



# Northumberland County Council

## **FAMILIES AND CHILDREN'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**DATE: 7 JULY 2022**

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### **The Annual Report of Northumberland County Council Fostering Service 2021/22**

Report of Graham Reiter, Joint Interim Director of Children's Services

Cabinet Member: Children and Young People: Cllr Guy Renner-Thompson

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#### **Purpose of report**

To provide an overview of the Fostering Service 2021/22. In line with statutory guidance and regulation, all Fostering Services have to provide a report on the outcomes of the service.

#### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

1. Members note the report and its content.
2. Members acknowledge the report and performance information regarding the period April 2021 – March 2022.

#### **Link to Corporate Plan**

This report links to the Living and Learning Priority of the NCC Corporate Plan 2021-2024.

#### **Key Issues**

1. The service to continue to recruit, retain and maintain a stable cohort of foster carers, to meet the placement needs of children in care.
2. To ensure foster carers receive a high level of support and development opportunities, by the service and other professionals, to assist and empower them to look after the children and young people placed with them.
3. The agency to continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards & Regulations and other relevant legislation.

## **Background**

Northumberland County Council's Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2022 - 24 sets out the Council's approach to meeting its responsibilities to provide secure, safe and appropriate accommodation to children in care and care leavers.

We aim to provide the right service at the right time for the right families recognising that at times families require additional support to help them stay together. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that we do. If it is not safe for children to stay at home then we will intervene to ensure they are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

As corporate parents, underpinned by our leadership pledge, we will strive relentlessly to provide the best quality care and support to our looked after children and care leavers that we can. We recognise the importance of safe and secure placements to ensure children in our care live happy, healthy lives and achieve the best possible outcomes that they can. This is provided through well supported placements that meet the child's needs. We will place our children in a family setting wherever we can, unless their needs are better met in residential or other care settings.

We offer a range of placements tailored to meet the individual needs of children. This can include special guardianship, foster care, children's homes, adoption or supported accommodation.

The Fostering Service is instrumental in providing placements for children that need looking after.

This is the annual report that details the activity relating to the recruitment and retention of foster carers and provides an overview of the developments within the service.

## Implications

<b>Policy</b>	<p>Northumberland Fostering Services Policies and Procedures.</p> <p>Fostering Service Statement of Purpose.</p> <p>Corporate Parenting Strategy.</p> <p>Sufficiency Strategy 2022 - 24</p> <p>Other relevant legislation as detailed below.</p>
<b>Finance and value for money</b>	<p>The Family Placement Service has a budget that is closely monitored to ensure value for money in regard to the placements and provision it provides. The budget overspent by £0.426 million in 2021-22 due largely to an overspend on block contracts of £0.261 million and an overspend on Foster Care Allowances of £0.163 million. The block contracts overspend was mainly due to additional costs in relation to Adopt North East. Additional funding of £0.178 million was approved for 2022-23 as part of the budget and MTFP to mitigate this pressure. No additional funding is required at this stage.</p>
<b>Legal</b>	<p>Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations 2011 (England)</p> <p>Children Act 1989 and 2004</p> <p>Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 (England)</p> <p>The above mentioned policies, procedures and guidance.</p>
<b>Procurement</b>	
<b>Human Resources</b>	
<b>Property</b>	
<p><b>Equalities</b></p> <p>(Impact Assessment attached)</p> <p>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/></p>	
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	<p>This report is part of the Risk Management systems in place to check on the standards and service provision of looked after children in foster placements.</p>
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>	
<b>Customer Consideration</b>	
<b>Carbon reduction</b>	
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>	<p>Improvements to the health and wellbeing of our looked after children and foster carers</p>

<b>Wards</b>	All
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**Background papers:**

**Useful Links**

- NCC Fostering Service webpage  
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Children/Looked-after/Fostering.aspx>
- Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations  
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards)
- Foster Talk website  
<https://www.fostertalk.org>

**Report sign off**

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Service Director of Finance & Deputy S151 Officer	Alison Elsdon
Relevant Executive Director	Graham Reiter
Chief Executive	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Guy Renner-Thompson

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Northumberland  
County Council

# Fostering Service Annual Report 2021 - 22



# Northumberland County Council

**Northumberland County Council**  
**Residential & Family Placement Service**  
**Annual Report of the Fostering Agency**  
**1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022**

## **Introduction**

This report provides an overview of the main developments relating to the Fostering Service during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

## **Annual Dataset**

The fostering activity for 2021/22 is collated via an annual dataset. The dataset is submitted by all Fostering Services to Ofsted. The data is then collated to give a national picture of fostering in both local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

The dataset and other DfE Returns for 2021/22 (predictions as of 31st March 2022) reflect the following:

- Northumberland had 423 children in care. This equates to a rate of 72 children per 10,000 (above the national rate of 67 and below the regional rate of 108).
- The largest cohort of children in care (34%) are aged between 10 & 15 years which is consistent with the national and regional profiles.
- 53% are boys – slightly less than the regional (55%) and national (56%) profiles.
- 75% of our children in care are placed within a 20-mile radius of the family home (compared to 74% nationally). This enables family and friend connections to be maintained that in turn supports placement stability. This includes both inside and outside LA boundary.
- 86% of our fostered children (with 'stranger carers') are placed with in-house foster carers.
- 336 total approved carers in 203 households (as of 31st March) - the previous year was 307 in 182 households.
- 30% are permanent foster carers compared with the previous year figure of 27%. The England figure for this measure is 25%, regional figure is 29%
- 27% of children in foster care are placed with family and friends' carers

- The proportion of the looked after children population that had three or more placements in the previous 12 months was worse than the national average at 10% (England average was 9%, regional average was 8%)
- Of the 185 children who left care in the year ending March 2022, 34 were adopted – equating to 18%, which is better than regional and national averages.
- A further 36 looked after children (19%) were made subject to special guardianship orders in the year – a higher proportion than the national figure of 14%.

## **Ofsted Inspection**

Northumberland County Council (NCC) Children's Services was inspected in January 2020 under the Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework. The outcome from this inspection is that Children's Services within Northumberland are good.

The full inspection report can be accessed at: <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50147382>

In relation to the Fostering Service, the report highlighted that:

*'Most children live with carers who provide them with a good quality of care. An increasing number of children are living in stable, secure, long-term homes, and the local authority has recently begun to focus on celebrating the 'match' for children with their long-term foster carers.'*

*'Improvement in the quality and timeliness of foster carer recruitment and assessment is ensuring that there is a sufficiency of numbers and types of carers for children in Northumberland. Comprehensive training is provided to prepare foster carers to care for children who may have additional vulnerabilities as a result of childhood trauma. Foster carers spoke highly of the support they receive from their supervising social workers.'*

## **Fostering Panel**

The Fostering Panel has a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of placements of children in foster care. The panel meets once a month and has an independent chairperson who has significant knowledge and experience of fostering issues. The panel advisor, panel chair and panel members all play a key role in the quality assurance of all documents that are presented to panel. The panel has successfully recruited some new panel members that are establishing themselves within the role of being a panel member.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic all panels have taken place virtually since April 2020 and continue to do so. Panel members all receive the paperwork electronically. Meetings are undertaken via Teams with all panel members, applicants and social workers now adapted to this style of meeting. The panel have effectively managed this change and the meetings generally run smoothly.

The fostering panel approve mainstream foster carers, family and friend foster carers, considers all deregistration of foster carers for monitoring purposes and foster carer annual

reviews. 20 mainstream foster carers and 23 family and friends fostering assessments were approved by the agency during this time frame.

18 mainstream foster carers and 30 family and friend foster carers were deregistered.

The Fostering Panel also considers the decision regarding matching children to a foster carer long term. 11 children were matched long term with their foster carer.

### **Agency Decision Maker**

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is the Head of Service, Safeguarding. The ADM is provided with all Fostering Panel papers. Panel minutes are excellent and final minutes are always available to the ADM within the timescales. The ADM is always able to make her decision in a timely way with all the correct paperwork having been provided in line with the regulations.

No cases have been referred to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) during this timeframe.

### **Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers**

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is a priority. The Fostering Recruitment and Marketing Campaign has continued throughout 2021/22 despite the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. Information Sessions continued to take place throughout out the year with these taking place virtually. Despite this challenge, these have been well attended by individuals interested in learning more about fostering.

The recruitment messages are rolled out across a combined media programme. These are based on enquiry results from previous campaigns and situational analysis. The foundations of the marketing strategy are:

- getting the word out to target audiences
- good quality online information
- excellent customer service and timely responses across the application process.

The strategies for fostering recruitment are based on an analysis of practice information including current and emerging areas of need in terms of our children & young people. Targeted recruitment has taken place regarding carers who could look after sibling groups, look after children long term and teenagers. This is an ongoing challenge for the agency with specific recruitment for carers for these cohorts of children.

Approved foster carers have also been targeted to consider looking after children that they previously might not have considered. This has included delivering a training programme for foster carers to consider looking after children long term. The service has an allocated social worker in the team who leads and coordinates profiles of children that need a long-term foster placement. This has impacted positively on the number of foster carers who are now or are considering offering a long-term home for children.

Recruiting foster carers is an ongoing, year-round campaign, with focus at particular time periods e.g. Foster Care Fortnight. These opportunities provide extra support from the press and social media elements of the campaign. The service meets with other local authorities in the region to draw on best practice regarding the recruitment and retention of foster carers. A small cohort of foster carers and young people have completed short video stories of their experience of being foster carers that are used for social media recruitment activity.

All NCC foster carers have an annual membership with Foster Talk funded by the service. Foster Talk is an independent, non-profit organisation providing professional support services to foster carers across the UK.

The impact on placement sufficiency has been managed in collaboration with a team of foster carers who have stretched their skill base to meet the needs of children that need looking after and the team in the service.

Solution focused approaches have been applied to ensure the service continued to recruit and support foster carers.

This included:

- Fast track of assessment where carers are immediately available to offer placements for looked after children
- Reassessing and approving foster carers who had resigned in the last 2 years
- Increasing the number of children placed with current approved foster carers
- Skills to Foster Training adapted to deliver virtually.

A hybrid model of work will be developed as part of the ongoing recovery process from the pandemic.

## Data

The following information gives some comparisons of data relevant to the fostering service for the last 2 years:

As at 31 <sup>st</sup> March for each year	Total Number of LAC population	Number of children placed with NCC mainstream foster carers	Number of children placed with NCC family & friends carers	Total number of children with NCC registered foster carers	Total Number of approved mainstream foster carer households
2020/21	444	151	84	235	139
2021/22	430	179	82	261	138

The service has seen an increase in approved foster carers with an increase of children being placed with in house foster carers. Throughout the year, a number of foster carers had to shield due to the pandemic and complex health needs therefore this did impact on placement availability. The deregistration of foster carers has been for a range of reasons

including foster carers retiring having moved a young person on to independent living, foster carers adopting children and foster carers resigning due to the pandemic. As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 86 children are in long term foster placements with Northumberland foster carers. A further 36 children live with family and friends foster carers.

46 children were placed with family and friends under a Regulation 24 arrangement. This is a temporary emergency arrangement where the carers are not already approved as foster carers but are known to the child. This is referred to as a connected person who is defined as an individual who is a relative, friend or other person connected with the child. The 2010 Regulations specify the assessment requirements before the child may be placed under these temporary approval arrangements.

A number of young people have remained living with their foster carers in a Staying Put arrangement. As at the end of March 2022, 11 young people aged 18 years or over, continued living with their NCC foster carer and 9 young people aged over 18 years remain living with independent agency foster carers.

### **Foster Carer Support**

Foster carers are provided with a high level of support from their allocated supervising social worker. A comprehensive training programme is in place with core training being essential for all foster carers and more specialist courses are also on offer. Foster carers are able to access eLearning, training provided by Northumberland Safeguarding Board and internal courses are delivered. The delivery of training has been impacted on due to the pandemic. Training has been delivered virtually and various e-learning opportunities have been made available. Access to this was a challenge at the beginning of the pandemic due to foster carers adapting, for example, to different learning style. Children also being home educated impacted on the availability of foster carers time.

All foster carers are reviewed annually in line with the regulations, with early reviews taking place if necessary. The review meetings include information covering a 12-month period. All first annual reviews are presented to the Fostering Panel with an expectation that the foster carers will attend to give feedback on their first year of being a foster carer. Review reports include information from the foster carer, child in placement, child's social worker and the foster carers supervising social worker. Following the meeting a report is completed that summarises the findings, gives recommendations and when required, this report is submitted to the Fostering Panel for consideration. The review process is also an opportunity for foster carers to give feedback both verbally and in writing regarding the support they have received.

All foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker who undertakes regular supervision with the foster carer. These have been undertaken both virtually and face to face with appropriate precautions being put in to place to ensure these have been COVID compliant.

Foster Carer Support Groups have taken place across the county and have now adopted a hybrid model. From November 2021 face to face support groups got reinstated across the county. It is acknowledged that virtual support groups are not as beneficial or supportive for foster carers, particularly newly approved foster carers. The groups are delivered by the supervising social worker and include opportunities for external speakers to attend to

discuss key topics, informal support to each other and the sharing of good practice. The groups are also used to get feedback and to consult with foster carers on any key issues or areas of service development.

Foster Carer Newsletter have been circulated to all foster carers that give key information about the service, partners and other stakeholders.

### **Mockingbird Model and Implementation Plan**

Northumberland is collaborating with the 11 other local authorities in the Northeast (NE) Region to implement the Mockingbird programme. NCC will be implementing the Mockingbird Family Model with a target launch date of October 2022. Mockingbird, a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, delivers sustainable foster care. It is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

For more information about the Mockingbird model see:

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/mockingbird-programme>

Between January – March 2022 the Fostering Service has appointed one of the Fostering Team Managers as the Mockingbird Project Manager. A stakeholder analysis and implementation timeline has been completed with a projected launch date of October 2022.

### **Reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's)**

The Local Authority has continued to reduce its reliance on the number of children being placed in IFA placements. IFA's placements are resourced if the needs of the child cannot be met by an in house placement, for example, large sibling groups being accommodated, assessed needs of the child.

IFA placements place a significant financial pressure on the Local Authority. Monitoring and approval systems are established in regard to tracking these placements.

The number of children placed in IFA's as at the end of the financial year 2021/22 is:

<b>As at 31<sup>st</sup> March for each year</b>	<b>Total number of children in IFA placements</b>
2020/21	37
2021/22	25

As at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 18 children have had their placement in an IFA agreed as long term.

## **Outcomes for Looked After Children**

The success of looked after children is hugely dependent on the high-quality care each child receives. Foster carers are encouraged to ensure they provide children and young people with the opportunity to reach their full potential in all areas of development for example, formal educational environment, recreational activities. The training that is in place for foster carers supports, equips and enhances the necessary skills to do this, for example, Making Sense of Education Services, Reading with Children & Young People.

Support is provided for looked after children from a whole range of services including the Education Support for Looked After Children's Team (ESLAC), Community Support Teams, dedicated health team for looked after children. The Northumberland Emotional & Wellbeing Team (NEWST) that was launched in January 2022 have been working closely with the team to support foster carers and children in placement. Plans to develop a core offer of training is being progressed.

Residential camp and extra curriculum opportunities have taken place for children in care. This supports placement stability as well as the positive impact this has on the children that participate in the camps/day experiences.

Children and young people in foster carer are encouraged to participate with the children in care council – Voices Making Choices. The 'Mind of my Own' app (MOMO) is promoted with foster carers so they can support the child in their care to maximise giving feedback and communication with key professionals.

Foster carers generally understand their role as corporate parents. Attributes of foster carers included patience, listening, nurturing, being non-judgemental, resilient with a strong ability to see the world from the child's perspective. Despite some challenging times that foster carers have had with some children, this does not deter them from continuing with their vocation of being a foster carer.

## **Aims & Objectives 2022/23**

The service will continue to successfully operate on a day-to-day basis in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards & Regulations and other key legislation.

The key aims and objectives for 2022/23 are:

- Continue to increase placement availability and choice ensuring the service remains inclusive and engaging to all, while maintaining a focus on several key targeted audiences, for example, sibling groups, older children, long term placements
- Aim to increase the number of children in care to be looked after in a family placement
- Implementation of the Mockingbird Model – first constellation
- To work collaboratively to support the innovative working and developments of placement sufficiency agenda
- To implement a reviewed fee payment structure
- Embed the permanence monitoring, tracking and matching process

- Foster Carer Celebration Event 2022
- Ensure the Foster Carer Recruitment and Engagement Strategy 2021 – 2023 is being delivered against
- To involve care experienced young people in the delivery of training to foster carers.
- Re-introduce face to face training for foster carers once COVID restrictions are lifted, to ensure training supports the developmental needs and demands of foster carers
- To support all foster carers and children during the recovery period of the pandemic
- NEWST Training Program to be implemented