



Annual Report of the Fostering Service 2023-24



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1.0 Introduction

This report provides a description of the structure, an overview and summary of the activity of the Fostering Service during 2023-2024.

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. It is amazing when we can talk about and show case the great work people do.

Durham County Council Fostering Service is responsible for:

- The recruitment and assessment of foster carers and connected foster carers.
- Ensuring support is provided as well as supervision and training to all our foster carers including connected foster 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; placements with foster carers who have particular experience and skills in transition to permanence through adoption; return home or placement with family; foster carers 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. We also now have 3 Mockingbird Constellation with a Hub Home carers supported by a Liaison Worker.
- Promoting placement stability and providing the appropriate help and support when things get difficult.
- Providing ongoing advice and support to our Special Guardians from the making of the SGO through to the child becoming an adult.

In 2023, 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 across the board.
- Review the marketing strategy for the first part of the year 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.
- Continue to work with the other 12 Local Authorities to make the Pathfinder Pilot a success to increase our recruitment of foster carers.

- Continue to improve the timeliness and quality of family finding across the service.
- Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and continue to 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.
- Evidence the good work we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide.
- Continue to build on the success of our first Mockingbird Hub and launch our second hub in the summer of 2023.
- Expand the capacity within the Connected Carers team to improve our offer to connected foster carers pre and post panel.
- Align the Kinship Care and Support Team more to our Connected Carers Team to improve the offer and support to our SGO/CAO carers both pre and post order.
- Review the policy in relation to SGO/CAO carers.
- Review and improve our training offer to our Connected Foster Carers.

2.0 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 a Strategic Manager and a Service Manager, who oversee and manage the running of the service, driving it forward.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team, work with marketing to attract and recruit potential foster carers. They assess them and provide the initial support to new foster carers. They continue to hold Question and Answer sessions across the county and attend events such as Pride, Durham Regatta and Bishop Auckland Food Festival, to try and raise the profile of fostering and to support the recruitment more foster carers.

Carer through assessment:

Once again, thank you ever so much for all the help you gave us. You made something that was very difficult so much more bearable. I can't praise you highly enough, I really can't. Any family and potential fosterers that find themselves working with you in the future are very, very lucky. We always felt you were there for us, were a wonderful guide, and most importantly, genuinely cared. It made all the difference, it really did.

When the Homefinder Team was launched in April 2023, the Supported Lodgings Team also moved over to the Fostering service and joined the Recruitment and Assessment Team. The team assess and support our Supported Lodgings Providers for young people aged 16+. They work closely with the Children in Care Teams and the Leaving Care Service. They attend all of our recruitment events, and we have a recruitment strategy mapped out for the coming year. The major change for this part of the service is that we now have to be registered with Ofsted and inspected in the same way as the rest of the service. We were successful in our application in October 2023 and are waiting for the visit from Ofsted. As part of our preparation for registration we looked closely at the regulations and how we could improve the service we offer to our Supported Lodgings Providers and also the young people who live with them. We reviewed our process for approving providers and have linked this into the Mainstream Fostering Panel. We also now provide all our young people with their own packs which includes their own bedding, nightwear, toiletries etc. and these packs are provided to any young person who moves into Supported Lodgings. The Supported Lodgings team also support carers who offer Staying Put arrangements, where the carer is no longer a foster carer.

There are two Fostering Support Teams, one for the North of the county and one for the South. They support all our foster carers ensuring they get good quality supervision and have all of the support they need, when they need it. They also now organise and run the events across the year for our foster carers and children and young people to show our thanks for all of their hard work. This is a critical part of our retention strategy.

The Connected Carers Team has one Team Manager, and we were able to secure a second social work consultant. The volume of assessments has continued to increase over the year, and we were able to recruit 3 permanent social workers to the extra 6 posts secured and 3 agency social workers. The permanent posts have been advertised again and we are hoping to fill the remaining 3 posts with permanent staff in 2024. Due to the expansion of the number of workers within the team and volume of assessments completed and carers needing support, it has been agreed for temporary Team Manager to join the team for 6 months. This will enable the service to assess the necessity of this being a permanent post, depending on improvements in performance and then there will be consideration given to securing the funding to make this a permanent post.

As agreed, the connected foster carers in the two mainstream teams have been allocated to social workers within the Connected Carers Team who will support them until a SGO is

granted or until the child/ren in their care reach adulthood, depending on the plan for the child/ren. This has reduced the caseloads in the mainstream teams enabling performance to improve and enabling them to offer a further enhanced package of support to our foster carers.

The Homefinder Service was launched as planned in April 2023 and consists of Homefinder – Fostering Team, Homefinder-Residential Team and was also joined by the Supported Accommodation Co-ordinator, who sources supported accommodation for our 16+ young people. The Homefinder Teams continue to work 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, in a residential home or in supported accommodation. 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. They work closely with our In-House Residential Homes and our Supported Lodgings Team. The referral form has been streamlined and enables the Social Worker to use one referral form irrespective of which service/type of home they need for a child/young person. The service are working with the Systems Team to embed the form onto LCS to streamline the process even further and to reduce any possible delay when starting the search for a new home for our children and young people.

In relation to financial support for our foster carers, the increase to both payment for skills and age-related fostering allowance was progressed and this has had a positive impact on our foster carers as they feel more valued, and that the local authority recognise the work they do.

The service supports our foster carers through regular supervision. In addition to this regular support groups are held and following on from the success of the virtual ones, we operate a hybrid model. The service has continued support for new foster carers with the Launch Pad group. We restarted our Teenage Support Group, as this had stopped during covid, at the request of our foster carers and they have given us really positive feedback about , how beneficial it is to be able to get ideas from each other and support. As Drop-in sessions at Hubs in the north and south of the county have continued to be successful. Staff attend the Hubs one day per month and are available for carers to drop in for a coffee and a chat or if they have any questions. This also allows an opportunity for peer support between themselves.

Training has progressed to hybrid models as virtual training allows a lot more people to participate at any one time. The Workforce Development Lead has delivered a comprehensive training package over the last 12 months. Work has been completed with the Systems team to enable our foster carers to access all training via the Durham Learning & Development Hub. This allows the service to keep a record of all their training in one central place and supports more effective foster care reviews etc. Over the year we run a total of 25 courses, 7 Mandatory, 3 Core and 15 Optional courses and we offer from 2 to 7 separate dates for each course, depending on the subject. 427 foster carers attended the virtual training sessions over the year and 247 foster carers attended the face-to-face sessions over the year. Our most popular training course this year was Relationships, Sex &

Health Education (RSHE) Awareness Session for Foster Carers, with 46 foster carers attending the virtual session.

We continued to run our Skills to Foster Training up until the Pathfinder Hub was launched in September 2023 when they assumed responsibility for this training. Connected Carer foster carers are supported with a similar package of training when the plan is for the child/young person to remain looked after rather than the carers securing a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). The first course is starting in April 2024 and successful completion of this will enable our connected carers to be paid the Accredited payment for skills level.

Our Kinship Care and Support Team, who offer support and advice to our connected carers post SGO/Child Arrangement Order (CAO) are now more aligned to the Connected Carers Team and this will continue over the coming year. Connected Carers are offered a package of training pre and post order, including training with Full Circle. They are introduced to the Voluntary Sector and well as out Early Intervention Teams. Support is in place to ensure that they are accessing all the benefits they are entitled to, and a dedicated Welfare Rights Officer is attached to the team who can assist with this. Regular consultation meetings are held at least twice yearly, two carousel events have been held over the past year, where voluntary agencies attended to give advice and support or signpost our carers to the most appropriate service.

The teams 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. There are two 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. As the IRO said in one review

‘Their love and passion for the boys is clear to see and they, along with everyone else, are delighted with the progress the boys have made.’ A child’s social worker in their report for another foster carers review wrote ‘

I just wanted to say thank you to you and to the foster carers for making this the most positive transition for children I think I have ever done. It couldn't have gone any better. I just wish all introductions for long-term children could be coordinated like this. Thank you for all your hard work.’

The support offered by the fostering social worker’s is also regularly recognised.

2.1 To Increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.

The major challenge during 2023-2024 for Durham Fostering Service and nationally for other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies remained the recruitment of new foster carers to the service. This was recognised by the Government and the 12 North East Local Authorities were part of a pilot scheme in relation to coming together to pool resources to recruit foster carers. The Pathfinder Hub was led by Together for Children (Sunderland) and the name chosen was Foster with North East. The Hub commenced in late September 2023 and all 12 local authorities have signed up for 2024-25. Part of the plan was also to promote the Mockingbird Model as a way of retaining foster carers and the grant from the DfE to promote this, has been extended for 2024-25. This has enabled Durham to not only launch a 3rd Mockingbird constellation, but we are in the process of the recruitment of a Hub Carer for our Fourth Mockingbird constellation.

Foster with Northeast has worked well for Durham County Council Fostering Service as we have had more enquiries than any of the other Local Authorities. The hub matches people with the Local Authority they live within unless they specifically ask for a particular Local Authority. We have continued to recruit from outside of our county boundaries, as a result of the positive publicity and the 'word of mouth' from our current carers, about the support they received and how we value them and their skills. Durham was also the first Local Authority to have foster carers approved at fostering panel, who had made their initial enquiry through the Pathfinder Hub.

Table 1 – Foster with North East overview

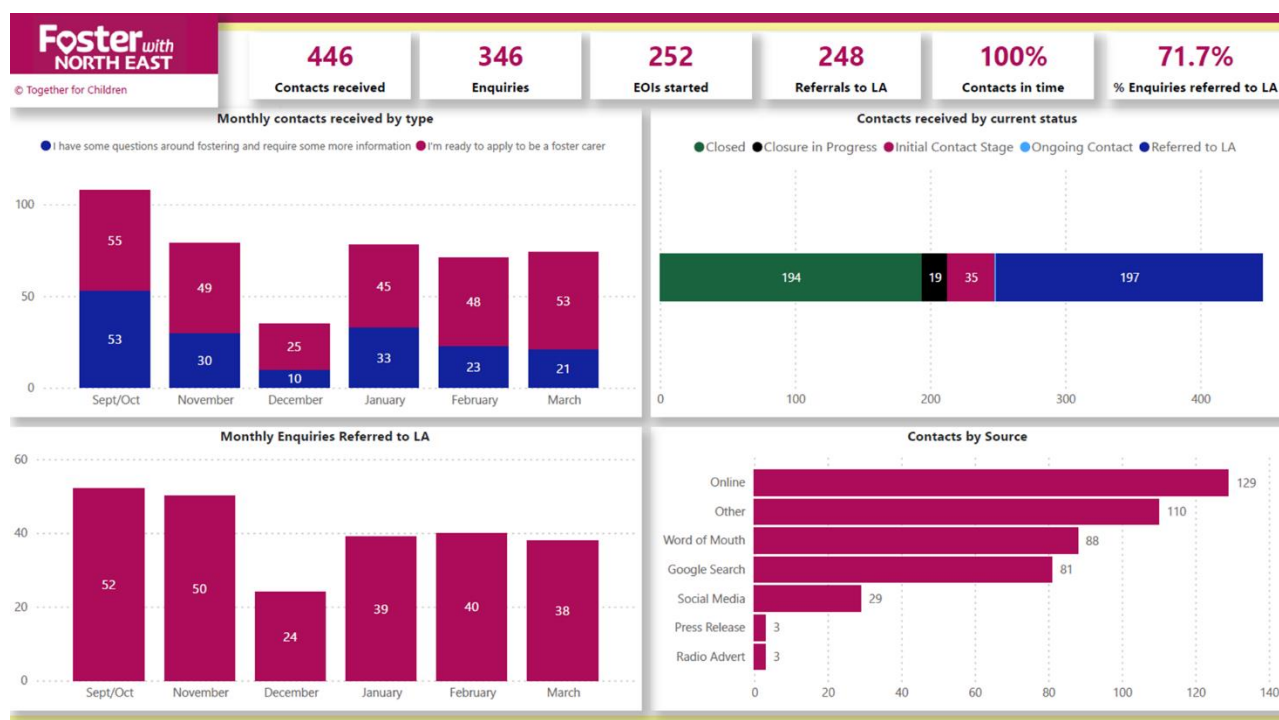


Table 2 – Foster with North East breakdown of referrals per Local Authority

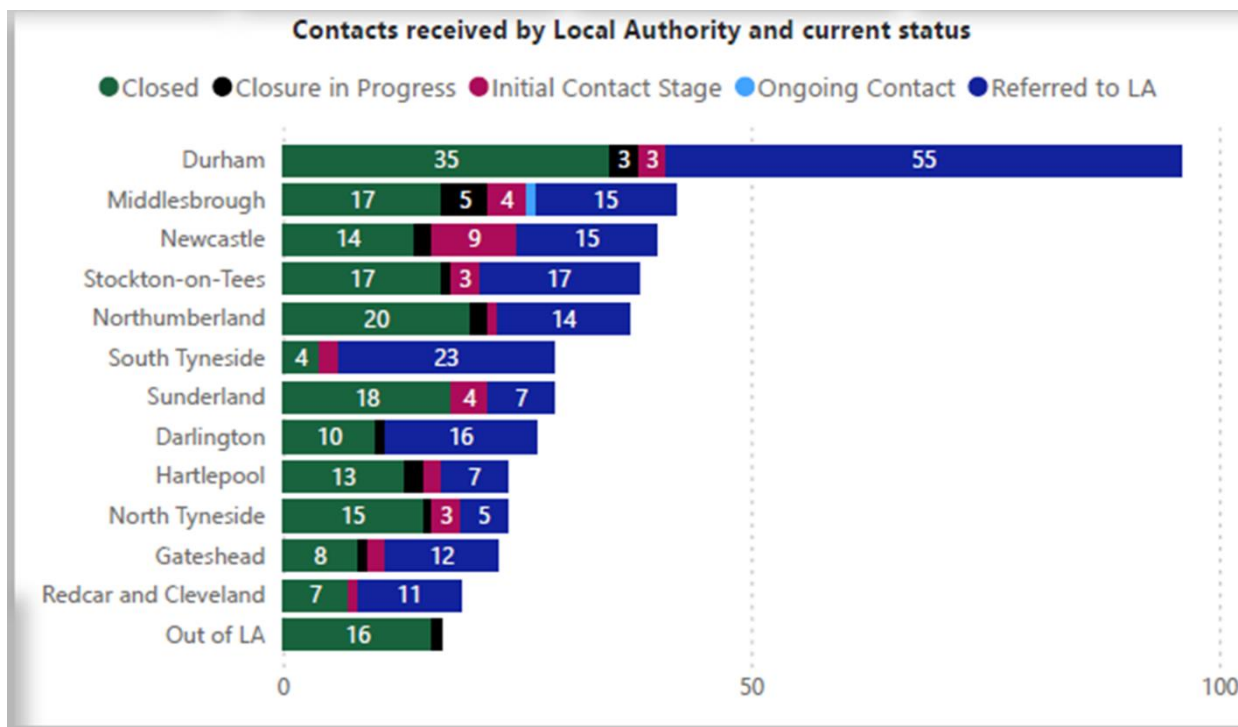


Table 3 – Recruitment and Retention figures for 2023/24

	Expressions of Interest	Foster Carers Approved
2020-2021	88	25
2021-2022	146	29
2022-2023	112	12
2023-2024	176	23

Expressions of Interest were increased due to an advertising campaign at the beginning of April 2023 in relation to foster carers to care for babies. This resulted in a spike in enquiries and the subsequent spike in expressions of interest for that month. When the Pathfinder Hub launched in September, there was an increase in expressions of interest over the first few months through to the new year. However, from January this has slowed down. This is a reflection of the experiences of the other 12 Local Authorities in the Pathfinder Hub.

In 2023-24, 13 foster carers were de-registered leading to an overall increase of 10 mainstream foster families. This is a huge improvement on 2022-2023 when 33 foster

families were de-registered. We had 7 foster carers who retired, 5 who no longer wished to foster and 1 where there was a change in their family circumstances which meant they were no longer able to provide a home for our children. This is an area that continues to be monitored and examined closely, so there is an understanding of the demographic of our carers, including age, where they live etc so we can use this moving forward for our recruitment campaigns. We also look at any lessons we can learn from our carers when they leave us i.e. were they recruited during Covid so the assessment and training was mostly completed virtually and has this made a difference, did they have any gaps in allocated fostering social worker or child's social worker and did this impact on the support they received in general and also when things were not going well. We use this information to try and improve the service moving forward.

2.2 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.



There has been a continued focus on the marketing on social media campaigns, digital campaigns, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), local magazines etc. Since September, the Pathfinder Hub have been promoting Foster with North East and they have been to a variety of settings across the whole of the North East including the Metro Centre and Eldon Square. There is now a full kit of merchandise with the Foster with North East branding.

The teams have continued to hold face to face Q&A sessions across the county and we attended Pride and other events, particularly prior to the Pathfinder Hub launching. There is a new marketing strategy both in house and via Foster with North East for 2024-2025 which will include radio and television adverts as well as representation at events across all 12 Local Authorities. Some of our foster carers have been used in the campaigns ran by ourselves and those by the Pathfinder Hub. We continue to have the full support of the

Children's Portfolio Holder and the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board and its members and they champion fostering whenever they can.

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

- A wide range of children requiring foster families.
- Full Circle and Clinical Psychologist.
- The benefits of being a large Local Authority with all the support this provides.
- A comprehensive training package.
- Support Groups including a one solely for new foster carers and one for those who solely care for teenagers.
- A 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.

Retention events are invaluable as they are our way of thanking our foster carers for all of their hard work. In 2023-2024, a number of events were held. We celebrated Foster Care Fortnight at the Ramside Hotel where our children, young people and carers challenged the Great Pottery Throwdown, with some amazing pottery. The annual Foster Carer Awards ceremony took place on 13th June at the Gala Theatre, and it was a huge success with some emotional stories shared about how our foster carers go above and beyond to help and support and give our children the best possible care and opportunities they can. We have also thanked our carers by having afternoon tea and relaxation sessions at some of our support groups across the year. This year the Halloween party was held at Nettlesworth Community Centre and was spooktacularly good, with lots of ghosts, witches and zombies present.



A Christmas party was held on Sunday 10th December at Coxhoe Leisure Centre, and it was very special. The children were able to jump around in a huge blow-up snow globe, visit Santa Claus in his log cabin at the North Pole and were entertained by his elves and they enjoyed snowball fights and a foam party. We had some very excited but happy children by the end of the afternoon.



The Easter Event took place on 4th April and included a Mad Hatters Tea Party and petting zoo, so lots of fun for all!



3.0 Placement Stability and Sufficiency Strategy

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

Ideally, we would want our children to remain in the care of their parents and if that was not possible, the care of their family. If a child cannot initially live with their parent/s, then we look to family/friends first before looking to a foster family to care for them. By placing within their family/friend network it is hoped that if they cannot return home to live with their parent/s, they will be able to remain within their family/friend network therefore enabling them to sustain those important relationships and supporting their identity.

It is always our aim for our children to lead as normal a life as possible with no input from anything other than universal services and therefore the teams work with the families/friends to enable them to secure the child/ren with them via Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Focussing on there has been an increase in the number of staff in the Connected Carers Team over the past year to enable us to progress Form C assessments in a timely way and offer those carers consistent support once they are approved at panel, particularly if they are to remain as connected foster carers.

The number of connected carers has continued to increase over the year however our children have continued to exit care from our connected carers by either returning to their parents or because their future has been secured via a Special Guardianship Order. From 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, 65 connected foster carers were de-registered, 39 of these was due to the granting of a SGO, 12 were de-registered because the child/ren returned to

parent’s care and the remaining 14 were for a variety of reasons including change in family circumstances and safeguarding concerns.

At the beginning of April 2023, the service supported 235 foster families at the end of March 2024 this increased to 245. Over the year the number of all children looked after, rose from 1067 on 27th March 2023 to 1214 on 25th March 2024. This fluctuates on a week-by-week basis, however what has remained consistent throughout the year is that despite the increase on number of children in our care, 72% continue to live with foster carers.

It is accepted that the number with IFA’s has increased significantly, but this is due to a nationwide shortage of local authority foster carers and it is anticipated that the Pathfinder Hub and other such projects across the country will improve this picture and encourage more people who are considering becoming foster carers, choose their local authority over an independent agency. The table below shows that the number of children living with in house foster carers, IFA carers and connected carers.

Table 5 – Foster Carers Across the Country by Type

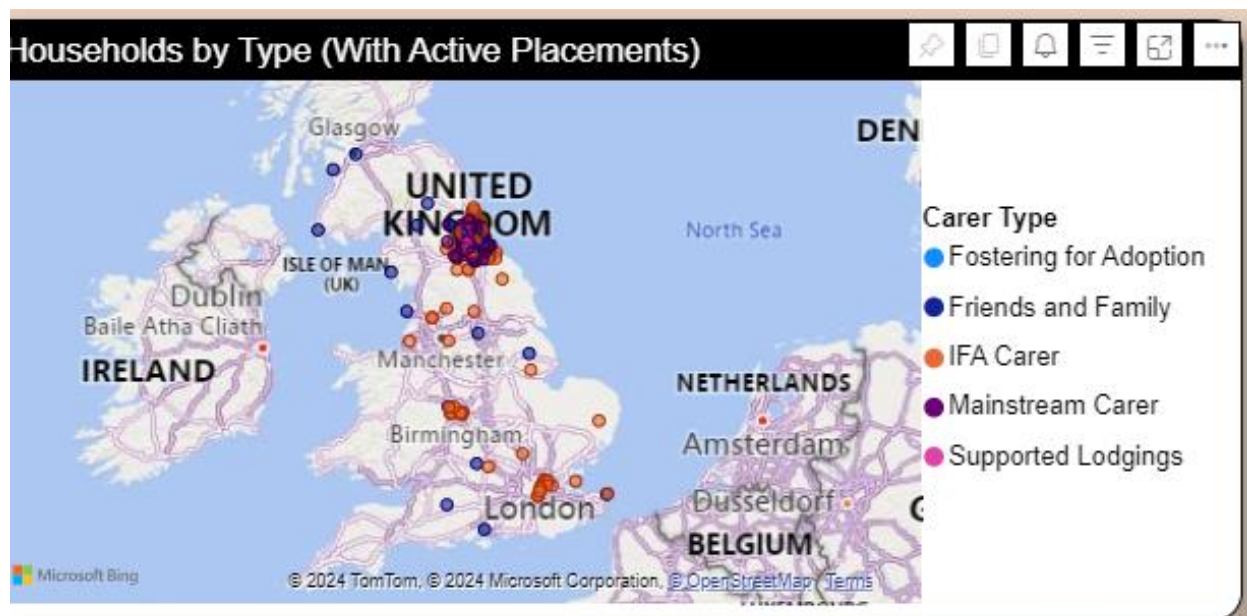


Table 6 – Number of children in placement type 2023/24

Date	Total Number of Children in our Care	Children with In House Foster Carers	Children with IFA Foster Carers	Children with Connected Foster Carers	Total Number of Children with Foster Carers	% of Children living with Foster Carers
27 th March 2023	1067	382	202	182	766	71.79 %
31 st October 2023	1187	387	236	230	853	71.86 %
25 th March 2024	1214	388	272	217	877	72.24 %

3.2 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 family for them. A family finding clinic continues to be held every week. The focus of the clinic is on finding appropriate permanent foster 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.

When our children in care cannot remain within their family/friend’s network, our aim is to find them the best foster family possible to meet their needs and if their plan becomes one of permanent foster care, we aim to have them matched with their permanent foster carers within 12 months of the plan being approved. We have worked hard over the past year to find the right family for our children and have had 33 matches approved.

To ensure we keep on track with the plans of permanence for our children, whether that be through a Special Guardianship Order, permanent foster carer, return to birth parents or adoption, the Permanence Monitoring Group (PMG) was established. This group reviews a different cohort of children each week with a view to tracking the child or young person’s plan of permanence and ensuring it is achieved in a timely way.

4.0 Fostering Panels

The volume of Connected Foster Carers has continued to increase over the past year and the team are getting involved in assessments earlier in the process. This means assessed carers are assessed and ready to go to panel as children need to be placed, as well as those where the children are placed under Reg 24 in an emergency.

Over the past year we have had 3 connected carers panel each month and 1 mainstream panel per month. The connected carers panel purely approve family and friends who have been assessed as connected foster carers for a particular child/ren. The volume of carers being assessed as connected foster carers has meant at times, we have had to arrange an extra panel, and over the last year we have held 11 extra panels.

The mainstream panel considers and approves our mainstream foster carers and also reapproves any carer, either mainstream or connected foster carer, after their first review. This panel has remained busy and we have presented 23 foster carers to panel with for their first review. With the number of first reviews and the number of newly recruited carers increasing this year we have had to hold 1 extra mainstream panel.

Our panel chairs are very experienced and manage the panels well. All panel chairs and 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 continue to have a Panel Advisor who advises on all of the panels, which provides consistency across them all.

As a service we are always looking at how to improve and therefore feedback from panel members and the panel chairs is very important to us, as well as feedback from foster carers in relation to their experience of panels.

Our Mainstream Panel chair has stated that “Quality of assessments is generally good”. However, any issues that are raised about the quality of any assessment is shared with the service via the Panel Advisor.

The Panel Chair also commented on the number of connected carers in the Local Authority, as they attend Mainstream Panel following their first Review. She recognised some of the issues within the service around support for our connected carers but also the changes that have been made to address these and ensure our connected carers are fully supported. She did say that “Panel is routinely astounded at the many amazing kinship fostering families that Durham has, they have shown their resilience by navigating tricky systems to access support for children and have shown unwavering ‘stickability.’ “

In relation to our Connected Carers Panels the chairperson stated that “The quality of carers attending panel has been outstanding with an increase being noted in non-family members stepping forward to care for children with whom they are associated by other means.” The panel has also had one young person attend panel and this is something the panel hope

they will see more of over the coming twelve months. She also commented on the Connected Carers Team saying “It is widely acknowledged the significant pressures that the Connected Care Team face in respect of demand and tight timescales. Despite this, there is an obvious passion for safeguarding children across the team along with a dedication to achieve positive outcomes.”

Both Panel Chairs commented on the need for panel membership to be more diverse and there is a rolling recruitment and a number of new panel members have been recruited over the latter part of the year.

Feedback from foster carers of their experience of the panels is positive with the following feedback shared via the feedback questionnaire:

“ The whole experience was relaxed....friendly and we were given the chance to ask questions.”

“...yeah I felt very listened to, everyone was really welcoming which really helped as i was feeling nervous. I was asked if I had any questions at the end.”

“...yes everything during the panel was explained well and clearly”

5.0 Fostering and Liquid Logic and Signs of Success

5.1 Liquid Logic and the Fostering Module

In 2023 - 2024, the fostering management team have continued to work with the systems team and performance team to improve the system and our understanding of our performance data.

The service continue to use Liquid Logic and now have access to updated performance data daily via the BI reports. This covers the work of the North & South Support teams and the Recruitment & Assessment Team. This has enabled management to understand at a glance which foster carers have had a supervision within the last 6 weeks, an unannounced visit with the last 12 months and also that their Foster Carer Review has been held within the last 12 months in line with statutory timescales. It allows managers to drill down into the data and cross reference with the Fostering Social Worker if there are any issues so that they can be resolved quickly.

It also allows for a better understanding daily of what foster carers are available to look after a child, whether they are on holiday, if there are matching issues and no other child can live with them at any one time. It provides an overview of what type of foster carer is available, i.e. short term, permanent, respite, etc. This is used by the Homefinder team alongside their own systems to ensure that we contact all our available in house foster carers first, before considering referring out to an Independent Fostering Agency.

It also means there is a better understanding of the data around recruitment, and a better understanding of the reasons why people do not progress through the full process, what stage they end and the timeliness of the assessment process.

There has been some delay in the connected carers information being fully available on the Bi system due to the demands on the Systems team, however this is now progressing with some pace and it is hoped that we will be able to have a full set of performance indicators available by the end of May 2024.

5.2 Signs of Safety/Success

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

The practice leads and practice champions attend workshops and meetings across the year and feed back to their individual teams. Monthly group supervisions are now well established across the service in all teams, including the management team.

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 their documents, including their safety plan and care plan.

A Signs of Success development day is planned for North and South Support teams and the Recruitment and Assessment team for May 2024. There will then be a development day for the Connected Carers Team and Kinship Support team before the end of July. This is to build on the knowledge of all the workers and focus on the Signs of Success.

6.0 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 there is a full understanding of what children need and

what they are wanting to tell us, the teams involve them and listen to them every step of the way.

The service 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 Children in Care Council work alongside the teams in our retention events such as Halloween and Christmas. Young people are involved in the recruitment of new staff to the service, as they sit on the interview panel. They also attend our recruitment events when they are able to, such as Pride.

The teams promote the use of the Mind of My Own app with all children and young people who we work with. This is to enable all children and young people, not just those involved in the Children in Care Council, to share their views and worries at any time. They can share their views in readiness for their own reviews, also for the foster carers review 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. It has improved the feedback we get from our children and young people, in relation to the care they receive, for the foster carers annual review and the fostering teams get an average of 31 contacts from children and young people per month via MOMO.

In addition to the strong focus on the voices of the children in our care, the service also works with, and supports, the children of our foster carers. During the training of prospective foster carers, a training session is offered specifically to carer's sons and daughters which is age appropriate. This offers children the opportunity to meet other children and young people whose parents are undergoing the assessment process, to share their views, ask questions and talk about any potential concerns.

When a child goes to live with a foster family, the carer's own children must adapt and adjust as much, or more than the carer. They must share their parents with someone they have never met before, accept them into their home and lives and this can have a significant impact on them. To enable them to talk to and share their experiences with other children and young people in the same situation, the M8's group was developed. This was designed by the birth children and young people of our foster carers to support them and allow them to have some time and space away from the home. The children decided how they wanted their group to function, and they decide what they do for each session. This has been very successful and we have approximately 16 children attending any one session, which they all seem to enjoy.

To ensure we get the voice of our carers as well as the support groups we offer, we have also held a focus group in January 2024, which was very productive. The group discussed the following ideas; supporting each other through a buddying system in relation to new foster carers when they are approved; giving potential foster carers the chance to experience fostering first hand via linking in with one of the mockingbird constellations and being involved in an activity; babysitting for those carers with limited support networks; and looking at a community parenting programme where their skills and knowledge can be

shared with our families, to try and enable children to remain in the care of their parents ; a central library both on line and possibly physical books that carers can access. Some of the ideas need to be looked at in more depth before they could be started, however we are looking at prioritising and progressing these ideas moving forward.

Another way we understand and learn from our foster carers is through any complaints we receive and from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 the service received 5 complaints. One was about drift and delay, two were due to disagreements with the assessment completed in relation to connected carers and two were due to finance issues. All were investigated fully and any lessons learnt taken back into the service to help improve practise.

7.0 Mockingbird Model

In January 2022 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.

Our first Mockingbird Hub was launched on in September 2022. This first constellation was very successful and had a significant impact on the children and carers involved. Due to the success, the service launched a second one in June 2023 and a third Hub in February 2024.

The second Hub has included carers who have children with disabilities and the third Hub has focussed on teenagers. They have both been very successful, having a positive impact on the children and the carers alike. The hub carers organise activities and events individual, but they also are able to attend the activities run by the Fostering Network. We have been able to link in foster carers who are caring for children who previously lived in residential homes and new foster carers and carers who have limited support networks. These have proved invaluable in the advice, support, and time out they have given to the children, young people and carers.

"CJ, 14 yrs, has been in crisis recently, experiencing a move to his (newly approved) carer J and still trying to navigate the death of his father and uncle. As such his mental health has been very wobbly and he has talked about wanting to end his life. This has resulted him in going out of school and seeking refuge at his girlfriend's house for a few hours over the last few weeks.

J, his carer, felt out of his depth and sought support from the Mockingbird carers. They looked after CJ overnight when J was feeling overwhelmed, J and the carers contacted the crisis team and managed to get CJ urgent support.

All have continued to maintain contact as a support network, to reduce anxieties and ensure CJ's carer felt supported and able to facilitate his return to him the carers have said – "Can I thank you all so much for your support. We greatly appreciate it."

When looking at children exiting residential care and moving on to living with foster carers, we offer all of these carers the opportunity to be part of a mockingbird constellation or linked in, to offer them extra support as and when needed.

Due to the success of our current hubs, we are in the process of establishing a fourth hub and will be one of only 3 local authorities in the North East to have 4 mockingbird constellations and one of only 16 in the country to have 4 or more constellations.

8.0 Conclusion

Over the past twelve months a lot has happened not only in Durham but across the country. It has been recognised that demand for foster families far outstrips the number available and this is not just in Durham but a national issue. The number of children in our care has increased significantly over the past 12 months and unfortunately the recruitment of new foster carers is not in line with that demand.

However, we continue to support our foster carers well, offer them a thorough training package, especially when starting on their journey, ensure 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 and share their experience across the service and also in our recruitment campaigns. We have continued to embed Signs of Safety/Success and we are using our performance data to enable us to improve our recruitment strategy and improve the support and service we give to our foster carers. We have been very successful over the past year in finding families for our children with a plan of permanent foster care. We recognise the importance of assessing and supporting family and friends to care for our children whenever possible and have increased our capacity in the Connected Carers Team to meet demand. We have launched a further two mockingbird constellations with a further one planned for 2024/25, taking our total to four.

Our challenges have been and remain around recruitment, especially for brothers and sisters, teenagers, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children with complex needs, however this is a national issue and something which is top of our agenda moving into 2024-2025. We will continue to work with our partners in Foster with North East to recruit new foster carers who can meet the needs of our children in care.

We await the outcome of the government's response to the Care Review particularly around Special Guardians. We also recognise the increase in connected foster carers and the impact of this on the team and service and will continuously review our Connected Carers Team and whether we have the right staff to meet demand. We will also continue to work to improve the offer of support to our SGO/CAO carers.

9.0. Key Priorities for 2024-2025

- To increase the number of Durham County Council Foster Carers.
- Continue to work with the other 12 Local Authorities to make the Pathfinder Pilot a success to increase our recruitment of foster carers. This will include a comprehensive marketing strategy.
- To retain our foster carers and support them to provide the best care possible to the children in our care.
- Continue to improve the timeliness of progressing children's permanence plans in all areas.
- Reduce unnecessary placement moves for children and young people and continue to 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.
- Evidence the good work we do in ensuring the voice of children and their carers informs the service we provide.
- To continue to enable our Mockingbird constellations to support the children and young people in their care and launch our fourth hub.
- Ensure we have capacity within the Connected Carers team and Kinship Support team to continue to improve our offer to connected foster carers pre and post panel as well as post SGO/CAO.
- Review our policy in relation to SGO/CAO carers in line with the recommendations of the care review.

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.