

## Background

This report provides an overview of the work of Leeds City Council Fostering Service during the financial year April 2021 to March 2022. The report provides information on our work as a fostering service, including our progress in recruiting new foster carers, our support arrangements to our existing carers and updates on our work with Kinship carers.

As with the previous 12 months this work to support our young people and carers continued against the context of the ongoing pandemic.

## Fostering Service

The Fostering Service operates under the banner of Foster 4 Leeds, this reflects a strong ethos to ensure that Leeds children are placed with carers who live within the city and its surrounding areas. Seeking to place children within their home area enables them to retain strong relationships with their birth family, continue at their school and to access a broad range of enrichment activities living within our child friendly city. The values which the service seeks to define within the best practice model for carers draw directly on the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan, with a focus on ensuring that foster carers support children and young people to achieve their potential in all areas and develop the necessary skills for adulthood.

## Children Looked After

At the end of the 2021/22-year Leeds had 1373 looked after children, this represents an increase of 9% or 95 children. The following table provides a breakdown of the children looked after, by age group, and as a rate per 10,000 over the last 5-year period. This upward trend reflects the increase in the number of children becoming looked after across the UK.

Period	Age range					Total	Rate per 10,000 children
	<1 year	1-4 years	5-9 years	10-15 years	16 and 17 years		
2017/18	81	172	256	529	229	1267	76
2018/19	67	205	245	510	259	1286	77
2019/20	69	214	256	522	285	1346	79
2020/21	52	201	252	498	275	1278	75.5
2021/22	60	162	257	584	310	1373	80.5

This increase in the overall number of children becoming looked after reflects a trend seen in other core cities. The following table identifies that Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle have experienced an increase for the preceding four years. At the point of

preparing this report the figures are not available for the core cities for 2022 but are anticipated to demonstrate an increase in 2022 for those core cities such as Birmingham and Bristol which like Leeds have managed to maintain or reduce their looked after population over the last four years. This assumption is based on feedback at a national and regional level as to the increasing numbers.

***Looked After Rate per 10,000 population for Core Cities***

Core City	2018	2019	2020	2021
Leeds	76	77	79	75
Birmingham	67	67	67	67
Bristol	68	66	66	67
Liverpool	122	140	148	157
Manchester	97	106	115	111
Newcastle Upon Tyne	94	117	113	116
Sheffield	50	54	53	57

Statistics released by the Department for Education as of 31 March 2021, stated that there were 80,850 looked after children. This figure represents an increase of 1% on the 2020 numbers and is an all-time high.

These statistics were against a pandemic backdrop which has continued to be the context through 2021-2022. During the last year the majority of support and assistance activities that would normally be run in person have continued to be undertaken via Skype/Teams and other communication routes. It has only been as restrictions eased at the start of the year and public health advice was adjusted that carer support groups, home visits and meetings around the child have resumed face to face.

**Staffing**

The Fostering Service reports to the Head of Service, Children Looked After Services, Chief Officer, the Deputy Director and Director of Children and Families. The Service was successful in recruiting an experienced fostering manager to our permanent Service Manager role who came into post in February 2022. The Service consists of five teams each with their own team manager. The managers lead teams which have a focus on the following areas: Recruitment, Retention and Enrichment, Support and Supervision of mainstream foster carers and Children with Disabilities. Each of the Managers also acts in the role of Panel Advisor to one of the four Fostering Panels.

The teams have a range of social workers and senior social workers, a significant number of whom have been with the service for several years which builds expertise and strength within the service.

## Foster Carer Recruitment

Foster carers provide a vital role in supporting Leeds City Council to deliver its ambition to support and safeguard our children and young people to enable them to achieve their potential and to have the best start in life. During the last year the service has successfully recruited 91 new carers to our fostering services. The types of carers recruited and registered were: 28 new foster carers within our mainstream provision, 4 new foster carers for children with complex needs, 57 new kinship carers and 2 new rent a room provider for our older young people. These figures represent a decrease in all areas on the previous year which is consistent with other Local Authority experience and assessed as being linked to the ongoing consequences of the pandemic. Whilst the rate of recruitment and registration of new carers has slowed, we have continued to experience an, albeit reduced, number of deregistration's throughout the year. Over the course of the year there were 113 foster carers deregistered due to varying reasons including: 21 carers ending their role upon being granted a Special Guardianship Order, 22 carers retiring, 11 resigning and 17 kinship carers ending their role upon the young person in their care reaching the age of 18. The deregistration of foster carers who continue to support and care for children through other arrangements such as Special Guardianship Orders and moving onto Staying Put arrangements, whilst is a reduction in our number of carers is of course a positive outcome for the children and young people in their care. The net decrease in mainstream carers has been slightly balanced through an increase in placement availability with some carers, in line with their experience, progressing to offer additional placements.

Carer Type	New households registered	Households deregistered	Net change in households	Overall No. of carers in service	Carer Type by %
Kinship	57	60	-3	241	28%
Mainstream	28	41	-13	446	55%
Complex needs	4	12	-8	87	12%
Rent-a-room	2	0	2	35	4%
Total	91	113	-22	809	

## Marketing

An important part of our recruitment approach is our marketing strategy. The Fostering Service has been very well supported by colleagues within the Marketing and Communications Team whilst of course acknowledging that across the year there has clearly been a continuing challenge and limitations in promoting fostering by previously successful means of 'in person' events.

The 'Foster4Leeds' brand on Twitter and Facebook continues to be marketed and has a number of followers. We'd encourage everyone to follow and retweet the 'Foster4Leeds' twitter account at @LdsFosteringAdv .

### **Fostering Panel**

Leeds Fostering Panels continued to operate virtually using the Zoom platform. During the initial part of the covid 19 pandemic, the decision was made to increase the number of virtual Fostering Panel's held to five, this was in response to the need to hold shorter virtual Panels and ensure that all matters were presented to a Panel in a timely manner. As Fostering Panels have become more accustomed to this medium, we have returned to holding four Fostering Panels per month, one being held every week.

There are four Independent Panel Chairs who each chair a Fostering Panel. Each Fostering Panel continues to have a Vice Chair and Panel Advisor. There have been several changes in terms of Panel membership but interest in being a Fostering Panel member remains high amongst Social Workers in the city and several new Panel members have been appointed over the past 12 months including independent Panel members.

The running of our Fostering Panel is supported by one Senior Panel Administrator along with minute takers and a Fostering Panel Manager who oversees the running of the Fostering Panel.

Fostering Panels continue to be busy with both mainstream fostering and kinship business. Social workers continue to undertake high quality assessments of often very complex family situations and their suitability to care for a child or children for whom they are being assessed for. Panel members complete a quality assurance process on all items presented. The quality of assessments presented at Fostering Panel is of an extremely high standard with most being evaluated as good or excellent. Authors of the reports present as knowledgeable and supportive towards the applicants, in attending panel. During the last year 98% of assessments were completed and presented within expected timescales to a Fostering Panel.

Training for panel members takes place annually, the last training took place in October 2021 where the Fostering Panel Manager gave a service update and colleagues from Migration Yorkshire delivered a presentation on unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people and considered what skills Fostering Panel should look for in potential foster carer applicants for these young people and how foster carers can best support this group of young people.

### **Training**

Throughout the year there has been a blended training offer to foster carers of in person courses and on-line training, with some of the primary training including T.C.I, First Aid, Child Development and Restorative practice being classroom based. Carers have continued to be invited to join 'masterclasses' alongside other members of social care. Attending training is key to developing the skills and knowledge base of our carers. Attendance at training has been impacted by external factors e.g. reduced capacity from providers, restrictions across the period as a result of the pandemic etc.

and fell to 47% in the third quarter and averaged 55% across the year. Strategies will be implemented over the coming year to significantly improve these figures and encourage and ensure take up of the broad and comprehensive training offer.

Foster carers continue to be able to book a slot at Fostering surgeries, where they can access specialist advice from our Therapeutic Social Work Team.

### **Enrichment activities**

Against the context of the ongoing restrictions due to the pandemic the staff delivering enrichment activities strove to provide activities safely, this included mountain biking at Herd Farm, Activity days during the main school holidays, Fun Days for carers of children with disabilities, a roller disco and canoeing and Forest School for the Under 5's. Since the resumption of a fuller and broader range of activities participation has increased. There are a range of residential and day trips planned for the coming year, where up to 120 carers and young people can take part. Our young leaders course commenced in February, this is for young people aged 16-17 this will be completed over 2 years with a Focus on Teamwork, Resilience, Confidence and Leadership skills at West Leeds Activity Centre. We are in early discussions about doing more work at South Leeds Community Hub which has fabulous opportunities for arts, Media and sports. We will resume accessing the museum offers made available through Child Friendly Leeds. Carer well being days will run in conjunction with the activities organised for young people.

It is anticipated that the Fostering holiday lodge will offer over 100 breaks for Leeds caring families over the coming year. Additionally, we have an allocation of holidays kindly donated to us by The Prince's Trust Children's Charity to distribute to families, the accommodation offered is Disability adapted.

### **Support groups for foster carers**

Across the city there are 15 support groups, these run on a monthly or bi-monthly basis; and include support groups for kinship carers, foster carers who care for teenagers, foster carers who support unaccompanied asylum seeking children, parent and child foster carers, BME foster carers, Asian foster carers, foster carers who care for babies with neonatal abstinence syndrome and carers who care for children with disabilities. Each support group has a representative who alongside the Leeds Foster Carers Association (LFCA) attend the Foster Carer Liaison Group which meets bi-monthly and has continued to be chaired by the Executive Member for Children & Families. Foster carer representatives play a key stakeholder role and are involved in a range of service developments, these meetings have been held virtually during the last year.

The Leeds Foster Carer Association now facilitates six 'All Carers' support groups over the course of year, the meetings provide key elements of support but also supplementary training opportunities when keynote speakers from health, education and other areas of children's services are invited to attend.

### **Foster Friendly Leeds**

Leeds City Council has been successful in achieving Foster Friendly Employer status. This enables employees who might be considered for fostering to access support arrangements from LCC as an employee right and entitlement and thereby increases the opportunity for our workforce to consider fostering.

### **Kinship/ SGO Update**

A snapshot of the percentage of children cared for and supported within Kinship arrangements at the end of the years shows 23% of all Children Looked After in Leeds are in Kinship family arrangements (319 of 1373)

Leeds City Council continues to place a high degree of emphasis on supporting children to remain within their birth families, where it is safe to do so. The recent OfSTED inspection highlighted that 'a large proportion of children in care live with extended family members under safely assessed kinship care arrangements.' Leeds currently has 319 Children Looked After residing within kinship homes. The use of Family Group Conferencing has in many cases enabled alternative family members to be identified at the earliest opportunity and 58 of these children are placed under Reg 24 procedures, potentially having avoided the need for them to enter stranger foster care placement on even a temporary basis. The assessment team continues to deliver support which is specifically adapted to kinship carers' needs and assists them to better understand and navigate the complexities of the process.

Leeds City Council remains committed to increasing the number of kinship care arrangements in the future with an emphasis on improved Early Help support for kinship families which enables them to address their specific needs in a realistic and robust way without overreliance on statutory services. For more complex situations which require children to remain Looked After, Early Help Intervention is underpinned with an improved support offer for kinship carers, including peer support groups and access to financial allowances.

Where appropriate, the services provide support to enable children to cease being Looked After and become subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Leeds currently has 810 children residing in 613 Special Guardian households, with the service actively supporting approximately around 80 – 100 of these families at any one time. Leeds have continued to work in partnership with other Local Authorities within the West Yorkshire region to ensure that Kinship and Foster carers who wish to progress to Special Guardianship status are able to access consistent assessment and support arrangements that they feel meet their own needs, those of their children and their parents throughout the course of their caring journey. This offer works to ensure that families are not at a disadvantage in caring for a child via a Special Guardianship Order. It includes access to consistent financial support including support for young people after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday where support would have been available should the young person have remained Looked After until their 18<sup>th</sup>

The revised offer intends to maximise support available through the Adoption Support Fund and to consider alternative avenues of therapeutic input for children. Work remains ongoing across the West Yorkshire region to improve the consistency and maximise support for Kinship and Foster Carers transitioning to SGO arrangements for children in their care. Kinship Carers, including Special Guardians continue to be

able to access support from The Mockingbird Hubs and Kinship Carers support groups.

## **The Independent Review of Children's Social Care**

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, undertaken by Josh McAllister, was published in May 2022. The report makes several recommendations around the use of Family Group Conferencing and Kinship Care, many of which are already practiced in Leeds.

- **Establish Family Group decision making as a family's legal rights** – All children within Leeds currently have an entitlement to an offer of a Family Group Conference.
- **Ensure families get the financial and practical support they need to care for children without having to register as foster carers** – Leeds Kinship Service is currently situated within Early Help Services and work is ongoing around improved access to non-statutory support for Kinship Families to ensure that they are able to meet their children's needs without the need for them to become Looked After. The ongoing work in partnership with One Adoption West Yorkshire continues to focus on ensuring Special Guardians have a consistent offer of financial support even in circumstances where they have proceeded to SGO without registering as a foster carer beforehand.
- **Provide support for kinship carers of all types within their local communities** – The Family Group Conference Service continues to work alongside Kinship Care to ensure that kinship carers are offered a FGC as an additional layer of placement support. The principles of this approach provide kinship carers with the opportunity to identify whole networks, including support within the community in recognition that this is the most realistic route to sustaining stability for children who reside within their families.
- **Help kinship carers get access to legal advice and guidance** – Leeds continues to work alongside Kinship (formerly Grandparents Plus) and Family Rights Group who are pioneers in this particular area. The Services responsible for Kinship Care will evaluate these recommendations and use them to assess existing services, before making recommendations for further development.

Overall Leeds does well in support our Kinship families and we recognise them as central to the lives of the children we work for.

## **Mockingbird Family Model**

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) places an emphasis on building links between fostering families and the wider community. The emphasis is very much about strengthening families and protecting children and young people. The model is evidencing effective support for satellite carers and assisting with placement stability for children and young people. This has been really evident over the last two years when we have fostered within a worldwide pandemic and where opportunities for face-to-face relationships were minimal and strong connections had to adapt in terms of continuing to offer a high level of support. Mockingbird connections stayed strong.

In total, 68 fostering households are being supported with a total of 116 children and young people (this is within 10 hubs).

The Hub foster carer role is central to the establishment of a community network for up to 10 fostering families. Recruiting experienced foster carers has been key to the successful implementation of the model in Leeds. We have 10 hubs available to our foster carers this year; 5 support kinship families (including families who have obtained Special Guardianship Orders) and 5 geographical hubs support mainstream fostering families (including some adoptive families). Our commitment to Mockingbird is strong and our development will be needs led – ensuring as a service that we have the right hub carers, the right liaison workers and full-service support.

There is a fidelity to the model, which is essential to uphold, however, the model is able to be used creatively to meet the needs of the overall service as these change. Our ambition is for hubs to further develop links to our residential homes aiming to assist young people moving from a residential to a fostering arrangement. Part of this would include providing young people with quality time in a family/community setting until the right long-term family can be identified. We would also want to involve young people who are placed out of area where the plan is to return them to their Leeds community.

Mockingbird Family Model staff and foster carers have hosted practice development sessions on the model for other agencies seeking to adopt the model. Leeds continues to have an open doors policy to assist other local authorities who come on board nationally to adopt the model.

Mockingbird Family Model staff continue to benefit from working in partnership with The Fostering Network who facilitate national and regional leadership and operational workshops for staff and carers involved in the Mockingbird Family Model. This is alongside national engagement activities for children and young people involved in Mockingbird (known as NEST events).

### **Fostering Children with Disabilities Team**

Some of the work of Leeds Fostering Service is concerned with specifically recruiting, assessing, training and supporting foster carers to provide care for children with disabilities. These carers often have previous experience of caring for disabled children in their personal or work life. Foster carers who care for children with disabilities provide **short term and long-term fostering** and have specialist skills and experience in caring for disabled children.

These foster carers access specialist training and support groups and have supervising social workers who are also experienced in working with disabled children. Supervising social workers work closely with the child's social worker and foster carer to form a team around the child.



Eligible children are those with disabilities including: a physical disability; a learning disability (moderate to severe); a sensory impairment (severe); complex needs—multiple impairments; Autistic spectrum disorders; complex health needs; or a combination of the above. The service accepts sibling groups where one of the siblings meets these criteria.

The fostering service also provides **fostering short breaks** for children with complex needs. The short breaks service aims to support families who care for children with complex health needs – Children looked after or on those on Child Protection or Child in Need plans. The service aims to keep children at home and supported with short breaks within a family setting (as opposed to a residential setting - at an increased cost to the authority). The service is a preventative service which supports Early Help intervention and keeps children and young people out of full-time care. The short breaks service also supports foster carers who offer permanency to children and young people with disabilities.

Within the Team also sits the **support care scheme**. Support Care is a preventative and supportive service which provides time-out or a short break for children with another family. The aim of the service is to support children to continue to live at home and prevent family breakdown. Support Care is a resource for families where practitioners have significant concerns that children and young person are on the edge of care and may need to become looked after. Support Care includes day care, evening, and/or overnight stays. Support Carers can also offer outreach to young people to build relationships and support families with positive parenting. The scheme has 25 support carers who can support up to 33 placements between them. During the year 3 carers have moved on to be full time carers. During the year 107 referrals were received, and work with 63 children enabled them to remain at home with family. From the children who were referred 23 did subsequently become looked after, this is a higher figure than previous years, this is thought to be due to referrals being made at a point of crisis when earlier intervention would likely have been more successful in achieving effective levels of engagement and change. Support care works well alongside MST CAN in allowing parents time and breathing space to fully adopt and integrate the work undertaken by MST.

Also, within the team sits the **child-minding scheme**; this is an innovative way to support children aged 0-3 years who are receiving social work input by providing day-care with a registered child-minder who have an Ofsted judgement of good or better. All children referred to the scheme must have an allocated Social Worker and would generally be the subject of a Child Protection or Child in plan. The scheme aims to support children to continue to live in their home environment and prevent family breakdown or children being received into care. There are currently 34 childminders registered with the scheme.

## **Complaints**

In the last year the Fostering Service has received 10 complaints, the majority of these were received from foster carers, seven of which were not upheld.

### **Allegations against Foster Carers.**

During the period 2021-2022, 36 foster carers were the subject of allegations, the majority of these allegations were made by children/young people in their care or previously placed in their care. The categories of alleged abuse were as follows.

Physical Abuse	15
Sexual Abuse	6
Neglect	6
Emotional Abuse	9

In circumstances where the service receives allegations against carers these are managed to ensure that any potential risks to children are understood and addressed. Where necessary children may be moved from foster carers whilst concerns are investigated. In line with relevant procedures and guidance where appropriate concerns are referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer and managed through the Allegation Management process to ensure independent scrutiny and investigation.

Concern resolved, no further action	21
Continued monitoring for an agreed period	7
Concern substantiated; ongoing approval referred to fostering panel.	8

### **Analysis**

It has been a challenging year for the Fostering Service with an inverse increase in the overall number of looked after children against a decrease in the number of fostering households available to provide placements for children and young people. This has reflected trends seen in core comparator cities and nationally. Recruitment has not kept pace with the rate at which foster carers are moving out of the service. In part this reflects an aging population amongst foster carers, a trend which is likely to continue as 197 of current carers are aged 60 plus. The level of assessments being undertaken was declining towards the end of the year and the level of enquiries was slowing. Against this context it has been extremely difficult to reduce the use of external provision including Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential provision or to proactively enable young people to return to live in Leeds from external placements. A significant number of the looked after population is aged 15-17, increasing the demand for skilled foster carers and the use of residential provision to meet their assessed needs.

Figures for placement stability with Leeds foster carers continue to indicate that this affords children and young people with effective permanency with a stability indicator of 75% for children and young people placed with matched long-term Leeds foster carers against 58% for those placed with Independent Fostering Agencies. Recruitment of carers is becoming increasingly difficult in the face of competition in the form of improved packages from Independent Fostering Agencies, and the wider economic pressures currently. This context has impacted on the delivery of the service objectives which were set last year and shaped the proposed objectives for the coming year.

## 2022/23 Service Priorities

Objective	Method
<p>To increase the number of foster carers available to the service and to reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agencies. Support the development of a wider offer and reduce our use of residential placements</p>	<p>CSWS have set out plans, approved at the Executive Board for implementation in the coming year to invest significantly in our marketing, recruitment, and support for Leeds Foster Carers.</p> <p>Recruitment events to resume in person, with targeted events at key points during the year.</p> <p>Enhance current marketing campaign to target new groups/age groups with transferable professional experience</p> <p>Continue to engage with community and faith groups to increase diversity across the fostering population.</p> <p>Review the Payment for Skills Model and seek to enhance within permitted budgetary limits and attract high level carers.</p>
<p>To further develop different strands of foster carer offer, in particular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for children of primary school age with complex behaviour currently placed in residential provision</li> <li>• Support for teenagers with challenging behaviour</li> <li>• Expand the Mockingbird Family Model</li> </ul>	<p>Refresh and redirect marketing to attract carers with relevant previous experience to care for children with complex needs and behaviour.</p> <p>Establish an Older Teenage Team under a separate manager with a focus on supporting this age group including those caring for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.</p>

	<p>Ensure Support Carers offer is widely promoted and has a renewed focus on preventative work.</p> <p>Identify further carer to establish 11<sup>th</sup> Mockingbird Family Hub</p>
<p>Improve retention of foster carers, with access to robust training and support.</p>	<p>Continue to develop our current enrichment offer.</p> <p>Ensure that training and development commitments are fully supported for all carers to achieve required levels of attendance.</p> <p>Provide effective support groups that meet identified needs of carers.</p>