

fostering

Leicester City Council

Annual Report 2019-2020



Purpose

The purpose of this annual report is to provide an overview of the activity and performance of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.

The Fostering Service is also required to produce a written Statement of Purpose each year which sets out details of our services and how we will meet our commitment to providing high-quality care and support for our children, young people and foster families.

The Fostering Service Annual Report and Statement of Purpose are available to all staff, foster carers, children and young people, parents and other professionals in a variety of formats.

You can find the most up to date copy on our website www.leicester.gov.uk/fostering.

Summary

The Fostering Service is essential in supporting our delivery of high-quality care and support for our looked after children, allowing them to live and thrive in a family home.

The service allows our children and young people to live in safe, stable and appropriately matched foster families.

Our aims and purpose are exemplified in these statements from a reviewing officer:

‘The children speak very highly of their carer’s. They regard their carer’s as their family and have fully invested in the idea of the placement as their home. I would like to thank the carers for their commitment to the children and for providing them with such a loving, stable, and nurturing home.’

Our aim for children who are cared for is that that they will have a clear understanding of why they are looked after by the local authority, be given an opportunity to make sense of their experiences, knowing who is there to support them to achieve their goals and lead successful lives.

‘I wanted to give the carers a commendation for their care of the children. They have provided them with an environment where they are thriving. This includes structure, routine, nurture and emotional warmth and they take the time to have fun with them and give them the opportunity to talk through their feelings and views and are attuned to them.’

We are committed to supporting our foster families and continue to develop our support offer. More information about the fostering service and the support offered can be found in our Foster Carers Handbook available at www.leicester.gov.uk/fostering.

If you have any questions about the information contained in this Annual Report or our Statement of Purpose, please contact the fostering team on 0116 454 4510.

Key Information

The primary aim of the Fostering Service is to ensure that children who require a foster care placement, are placed within a caring and supportive family that can meet their needs during childhood and beyond.



The majority of our Looked After Children (75%) are placed in foster care, with our foster carers looking after 329 children and young people in March 2020.



The Fostering Service currently supports 156 mainstream fostering households, 72 Kinship fostering households and 9 short break fostering households.



11% of our fostering households consist of a single carer, 89% share caring responsibilities.



58% of our foster carers are approved to care for children on a long-term (permanent) basis, 35% offer short-term placements, the remaining 7% care for children on an emergency, respite or short-break basis



39% of our foster carers are approved to care for one child, 41% for sibling groups of 2, and a further 20% are approved to care for 3 or more siblings.



Most of our children are placed locally, with 53% of our foster care homes located within the city, with a further 39% located within Leicestershire. The remaining 8% are located outside of county and are permanent placements, mainstream and kinship (except for 1 placement which is short-term).



We have an older foster carer profile with most of our foster carers (31%) aged between 50 and 59, whilst a further 3% are aged 70+, 23% are aged between 40 to 49, and 23% are aged 20 to 39.



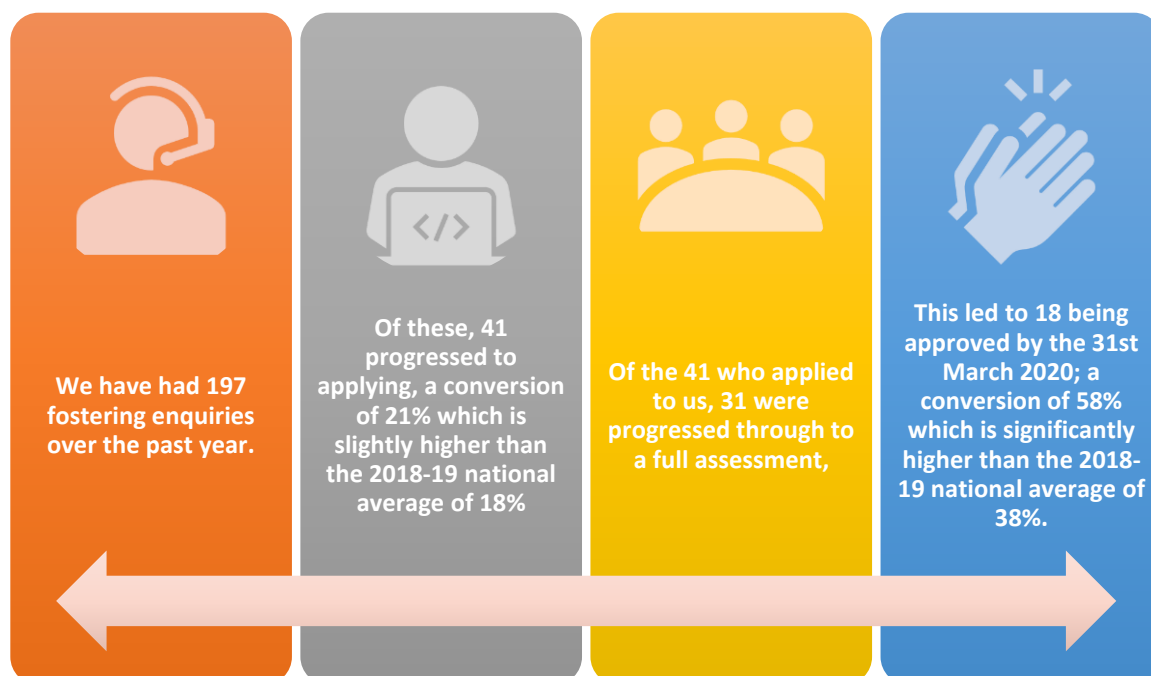
Our looked after children cared for by foster carers are predominantly white British (59%), compared to 76% nationally, but a significant number have diverse heritages.



71% of Leicester City Foster Carers are white British compared to 84% nationally. 23% of our carers have diverse heritages, speak over 20 languages and practice 17 different religions, some with no religion.

Recruitment and Retention

The Service aims to maintain a sufficiently large and diverse range of foster carers and short-breaks carers to match children's needs.



Two successful recruitment strategies have been the 'golden hello' and the £500 reward payment. 11 of the 18 approved carers received a 'golden hello' of £1000 as they were approved for either sibling groups, or teenage placements. Three current foster carers received a £500 reward for recommending friends who went on to be approved this year. This is a positive recruitment aid, as the applicants already have a realistic view of fostering and have friends who can offer support and advice.

We are developing a new marketing, recruitment and communications strategy, including the launching of a new brand, more targeted recruitment of underrepresented communities, and a digital transformation of application, recruitment and approval process. These proposals were subject to a public consultation as part of our wider sufficiency strategy consultation.

We currently use a variety of media and marketing activities to raise awareness of fostering, using a range of social media, local media and web forms to attract interest and facilitate enquiries and applications. An online application form is now in place.

The Recruitment and Assessment Team have a dedicated Enquiry Officer operating a daily service so that when the public make contact they get to speak to an experienced worker immediately.

The service operated a rolling programme of monthly information evenings which work well in terms of recruitment, and our website is effective in guiding applicants to our service.

Information packs are sent to those interested in pursuing fostering and returned application forms will then lead to an initial visit from the team.

We are currently exploring digital transformation whereby an initial enquiry can be responded to and 'kept warm' by keeping contact via automated responses. This would be particularly effective where the applicant shows potential, but the timing is not right.

We approve a wide range of single people, couples and families with children who meet the criteria.

Timescales remain positive, with mainstream assessments being completed in a timely manner, well under the National Minimum Standard of 8 months.

Unsuccessful applicants include those who fail to meet basic requirements for example their working pattern may not be flexible enough; they may lack experience of looking after or working with children; they may demonstrate that it would be unlikely they will meet the minimum standards. Some applicants may express attitudes inconsistent with fostering; they may have health issues that prevent fostering; some will be excluded after negative background checks.

We want to increase the numbers of foster carers so more children can live in local foster carer households reflecting the population and communities of Leicester.

Whilst we have an overall need for more foster carers, there are specific needs for more carers who can support young people over the age of 11 years, larger sibling groups and children and young people with more complex needs.

Most of our carers stay with Leicester City following approval, the majority leaving due to taking Special Guardianship Orders on the children they care for, positively ensuring permanence for the children.

A completed analysis of de-registrations over the last year showed of the 17 mainstream carers leaving the service the top 3 reasons were: left due to struggling with the fostering role (5); transfer to another LA/agency (3); and ended by the fostering service (3). Other reasons included retirement, secured permanence through Special Guardianship and personal reasons / life events.

Kinship (Family and Friend) Carers

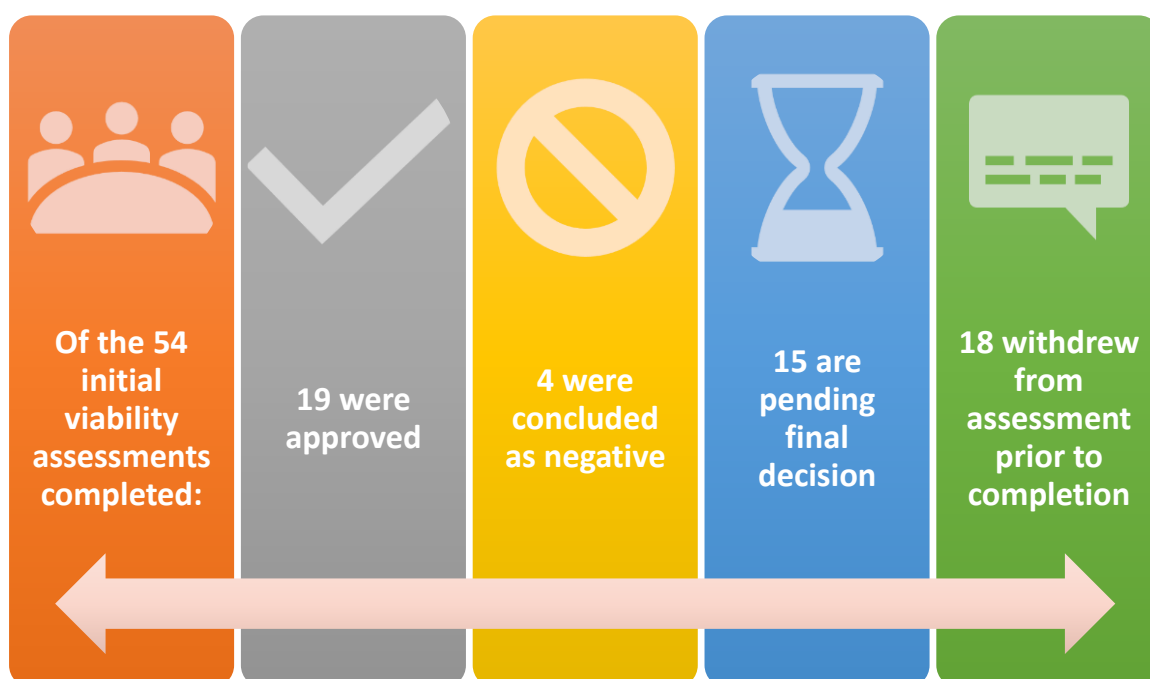
There is a legal requirement for local authorities to assess all potential family members as potential kinship carers for looked after children.

Locally we have a comparatively high number of kinship carers.

Family members who need to be considered for kinship care are subject to a Joint Initial Viability Assessment (IVA) usually carried out by the Children in Need Service arising out of care proceedings.

A Supervising Social Worker from the Kinship Team has been 'embedded' alongside Social Workers in the Children in Need Teams, to support quality and consistency of viability assessments giving advice and collaboratively completing joint viability visits.

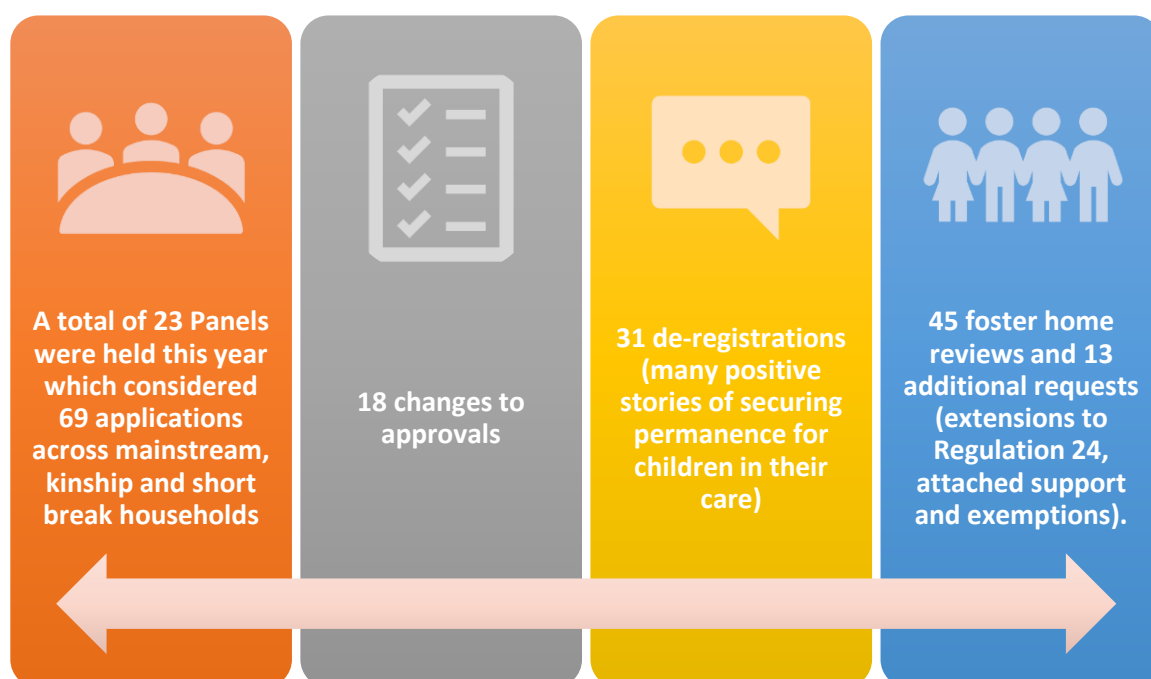
The joint working has proved to be very successful in improving the quality of viabilities. Resources are being focussed and dedicated to identifying positive family options alongside counselling out negative viabilities.



Fostering Panel

The role of the Fostering Panel is to give recommendations to the local authority regarding the suitability of foster carers. The panel also quality assures each report and gives feedback to the Team Managers to promote opportunities and share learning.

The Panel consists of experienced individuals who work to ensure that Looked after Children in Leicester City enjoy a consistently high standard of care with approved foster carers who can meet their needs.



Support for Foster Carers

The main source of support for our foster carers is access to an experienced and qualified Supervising Social Worker allocated to each fostering household. Foster Carers indicate that this relationship is one of the most important elements of the local offer.

'We've had ups and downs over this last 7 years and he's the person we've turned to when we've felt like giving up, he's always supported us and here we still are.'

Membership is paid to Foster Talk, an independent, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting Foster Carers. They provide a comprehensive support package including 24 hour legal, counselling and medical and first aid helplines; accountancy and tax advice, high street discounts, legal expenses insurance, education advisory service, and independent support during allegations.

A comprehensive Handbook for Foster Carers is published online.

There are close working relationships with a range of childcare professionals including the child's Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer, the Virtual School Team, Health colleagues, and the Children and Families Support Team (CFST) providing therapeutic advice and direct work.

'the carers described her as the perfect Supervising Social Worker and that she is brilliant. She does anything needed straight away and is very responsive, even outside of work hours. They can talk to her about anything and she gives them good advice.'

All carers have an annual review meeting chaired by an independent Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who sits outside of the service.

A peer support group is established by foster carers in the city.

A buddy scheme has been established whereby new foster carers gain support from more experienced foster carers.

An annual professional development Conference and a meet the team event gives foster carers the opportunity to come together and share successes.

Active Leicester Membership entitles the whole fostering family and those they care for to access free swimming and gym.

30 hours free childcare is provided for foster carers meeting eligibility criteria.

Bespoke financial support is provided to foster carers via the Leisure Fund, to enable children and young people to sustain their interests over time, building confidence, skills and enjoyment.

Access to Bullfrog Arts focuses on improving the emotional health, well-being and self-efficacy of looked after children and young people and their foster carers through music and singing culminating in an annual concert.

An annual celebration event during Foster Care Fortnight recognises the achievements of foster carers.

Sons and Daughter's Group

The group is an activity-based support group for sons and daughters of our registered foster carers which meets regularly throughout the year. Each meeting includes an activity for the young people, plus opportunities to share their thoughts and feelings about the experience of fostering. Members of the group contribute to the Skills to Foster training programme for new carers and have also contributed to Ofsted inspections.

We have more than 150 members of the Sons and Daughter's group; all of whom have attended at least one event. All our registered foster carers receive information about the group at the point of approval.

Young People have taken a lead role in the planning and running of activities. The take up of young people wanting to be part of the working group, as well as attending regular activities, clearly evidences the need for support and training for sons and daughters, so that they are better able to support their own needs and a successful placement of a Looked after Child.

As a group they have evolved using feedback from consultations with the children and their parents, in supervisions, from foster home reviews and team meetings, which has highlighted the need for more training. As a result, we have been able to provide training on several relevant current issues which include on-line grooming, the role of the Supervising Social Worker, Bullying, Loss and Transitions and building resilience in terms of support networks. Outcomes from the training events are then in turn fed back to the service, informing individual practice and Service Development.

As well as the Sons and Daughters Group, our Supervising Social Workers all get to know the sons and daughters of our foster carers and will speak and meet with them individually subject to parental consent.

The Children and Families Support Team (CFST)

The Children and Families Support Team (CFST) provide support for carers. Over the past year the team have worked with 2 young people (both male) who have used Sexually Harmful Behaviour and are subject to Children Using Abusive Behaviour (CUAB plans). This provides assessment and intervention to children and their families and carers to enable them to live safely in their family environment and within the community. The team has worked with 25 children who are Looked After by the local authority, working with the child or young person and their caregivers. Additionally, CFST provide training to foster carers and Hub meetings for case discussions and support.

The carers comment on the support received from the CfST worker:

'you are amazing, just wanted to say how appreciative I am of your fabulous knowledgeable input at this morning's conference'

Training for Foster Carers

There are three main areas to training: Initial preparation training for mainstream carers, ongoing offer of training for all carers, including one-off training provided by partners and Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS) for all carers.

The Skills to Foster courses are run three to four times a year, over 3 days followed by an evening for Sons and Daughters, for ages 7 to 18. There have been four Skills to Foster events over the past year with 36 applicants trained. The feedback from this is positive, with 7 children appreciating an understanding of confidentiality, safeguarding and what a Supervising Social Worker does.

15 different courses were offered over the year, most running twice. Three of these courses were newly developed; Understanding Your Role as a Foster Carer using a signs of success approach; Moving on to Adoption and Permanency to support the successful transition of children to permanent placements; Rebuilding Bonds – Understanding Attachment developing the importance of therapeutic parenting. The take up of course places has steadily continued to improve noticeably by kinship foster carers. Established foster carers are required to refresh their training in Safeguarding and Recording. From the 800 course places offered most averaged 65-70% take up with new courses achieving full capacity. The service uses experienced foster carers to co-facilitate on several courses. One-off training events run by external agencies included training from the CAHMS Service and Health. All presentations and training are evaluated through attendee feedback; this has been very positive with most indicating a 4/5 rating for overall course usefulness.

Foster Carers received a regular quarterly e- newsletter Fostering News, with articles such as Working with the CSE Team, Warning Signs Your Child is Beginning to be Involved in Serious and Organised Crime. The Electronic Foster Carer Handbook contributes to carers' knowledge, signposting relevant resources via hyperlinks.

The highly successful 2019 Annual Conference by Sarah Naish's Inspire Training Group was attended by over 200 people, nearly half of whom were foster carers.

The Service has a well-established e-learning platform from Kate Cairns Associates offering a range of general and specialised fostering topics. Currently 66 courses are offered from Level 1 to Level 3. An e-learning journal completed by carers offers opportunities to reflect on practice and there is opportunity to be mentored by their Supervising Social Worker in an interactive way outside of face to face contact. 90 new learners have created accounts with this e-learning Since 2019.

Training Support and Development Standards (TSDS) are completed by carers through commissioned e-learning from The Grey Matter Group. Carers can complete courses at home or attend six weekly drop-in sessions where they receive support from the Fostering Team and an experienced foster carer. These have been especially welcomed by new carers and those inexperienced in online learning. All carers must complete their TSDS; mainstream carers need to complete this within a year of approval and Kinship Carers within 18 months. Newly approved carers are now demonstrating they can complete within this timescale. Further work is being undertaken to support kinship carers. The reviewing of individual foster carers and their training is monitored in supervision and in the Foster Carer Annual Review.

Quality Assurance

Foster Home Reviews are completed by a dedicated Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO), whilst unannounced visits and supervisory visits completed by Supervising Social Workers, all contribute to an assessment of the child's lived experience in the home. Timeliness of foster carers' reviews has improved significantly, with 96% completed. This means that foster carers' performance, consideration of training and development needs are reviewed regularly. Foster carers are positive about the support that they receive from their Supervising Social Workers and the service.

We have established a new foster carer reference group called 'Fostering Influence' who have met to advise and help develop opportunities for service improvement, such as helping us to develop our foster carer handbook, buddy scheme and exit interview programme.

Managing Allegations

From 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020, there were 19 recorded incidents of allegations against Foster Carers which related to 16 households. All allegations or concerns are followed up rigorously by the service.

14 concerns were resolved following investigation, 2 incidents resolved following monitoring for an agreed period, and 3 incidents resulted in further review and were then resolved.

In response to the learning from these allegations it has been identified that additional training is needed about the role of being a kinship carer alongside being a close family member and how the Local Authority's expectations need to be understood more clearly.

Placement Stability



A total of 9.33% of our looked after children have experienced 3 placement moves or more which is currently lower than England (10%) and our statistical neighbours (11.80%)



64% of our looked after children have been in placement for over 2.5 years

Stable and secure relationships are a vital element to ensuring that our Looked After Children are safe and have the best possible opportunities to fulfil their aspirations whilst consistent and high-quality relationships with carers add to their resilience and security.

Robust actions are taken to prevent placement breakdown and pre- disruption meetings are called to identify additional resources to stabilise placements deemed to be vulnerable.

As part of the strategy to improve permanence (long term foster care) for our looked after children, a permanent fostering monitoring group has been established to review and track all children to ensure progress and prevent delay. This activity will promote better outcomes, support placement stability and reduce long-term arrangements with more costly IFAs.

Activity to support family finding for permanence includes:

- approaching existing foster carers – through a new e-bulletin; this has had a positive start in identifying permanent homes for our children.
- recruiting more permanent foster carers.
- The use of Link Maker to search for possible placements outside of Leicester City
- bespoke recruitment for specific children – this will be an innovative recruitment approach as evidenced by conversations with Coram BAAF

In the last 12 months, 25 children were found permanent placements with our in-house foster carers, of which 5 moved from IFAs, and a further 17 children were found permanent placements with IFA carers.

The recruitment film 'Giants' highlights how important it is to keep siblings together, and this is discussed throughout a foster carer's career.

Staying Put Scheme

Young people who are care leavers have the option of staying with their foster carer after they turn 18. All care leavers are encouraged to consider this option prior to leaving care, and currently 25 care leavers and their carers have chosen 'staying put'.

Other young people return to their carers for Sunday lunches and celebratory events, and for ongoing support and interest in their lives. Policies and guidance are appropriately targeted for young people, professionals and those foster carers who wish to participate.

More training is being planned to support foster carers to offer 'staying-put' arrangements.

More Information

The Fostering Service maintains a comprehensive range of policies and procedures that support the management of the Service, the care of children and advice / guidance / protocols to foster carers which are contained in the Foster Carer Handbook many of which can be found on our website www.leicester.gov.uk/fostering.



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