



Kirklees Children's Services
Fostering Report
April 2020 to September 2021



1. Introduction

The purpose of the report as set out in regulations is to inform the Corporate Parenting Board about the work undertaken by the fostering service between April 2020 and September 2021. The report updates the Board on activity in relation to the recruitment and retention of foster carers and developments within the service.

A key priority for Kirklees Council is to ensure that children can be brought up safely with their birth parents or within their wider extended family network. Where it is identified that children cannot remain within their family, the fostering service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people who are looked after.

The Kirklees Sufficiency strategy describes our aim for children to live in a family environment, within the boundaries of Kirklees wherever possible. Fostering plays a vital role in supporting this ambition.

Kirklees Fostering Service and our team of foster carers work in partnership to ensure children live in safe, nurturing family homes where they can achieve their potential and enjoy their childhood.

This Annual Report provides a summary of the performance of the Fostering Service during the past year looking at work undertaken by our:

- Recruitment Team
- Connected Persons' Team
- Fostering Support Team

2. Background information

In Kirklees the number of children who are looked after has decreased over the past 18 months. The table below shows the snapshot position on 31st March each year, apart from the position for 2021/22.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	30/09/21
Children Looked After	698	673	621	665	661	631
Rate/10,000	70	68	62	66	66	63
Stat Neighbours	85	86	92	92	N/A	N/A

The number of Children Looked After per 10,000 people in Kirklees is much lower than that of all Kirklees' statistical neighbours and is lower than that of the region and England as a whole. This is in contrast to other areas which have seen an increase in children in care during the Covid 19 pandemic.

We have seen a change in the ages of children looked after in Kirklees (see table below). There has been a significant reduction in children aged under 1 and a significant rise in young people aged over 16. This can present difficulties in recruiting foster carers with the necessary skills to care for older children.

Age Range	31/03/2021	30/09/2021	% Change
Under 1	44	25	43% Drop
Between 1 and 5	120	123	3% Increase
Between 5 and 10	109	98	10% Drop
Between 10 and 16	281	267	5% Drop
Over 16	107	118	10% Increase
Total	661	631	5% Decrease

Type of accommodation of Children in Care

As of 30th September 2021 Children in care in Kirklees lived in the following types of care provision;

Care Type	Number of Children
Fostering- Unconnected Person	378
Fostering- Connected Person	111
Placed for Adoption	11
Placed with Parents	45
Children's Homes	34
Residential School	2
Supported Living	29
Other	21
Total	631

In total 489 children are placed with approved foster carers, either through a Kirklees fostering or through an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). Of these, Kirklees fostering provides 308 children with a foster placement and 181 are looked after by an IFA carer. 54% of all Kirklees children living in foster care are placed within the Kirklees area.

We know that children from other Local Authorities are placed with Kirklees families. An audit of all independent fostering providers has identified that there are 52 independent approved foster carers within Kirklees. At the end of September 2021, these 52 foster carers offered 22 Kirklees' children a placement, and 41 children from other council areas. We need to understand why foster carers who live in Kirklees look after children from out of the area, rather than from within Kirklees.

3. Recruitment and Retention

The Fostering Service plays a key role in our overarching strategy to reduce the number of young people living in residential care and improve outcomes for children and young people. To do this we need to increase the overall number of Foster Carers, maintain levels of retention and increase the skills of foster carers to develop a more wide-ranging offer that meets the varying needs of our children.

Our ambition is to achieve a net increase of foster carers on an annual basis therefore increasing the number of children and young people in Kirklees remaining close to their families and communities.

Between April 2020 and September 2021 Kirklees has approved 47 new fostering families. Over the same period 36 foster carers have resigned. This gives us an increase of 11 new fostering families

Increasing the number of in house foster placements within Kirklees will improve outcomes for children, allowing children to continue to attend their existing school, continue to take part in leisure and social activities and retain links with their wider family and community network.

As well as improving outcomes for children and young people; increasing the number of foster placements will reduce spend on external residential and independent fostering placements in line with the Children and Families Directorate budget strategy. The Fostering Service has developed a recruitment strategy and is working towards delivering a greater number of local fostering placements to achieve this.

The Council faces competition for recruiting carers from the 15 Independent Fostering Agencies operating in the Kirklees area when recruiting new foster carers. This reinforces the importance of an effective marketing strategy, high quality support offer and smooth, effective processing of applications.

During 2020/21 there were 294 enquiries relating to becoming a foster carer. There is a process which is followed, and the table below shows the flow through this process.

Stage	Number of People
Enquiry	294
Expression of Interest	181
Initial Visit	113
Essential Info Sent	67
Essential Info Returned	51
Approved at Panel	16

As can be seen the number of people reduces as they go through the application process. Of the 294 people who expressed an interest in becoming a foster carer, 16 were approved. This figure is known as the conversion rate and stands at 8.8% for 2020/21.

24 new unconnected fostering households were approved during this period, that is where the foster family has no previous connection to the child. This is a significant increase from the previous year.

A total of 36 fostering and kinship households were deregistered between April 2020 and September 2021. This means that they no longer wish to be foster carers. The reasons are varied, but the majority of deregistration's are for positive reasons such as kinship carers becoming Special Guardians or children returning to parents. Similarly with mainstream foster carers deregistration is mainly due to retirement or a change of personal circumstances.

Foster Carer Support and Retention

Retention of foster carers is critical in providing high quality care and security for children who may have experienced a troubled start in life. Alongside financial support to carers, Kirklees has developed a range of other services to support foster carers and their birth children to deliver high quality care.

Kirklees has a reward system which gives foster carers a professional payment for their services linked to their skills. Foster carers can receive 3 payments; an allowance for the child, a skill element and a long service payment. Together these allowances can provide financial security for foster carers and reflect Kirklees Council's commitment to the carer.

The tables below show the current allowance structure and examples of weekly payments to carers. The rates increase in line with their skill level, which is described below.

Skill Level	Allowance Rate
1	£101.40
2	£126.75
3	£177.45
4	£228.15

Level 1 progression- completed Journey 2 Foster Training, completed a portfolio, which demonstrates that the National Fostering Standards have been met.

Level 2 progression- completed all mandatory training, completed TSD workbook and undertake a minimum of 4 further days or equivalent hours training or activities (classroom training, work with the placement support team, online training) to meet identified needs within your first year of practice.

Level 3 progression- completed the Level 3 Diploma or have a relevant equivalent qualification.

Level 4- is paid in certain circumstances. If a child placed is in receipt of the highest rate of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payment (PIP it will be paid).

Foster carers are also paid different allowance rates depending on the ages of the children they care for.

Age Range	Child Allowance
0-4	£144.86
5-10	£165.01
11-15	£205.42
16+	£249.89

Foster carers are also rewarded through long service, receiving £10 per week for every year of service, up to a maximum of 15 years. Therefore, a foster carer with 5 years' experience, looking after a 10-year-old child and having reached Level 3, will receive £392.46 per week.

Alongside the financial element there are non-financial benefits available. These include;

- A supported induction programme to be completed within 12 months of becoming approved
- A minimum of monthly support groups, including information from the Placement Support Team, Mockingbird, CAMHS, Kirklees' Legal Team and the Virtual School.
- Two celebration events
- 4 weeks paid annual leave
- Birth children/family events including camps, football matches
- Access to Kirklees Council's Employee Health Scheme
- 6 weekly supervision
- Discount card for shops, restaurants and cinemas
- Provision of laptops, Kirklees based email address and access to IT infrastructure

We are currently in the process of exploring further additions to the non- financial benefits with local partners and internally. To further support foster families, Kirklees Council has adopted the innovative Mockingbird support approach which is being launched during October 2021. The model consists of support networks known as constellations, with the first constellation of 7 carers, which cover mainstream, connected persons and SGO carers. The children in the constellation are aged between 8 months and 15 years.

The Mockingbird model includes a Hub Home Carer, who is developing positive relationships with the carers in the constellation and providing support to carers through daily/weekly telephone calls, messages and or visits depending on the needs of the carers and young people. The Hub Home Carer has commenced sleep overs with the children offering them one sleep over per month. This provides tremendous support to the carers knowing they have that planned sleepover in advance providing them with the break they need. It also creates opportunities for the children to socialise and develop friendships as well their independence.

A final aspect of our support for both young people and carers is the implementation of a revised Staying Put Policy in summer 2021. The Children and Families Act 2014 places a statutory duty on local authorities to support care leavers who wish to stay with their former foster carers (Staying Put arrangements) until they turn 21.

The intention is that this will allow young people to leave home when they are ready and at a time that is right for them to make the transition to living independently as an adult rather than an arbitrary point in time. It will help them get the best start at an adult life, putting them on equal footing with the same opportunities and life prospects as their peers.

Our revised “Staying Put” policy has been developed to address and meet the requirements of the many pieces of legislation and Guidance that exist in relation to children and young people, Fostering and Care Leavers.

The main aim of Staying Put is to ensure that young people do not experience a sudden disruption to their living arrangements, that educational and training achievement and continuity is promoted and that all young people can make a gradual transition from care to independence or to an Adult Service if the young person’s assessed needs meet this criteria.

Each young person will have differing needs, so it is right that the individual aims of Staying Put arrangements are made specific to each young person with their best interests and welfare at the heart of any decision making. It has been extremely well received by the Foster Carer Network as a significant development and improvement.

6. Connected Persons and Special Guardianship Orders

Supporting Children to grow up in permanent arrangements with families is the core goal for children’s services. Where appropriate, enabling children to be cared for by their extended family either through fostering or through Special Guardianship Orders can provide significant benefits to the child’s sense of belonging and security. Social Workers will continually assess and review children’s plans for permanency and consider where appropriate and feasible how Special Guardianship applications

can best be supported for children in Connected Persons and Foster Care arrangements.

We know that in order to provide these types of arrangements for Foster Carers and Connected Carers those carers need to be assured that the support the authority provides is equivalent to that which they receive as Foster carers and Connected Carers, and that this support remains available on an ongoing basis. Kirklees has developed a consistent offer for Foster Carers who move to support children via an SGO. This offer ensures that the carer is not at a disadvantage in caring for a child via an SGO.

The Connected Persons' team undertakes a range of interventions.

- initial viabilities of prospective carers
- Regulation 24 assessments
- Full fostering assessments
- Special Guardianship Order Reports
- Special Guardianship Support Plans

The Connected Person's team works to very short timescales, which are primarily under the fostering regulations but also led by the Family Court system. Since April 2020 the Connected Persons' Team has undertaken 339 viability assessments. Between April 2020 and September 2021 73 Special Guardianship Orders were made in favour of connected carers, this equates to 22% of viabilities lead to permanency for children within their birth family.

7. Foster carer training and development

Caring for our children and young people requires a range of skills and knowledge. Our training offer to them is critical in helping them manage difficult situations and care effectively for our children. Developing the skills of our Foster Carers will support them in being able to care for children with more difficult and complex behaviours, reducing our reliance on external placements and improving outcomes for young people.

All applicants to the fostering service are required to participate in training. Initially this was planned as a group based course, but since the Covid 19 pandemic , has become an online course like other training offers. The current courses cover a range of topics that includes Core Values and Skills, Working with Adolescents, Understanding Trauma, etc. Prospective carers are also required to attend a selection of taster courses prior to their approval at Fostering Panel. These new

courses give prospective carers a better understanding of the role of being a foster carer, introduce some of the issues they may encounter as carers and explains more about the social care system.

A training and development programme is provided for all approved foster carers and is linked to the Payment for Skills model. Foster carers are required to attend training or development opportunities dependant on their payment fostering skill level. The training framework is reviewed and updated by the foster carer training steering group alongside colleagues from Workforce Development.

The Fostering Service maintains a very close working relationship with the Placement Support Service. They offer training and support groups to foster carers. We are also reviewing the potential to offer courses online.

In collaboration with our Foster Carers and Workforce Development we will review our training programme and take into account the impact of and learning from Covid 19. The Workforce Development team have been able to move training online. This has allowed our training offer to continue. This happened very quickly at the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic and has ensured that the flow of training to new and existing carers has continued.

During 2022 Kirklees is introducing a new Placement Support Service model. There will be an integrated model of therapeutic support ensuring the right person works with the child and fostering family at the right time in the right place. This will reduce delay and build upon relationships which already exist for the child and foster carer. Part of the model is the introduction of the idea of Formulation. Formulation provides an opportunity for all those involved in the care of a child to come together and understand what is driving their behaviour. This enables the participants to begin to think about how they can help the child change their behaviour and agree specific offers of support and intervention. This helps improve placement stability and security by ensuring that everyone is working from a common plan and to common goals. Formulation is guided by trained staff who are able to support carers and the team around them.

We need to ensure that our ambition to offer a wider range of foster placements to children with more complex and challenging behaviours and needs is underpinned by a suitable training programme so that foster carers are better equipped to understand and manage the behaviour of children who may present in ways that are hard to understand or manage. Developing this offer will help our carers look after children and young people with a broader range of behaviours and will contribute to reducing demand for external residential placements.

8. Fostering Panels

There are currently three Fostering Panels which meet on a monthly basis. We have one Independent Chair, and one Vice Chair and 20 other members from various backgrounds. All Panels complete a quality assurance audit of each item heard. This is then collated and provides evaluation of the reports to panel. Overall, the feedback from the Fostering Panels is positive. Where poor quality reports are identified, feedback is given to the author, their manager and improvement actions agreed.

The fostering panel considers assessments of connected and unconnected carers, extensions to Regulation 24, changes of approvals, first annual reviews and long-term matching. The tables below show the work of the panel over the past 18 months

Panel Activity 2020/21	Number
Change of Approval / Amendment	5
Connected Persons Carer Approved	17 (3 deferred)
Short reports	1
Deregistered	0
Extension Regulation 24	39
Long Term Match	7
Mainstream Carer Approved	16
Post allegation	3
First Annual Reviews	14
Resignations	27
Total	132

Panel Activity 2021-22	Number
Change of Approval / Amendment	0
Connected Persons Carer Approval	8
Deregistered	0
Extension Regulation 24	14
Long Term Matching	7
Mainstream Carer Approval	8
Post Allegation Review	2
Short Report	0
First Annual Reviews	4
Resigned	9
TOTALS	52

The resignations are linked to carers moving from fostering to Special Guardianship Orders, retirement and changes in the foster carer's personal circumstances.

9. Quality Assurance Information

It is essential to have confidence in the quality of practice in fostering. This is assessed in a number of ways;

- Supervision
- Fostering Panel
- Annual Foster Carer Reviews
- The Family Court

The initial fostering assessment and the carer's first annual review is considered by the Fostering Panel. Subsequent annual reviews are primarily undertaken by an Independent Reviewing Officer, with some being undertaken by fostering managers who do not have line-management responsibility for the supervising social worker. Overall these provide reassurance that the current work is assessed as meeting the minimum standards.

The annual fostering review is a mandatory requirement. An audit of performance for 2020 and 2021 has been undertaken (see table below).

Period	Number of Reviews Undertaken	% Of Reviews completed within 1 year
January to December 2020	160	56%
January to October 2021	138	63%

The fostering service has developed an action plan to ensure 100% compliance in 2022. This will include implementing managerial audits across the three areas of fostering.

10. Diversity of Foster Carers and CLA

Kirklees has a diverse population, and it is important that our foster families reflect this diversity. The ethnicity of Kirklees children in care on 31st March 2021 was as follows;

Ethnicity Group	2020/21	Profile at March 2021
White	479	72.5%
Mixed	109	16.5%
Asian	47	7.1%
Black	14	2.1%
Other	12	1.8%

In comparison the ethnicity of Kirklees foster carers is;

Ethnicity Group	2021/22	Profile at September 2021
White	191	76.1%
Mixed	7	2.8%
Asian	29	11.6%
Black	6	2.4%
Not yet known	18	7.2%

This shows some differences between the profile of children in care and approved foster carers. As a service there is a need to ensure that the profile of our foster carers reflects that of the children they look after and the wider diversity of the Kirklees population. Our recruitment strategy includes targeting faith and wider diverse community groups as a priority.

11. Response to the Covid 19 pandemic

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, from April 2020 the role of the fostering service and the support offered to foster carers needed to change. Face to face assessments and supervision visits stopped and were replaced by virtual meetings. This was difficult to manage but over time the carers and the service adapted and became more flexible.

The fostering service had weekly check-ins with carers, to make sure everyone was ok and safe. These were identified as Covid-19 case notes. In some cases, carers did not want these so in these situations the service negotiated specific arrangements.

There was direct communication from the Service Director to clarify issues such as school attendance and family contact. These were very helpful in reassuring foster carers, children and their natural families. There were also weekly meetings in place between the Service Director and Kirklees Fostering Network so we could work closely together to identify challenges and co produce solutions together.

The fostering service supported foster carers with school risk assessments, technology for contact and education, provided links to the changing Government guidance, and provided support when things started to return to normal.

Assessments of technology requirements were undertaken and where required foster carers and children were offered laptops or I-Pads.

Some foster carers contracted Covid 19, and the fostering service offered practical support in terms of shopping and medication deliveries. All foster carers have access to the Kirklees employee health service and this was particularly useful to support carers where there were anxiety and stress related issues associated with Covid 19.

12. Future Priorities

Our Future Priorities are for the fostering service are;

- To increase the number of foster carers in Kirklees and to reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agencies and residential placements out of Kirklees
- To develop different strands of foster carer offer, in particular
 - Support for children of secondary school age with complex behaviour
 - Embed the new Placement Support offer
- To review our Payment for Skills model to attract carers from a more skilled background, to enable the development of a stronger adolescent offer
- To increase the number of foster carers who identify as being BAME so that the percentage of our foster carer cohort is similar to that of the young people we work with
- To continue developing our additional support offer to foster families to ensure Kirklees remains the best possible place to be a foster carer
- To review the Family Group Conference process to ensure families identify members who are potential connected persons carers, therefore creating more capacity within the Connected Person's team to undertake assessments and SGO applications.
- To maintain our scrutiny of external placements and ensure that we only place children in external placements when necessary and that when placed, outcomes are good.
- To review the offer to foster carers who want to become SGO carers

- Extend the use of formulation and early help support services to foster families
- Implement the new staying put policy

13. Corporate considerations

Consultation and engagement

The Kirklees Fostering Network meets bi-monthly with senior officers to discuss areas of service development and any issues of concern. Foster carer representation and stakeholder involvement in new service developments remains a key principle of the service.

The work of the Fostering Service is overseen through the Corporate Parenting Board. The Board has representation from services, partner agencies and from Elected Members and provides oversight of the work of the Fostering Service.

Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

The Fostering Service will undertake an Equality Impact Assessment. This report will lead to recommendations that will improve the services work in ensuring a cohort of carers reflective of the cohort of children we care for.

Resources, procurement and value for money

The offer of Foster Care placements continues to provide a good use of resources. Foster placements are not only less costly than other types of offer but offer young people a safe family experience which has lifelong effects on their ability to parent.

Legal implications, access to information, and call-in

This report is subject to call-in.

Risk management

It is a regulatory requirement of the local authority that this report is prepared and presented to the Corporate Parenting Board of the Council. The report is linked to the corporate risk on Safeguarding Children.

14. Conclusions

The recruitment and retention of foster carers and the development priorities of the fostering service will continue to be addressed in order to achieve a high quality service and best outcomes for children and young people looked after.

15. Recommendations

That the Corporate Parenting Board receives this report and continues to support the work of the Fostering Service and promote best outcomes for children.

That the Corporate Parenting Board support the following specific recommendations.

- To increase the number of current foster care placements available to children and young people cared for by Kirklees and to reduce the use of external residential and Independent Fostering Agency placements for children.

To conduct exit interviews when foster carers leave the service and use this information to inform future service developments.

- To develop the offer of additional activities and supports for fostering families.
- To increase the diversity of our foster carers so that it matches that of the communities we serve and the children we care for.
- To increase our ability to meet a wide range of children's complex needs by developing a broader service offer underpinned by an enhanced training programme.
- To continue with our work to improve and enhance the offer for Foster Carers agreeing to Special Guardianship Orders.

Definitions

Term	Definition
Connected Person	A connected person, is a foster care who has a link to the child before they take on a caring role. The person can be a relative, a parent of a friend, a person who knows the child in a employment role such as a teacher.
Viability Assessment	This is an assessment carried out prior to a child being placed with a connected person.
Unconnected Person	This is a foster carer who has no connection with the child prior to them being placed with the carer.
Fostering Panel	The fostering panel is a statutory function of the fostering service. It recommends the approval of prospective foster carers and the terms of their approval.
De-registrations	Foster carers are legally registered with one Fostering Service. At the end of their fostering period they need to formally resign and be de-registered from the fostering service.
Mockingbird Model	This is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model which provides sleepovers and short breaks, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.