirement, starting a new job, through to Standards of Care issues.

Review the Marketing Strategy to attract and retain a wider group of Fostering Families who are able to offer a range of fostering options to our children looked after.

Direct face to face marketing activities across the year have again been hampered by Covid restrictions. To compensate for not being able to meet with people face to face at events, either to recruit or in relation to activities with our current foster carers, marketing has focused on social media campaigns, radio adverts, digital campaigns, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), local magazines such, a huge poster outside County Hall and we also we had our first national tv advert aired in March 2022.

We have held regular virtual Q & A sessions and a year-round digital campaign. As we moved into 2022, we were able to do more face to face recruitment sessions in the Town Hall. There were also still periods of increased advertising at key times



of the year. We continued to use real carers and real stories in our campaigns and challenged stereotypes showing our inclusive approach.

Our targeted campaigns focussed on foster families for teenagers, brothers and sisters, children with complex needs and unaccompanied asylum seekers. We produced a whole new range of advertising leaflets and material focusing on these groups of children and young people.



We have several unique selling points in Durham Fostering Service which includes:

- A wide range of children requiring foster placements
- Full Circle and Clinical Psychologist
- A comprehensive personal development package
- Support Groups including a one solely for new foster carers.
- 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 believe retention events are invaluable as a way of thanking our foster carers for all of their hard work. In 2021-2022 we still started with virtual events but as the year progressed, we were able to hold some face to face events with the first one being a visit to Hall Hill Farm by the M8's group in August followed by a Halloween event in October in Hardwick Park.

Unfortunately, we were unable to arrange anything at Christmas due to covid numbers rising, however we did have a competition for our children and young people to decorate a Christmas tree bauble.



In March 2022 we were able to have our Foster Carer Awards, the first in nearly 3 years. This was held at the Gala theatre and was a huge success. Due to number of awards we had we have planned a second awards event with an afternoon tea for the 5 & 10 years long service awards.



Placement Stability and Sufficiency Strategy

Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and strengthen the matching arrangements for them

Over the year the number of all children looked after, rose from 937 on 25th March 2021 to 982 on 28th March 2022. The table below shows that the number of children with in house foster carers did drop over the first half of the year, however, has increased over the second half of the year and is back over 400.

The number of children and young people with connected foster carers dropped slightly but then started to rise again.

The number of children with IFA foster carers remained stable for most of the year only increasing in February and March.

Table 2 – Number of children in placement type 2021/22

Date	Children in In House Foster Care	Children in IFA Placements	Children with Connected Carers	Total Number of Children in Foster Care
25 th March 2021	396	166	137	699
25 th October 2021	380	166	128	674
28 th March 2022	407	173	143	723

Improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service

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. We continued to have a family finding clinic every two weeks which increased to weekly halfway through the year. The focus of the clinic is on finding appropriate permanent carers for children and young people in line with their plan for permanence.

Recruiting foster carers to offer a permanent home is also part of recruitment campaigns and 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 carers, and it develops into a permanent arrangement.

Table 3 – Family Finding Activity 2021/22

Date	Ongoing Active family Finding	Matching report in progress	Matches approved
31 st May 2020	36	49	7
25 th March 2021	38	53	12
30 th September 2021	45	53	14
31 st December 2021	44	59	1
31 st March 2022	28	48	16

Disruption activity

From 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, there were 9 children and young people whose placement with mainstream foster carers disrupted. They had been placed with their foster carers and their match had been agreed by ADM.

The 9 children and young people ranged in age from 10 to 17 and they had lived with their foster families for between 4 and 8 years. The reasons for the disruptions varied from health issues pertaining to the carers, to escalating behaviour of the young person, the impact on other children in the foster family and the skills of the foster carer in relation to teenagers.

Disruption meetings were held, and 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. We then use the learning from this to better inform our training for carers, intervention and support offered to carers and when supporting children and young people in their new foster family.

Fostering Panels

The volume of connected foster carers has increased significantly over the past year and the team are getting involved in assessments earlier in the process. This means that the Agency Decision Maker is approving connected foster carers following panel recommendation prior to children being placed as well as when they have been placed in an emergency under Regulation 24.

Previously we had 2 connected carers panels and 1 mainstream panel. The connected carers panel purely approved family and friends who have been assessed

as connected foster carers for a particular child/ren. The volume of carers being assessed as connected carers has meant that we have had to arrange a third panel to sit every month to approve the carers and a third Panel Chair was successfully recruited. We have also been able to recruit a further cohort of independent people to sit on the panel along side social workers.

The mainstream panel makes recommendations regarding the approval of our mainstream foster carers and also reapproval recommendation for any carer, either mainstream or connected foster carer, after their first review. This panel has remained very busy and at times we have had to put an extra panel on in the month to make sure that all carers could be presented.

Our panel chairs are very experienced and manage the panels well. All panel members have a yearly appraisal, are kept up to date with the service and any changes and have at least 1 training day over year. We have a part-time Panel Advisor who advises on all 4 panels, which provides consistency across them all.

Fostering and Liquid Logic and Signs of Safety

Liquid Logic and the Fostering Module

In 2021 – 22, the fostering management team have continued to work with the systems team and performance team to improve the electronic recording system and our use of our performance data.

We continue to use Liquid Logic and have introduced new forms to enable smoother transition through the system and better tracking of the information to enable us to be fully informed of our performance around dates and meeting regulatory timescales.

This helps us to provide daily accurate information regarding the availability we have across our foster families in relation to being able to match and place a child in a fostering home.

We also now have all the information we need to ensure our assessments are completed in a timely fashion, that the records of our foster carers receiving regular supervision, that unannounced visits have been completed and the review has been held within 12 months are available in real time. We can track children and young people's health assessments and dental check ups to ensure that they are having all of their needs met while with our carers. Team Managers can understand caseloads and focus on quality across all areas as everything is accessible on one system.

We have progressed well with our Connected Carers dashboard and are hoping to be able to access all the relevant data and timescales we need to measure performance by mid 2022.

Signs of Safety/Success

The Signs of Safety/Success practice model is more established now in the Fostering Service. There are practice leads in each team, and all staff have been trained. All of the forms used in fostering service are written using the signs of safety/success language and model, including the supervision documents, foster carer review documents and family finding form.

There are regular workshops for the practice leads who then feed back into the teams in relation to improvements being made in each area. This all feeds into the Quality Improvement Board.

All Fostering Social Worker's conduct foster carers supervision using this model. Foster carers understand the language both in relation to themselves and their documents and forms but also in relation to the child/young person in and their and their documents, including their safety plan and care plan. Signs of Safety/Success training for foster carers is to be part of the training programme moving forward.

Reflective group supervision is now embedded into all of the teams in the service.

Continued focus on the voice of the child and carers

To truly understand what children need and what they are wanting to tell us we try to make sure we involve them and listen to them every step of the way.

We work very closely with the Children in Care Council and they are heavily involved in shaping the service moving forward from the language we use to the training of new and existing foster carers. The young people formulated and present a whole section of training to new and existing foster carers, also to staff, managers including senior managers and the Corporate Parenting Board.

They also work alongside the teams in our events such as Halloween and Christmas. We involve young people in the recruitment of new staff to the service, as they are part of the interview panel.

We don't only focus on the voice of the child who is looked after in a fostering home, but we also work with and support the 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 children 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.

In previous years foster carers children told us 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. In order to better hear the experiences of children who foster the M8's group was formed which supports them and was designed by them, it is run how they want it, when they want it and they can do things they want to do.

We also use the Mind of My Own app. This is to enable all children and young people, not just those involved in the Children in Care Council, to be able to share their views and worries at any time. They can share their views in readiness for their own reviews, also on the foster carers for their reviews and they can contact their SW at any time with a query or worry. All fostering social workers have been trained to use it and support and encourage children and young people to use it when they talk to them.

Mockingbird Model

As part of our plans to increase our ability to find fostering homes for Durham's children we started our journey with the Fostering Network in relation to introducing the Mockingbird Model to Durham. This is a model that was developed in America and is based on the family network model. We have had the funding agreed to set up our first Hub which we plan on being in place in the summer of 2022.

This model works with a group of foster carers forming a 'constellation' of support around a hub carer. This model has shown significant progress in improving the stability of fostering homes and of aiding foster carers to meet the needs of children who might otherwise have needed children's home care.

The first Mockingbird constellation in Durham will begin to be established from July 2022 and it is hoped that within 12 months we will have 2 constellations and be able to formally review the effectiveness of the model in Durham.

Conclusion

The fostering service in Durham is currently working at capacity to meet the needs of children in care. The service is focused on the retention of the best foster carers for our children and the recruitment of new carers to meet children's needs.

We need to support our carers to feel able and equipped to provide stable family-based care to children of all ages. We need to be able to keep brothers and sisters together and to support teenagers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as well as smaller children and babies.

The staff within the service are ambitious and keen to implement new ways of working to assist in the meeting of our fostering sufficiency challenges. The Mockingbird Model provides an optimistic platform on which to build resilience into fostering homes with dedicated support and training.

We need to make sure that foster carers for Durham are aware at every level of the organisation how much their contribution is valued. We need to support them to provide the best standards of care possible and to hold them to account for doing so.

We need the successes of our fostered children celebrated at every opportunity with acknowledgement of individual achievements to aid future foster carers to see the benefits to them and to children fostering can bring.

To do this the service needs to be able to meet the need for the recruitment and retention of sufficient carers with the allocation of adequate resources.

Key Priorities for 2022-2023

- To increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers by 30.
- To increase the availability of fostering homes able to care for teenagers, brothers and sisters, children with disabilities and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- 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 in care.
- To improve the timeliness and quality of family finding to reduce delay for children in knowing they are living in a home that they can stay in.
- Reduce placement moves for children and young people to improve short- and long-term stability index's to within or to exceed regional comparators.
- Use reporting data to understand fostering service performance and drive improvements.
- Review the training and support offer to our foster carers.
- Improve the recording of the voice of children and their carers and how this informs the service we provide.
- Establish the first mockingbird hub in July 2022 and have a second one up and running before the end of March 2023.

Appendix 1

The Children Act 1989 requires a local authority who are looking after a child, to place that child with a foster care, 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.