

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Independent Fostering Agency

Annual Report 2022 – 2023



**Northamptonshire
Children's Trust**

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Our Vision, Service Structure and Function	4
3. Staffing.....	5
4. Summary of the service developments and challenges 2022/23:	6
5. The Children We Care For:.....	9
6. Recruitment and Assessment of Foster Carers.....	11
7. Post Approval Support and Supervision:	15
8. Connected Persons and foster carers granted temporary approval under Regulation 24:.....	22
9. Involving our Foster Carers	23
10. Involving our Children	24
11. Learning and Development	25
12. Placemet Stability	28
13. Fostering Panel:	29
14. Complaints:	311
15. Service Developments Planned for 2022-2023.....	333

1. Introduction

This is a report on the performance of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) Independent Fostering Agency in line with the National Minimum Standards (2011) and Statutory Guidance.

It provides details of NCT's Independent Fostering Agency activity from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 and sets out plans for service development until 31st March 2024.

This annual report should be read in conjunction with the Independent Fostering Agency Statement of Purpose.

The Independent Fostering Agency had its second Ofsted inspection in February 2023 and the overall judgement of our service is 'Inadequate'.

The observations and findings of the Inspectors have framed the ongoing improvement plan for the Fostering Service, where areas of practice and delivery of service needs to be focused and the following areas have been identified:

- An effective electronic recording system.
- Consistent recording and practice which clearly evidences risk and response to this.
- Children being seen by SSWs and meaningful discussion had with the child.
- Quality supervision of foster carers.
- Quality supervision of SSWs and Practice Managers.
- Safeguarding practices and knowledge of the staff working within the Fostering Service needs to be improved.

The service has produced a service improvement plan, with agreed team objectives, targets, and timescales for completion. Progress against the action plan is reported back to the senior leadership team and NCT's governance board. Following the Inadequate judgment received as a result of the full SCCIF Inspection undertaken from the 6th to the 10th February 2023, the Fostering Service remains subject to three Compliance notices issued by OFSTED, with a monitoring visit undertaken on the 11th April providing some assurance of the steps already taken by the Agency to address the arising areas of concern and deficit in practice.

The service has a clear understanding of what is required in relation to the key areas of improvement and continues to have very high ambitions to ensure foster carers receive training, support, and consistent effective supervision to enable them to offer the highest quality of care to children and that our children's voices are very clearly heard and children are regularly seen by the foster carers' supervising social workers.

2. Our Vision, Service Structure and Function

Northamptonshire Children's Trust base locations



The Independent Fostering Agency delivers the statutory Fostering functions for both North and West Northamptonshire. As such they are centrally based in Northampton but can work from other local offices.

The Strategic Manager with responsibility for the Fostering Service also holds responsibility for NCT VAA (Voluntary Adoption Agency) and Children's Homes and the Assistant Director has oversight of the Corporate Parenting Service within which the Fostering Agency sits. Both Strategic Manager and Assistant Director operate across the two unitary councils.

Our overarching aim is to provide secure and loving homes to children in need of foster care and to support those children and their families as long as this is needed.

The service shares the key aims and objectives of Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) in believing that all children and young people have the right to be healthy, happy, and safe; to be loved, valued, and respected; and to have high aspirations for their future.

We want all children to have secure relationships with family, friends, and carers, be eager, excited, curious, and engaged in learning, have self-confidence, be able to co-operate and communicate socially, and have the best possible health and development.

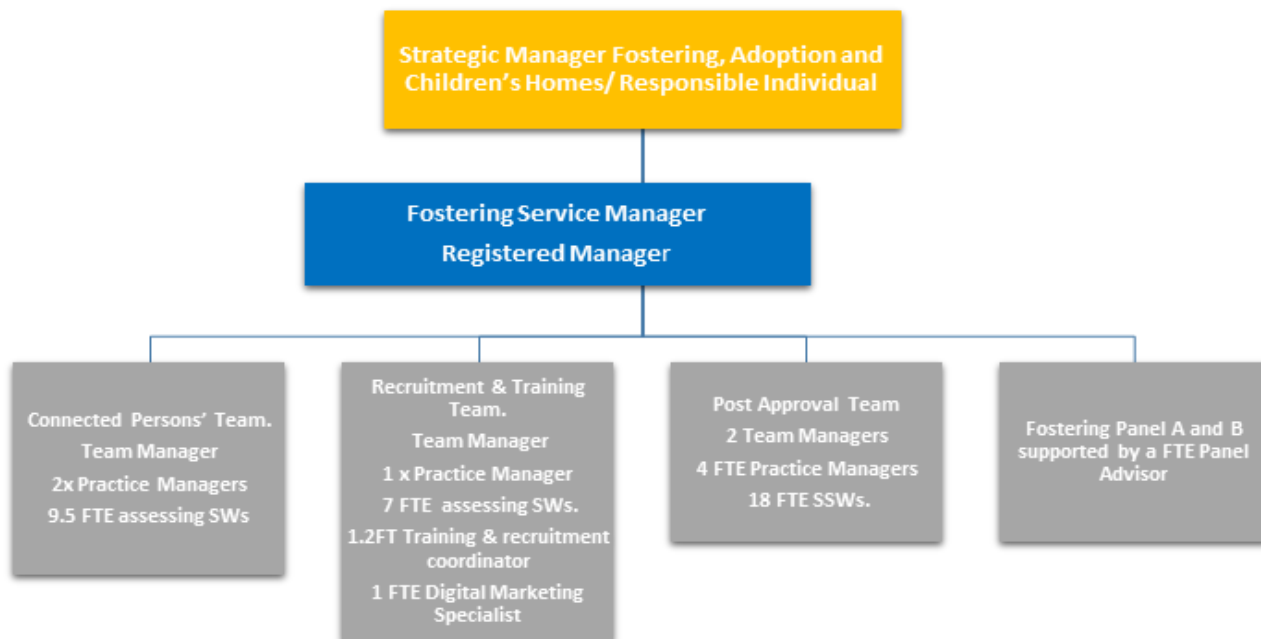
Our Vision:

“

Children, Young People and Families at the heart of all we do -
in every decision we make and every action we take.

”

3. Staffing



Additionally, a further specialist SSW post has been agreed for the Recruitment and Training Team to specifically supervise and support our cohort of Resilience foster carers. Recruitment activity to this position is ongoing.

NCT’s Independent Fostering Agency comprises of four fostering teams:

- Recruitment, Training and Assessment team
- Post Approval teams x 2
- Connected Persons’ team

The teams undertake statutory functions of assessment, approval, supervision, support, training, and development, safeguarding and review of foster carers. All fostering teams work in partnership with the Duty and Assessment, Safeguarding and Children in Care (CIC) Services to ensure children’s care plans are progressed with minimum delay and children are provided with the best possible in-house care. Supervising social workers and practice managers attend placement planning, permanency planning and placement stability meetings, CIC reviews and all other relevant statutory and non-statutory meetings for children.

The Independent Fostering Agency seeks to build positive relationships with professionals providing a ‘team around the child’ approach, ensuring partners work to best meet children’s needs. A fostering duty system operates daily to support the function of the NCT’s Placement Management Service, who are responsible for sourcing placements both internally within Northamptonshire and externally, by identifying internal foster placements and emergency carers. A duty team manager provides management oversight of placement activity. Additionally, a second duty worker supports the duty telephone response to foster carers on a daily basis. The Fostering Duty Hub are based together to provide a consistent managerial oversight.

Northamptonshire Children’s Trust Independent Fostering Agency provides a range of short term and permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience.

4. Summary of the service developments and challenges 2022/23

Key developments during 2022/2023

Whole service

- Improved our data set for managers to monitor performance in relation to statutory compliance. Reporting systems have been reviewed and an interim recording system has been introduced to ensure compliance can be effectively monitored. Redeveloped recruitment pipeline data and monthly performance meetings to drive assessment performance and recruit more foster carers.
- Review of existing policy and practice documents, practice guidance and 'HOW TO' guides written for all key practice changes or updates and to support new ways of working. These are shared with the relevant stockholders as appropriate, to include our foster carers and independent panel members when relevant.
- An incumbent registered manager remains in post to provide stability for the service and lead the necessary improvements and high aspirations for the service.
- Whole Service development days continue to be held on a quarterly basis with staff to be clear of the vision and expectations, to ensure all team members understand the importance of their role and how they can most effectively work together to achieve the continuing improvements of the service. These days provide an opportunity for review and implementation of new policy and practice as well as guest speakers to enhance the wider learning across all of the Fostering Services. Within this year, guest speaker topics have included 'The voice of the child' delivered by a care experienced adult, MBAM training delivered by our clinical psychologist, specialist 'Parent and Child' training as well as a SCCIF framework development workshop.
- Bi-monthly meetings continue to be held between the management team, panel adviser and panel chairs have been established supporting the ongoing development of the professional relationship between the panel and the agency.
- All managers have participated in Leadership and management training with positive impact on practice and culture. Focused on enabling managers to empower each other, staff, children and families and build positive culture.
- Signs of safety (SOS) training has been provided to managers and staff and this strengths-based and empowering practice model continues to be embedded, we have several SOS champions within the service to support this area of practice development. Further workshops in respect of the SOS model for foster carer's daily recordings are planned into this next financial year to further embed this practice.

Recruitment

- Streamlined forms for recruitment, through to assessment and support, including Matching, Placement planning documents, Safe care documents, Risk assessment templates have been revised and or introduced.
- The Digital Marketing Specialist role is now embedded in NCT's Communications team and supports Fostering recruitment.
- Re - shaped our front door approach and appointed a recruitment coordinator to ensure enquiries are followed up within 24 hours.
- Further developed a 'step down' pathway from Residential Care to Fostering through the Resilience scheme, which provides support to children to 'step down' from residential care and 'break the cycle' of children experiencing multiple placements moves. We now have 6 approved Resilience foster carers with 5 young people currently in place.
- Continued to develop joint and emergency viability assessments when undertaking Connected Carers Assessment, which has supported timely decision making, and has seen an increase in initial viability assessments being undertaken prior to placement of the children.

Training and support

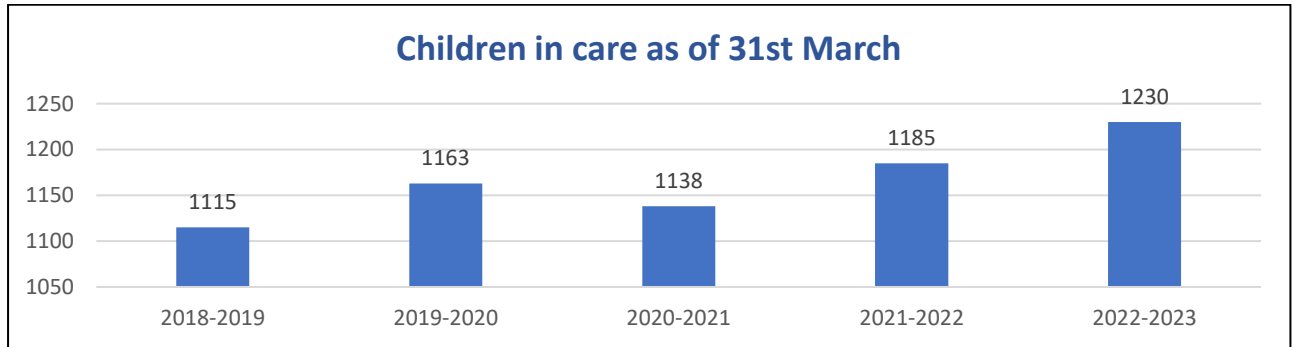
- Approaches to retention continue to be developed, including exit interviews and the use of retention meetings with foster carers who are thinking of leaving, and a clear pathway for engagement with foster carers who are 'on hold' to enable them to return to fostering in a timely manner.
- Managers' retention visits to foster carers remain an ongoing requirement of our carer retention and quality assurance framework.
- Continue to further embed the Public Health funded fostering project. The aim of this project is to develop the skills and knowledge of supervising social workers and foster carers in understanding the emotional needs of children who have experienced abuse and neglect developing therapeutic parenting techniques. It facilitates the commissioning of therapeutic interventions for children and carers, with the aim of improving mental health outcomes for children and to improve placement stability as well as specialist training social work staff working within the Fostering Service such as Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP).
- Clinical Psychologist role is embedded, and staff are benefitting from specialist advice and guidance. Individual consultations have been offered to foster carers to support them in their fostering journey, especially in consideration of blocked care and achieving placement stability.
- Foster carers continue to have funded access to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. This provides foster carers with access to training, webinars and networks of support with a focus on therapeutic approaches.
- The training provided to foster carers has been reviewed; there are plans to expand on existing training opportunities, and others have been introduced or re-introduced following foster carer feedback.

Key challenges during 2022/2023

- We have a high number of beds on hold (49 beds on 31st March 2022 compared to 8 the previous year).
- Recruitment & retention of foster carers. There has been a slight increase in resignations of foster carers, and we have recruited fewer households than in the previous year. This appears, anecdotally, to be in line with the experience of other Local Authorities and Fostering Agencies. Further exploration of the current situation around recruitment and retention nationally is needed to fully understand how NCT's Fostering Agency fared in comparison to others and what we can do differently to address sufficiency issues.
- Information Systems: The data required for the fostering service to monitor progress has continued to improve during this year but remains an area of significant challenge. We cannot use the Care First recording system to accurately collect data on the various approval details or vacancies, manage payments easily and accurately or provide adequate data on carers subject to concerns or complaints. Individual children's records have been created within TEAMS but remain vulnerable to corruption and are not able to 'talk' to any of the other systems that the Fostering Service is currently using which makes managerial oversight and tracking of actions/ practice clumsy.
- Staff recruitment has been a significant challenge for the majority of this financial year, however, this is now an improving picture.
- We have a high number of children living within family and friends' arrangements, standing at 119 fostering households caring for 174 children. A task and finish group has carried out a review and a whole systems approach has been taken in relation to changing the culture and ways of working to make sure Special guardianship is encouraged where appropriate and in line with the children's needs. This remains a targeted focus of the Fostering Service. Dedicated workshops for all social work practitioners have been jointly delivered by the Fostering Service and the post order team who are responsible for SGO support.
- To continue to progress and work within all elements of the improvement plan to address the points raised within the compliance notices. This will include regular review and Quality Assurance activity, self-evaluation and reporting to both NCT's SLT and monitoring visits from OFSTED. Ongoing policy and practice review will continue to inform the Improvement plan.

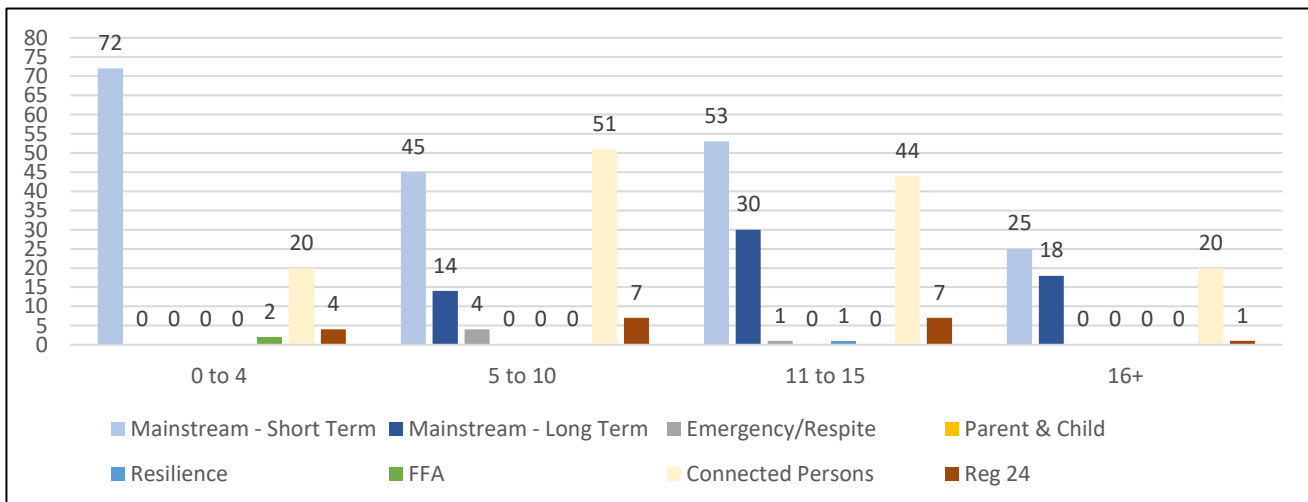
5. **The Children We Care For**

The graph below shows a snapshot of the number of children in care figures over the last 4 years. This graph shows a decrease in the year 2020 – 2021, anecdotally considered to be in part due to the COVID pandemic conditions but a significant rise for last year and this year. Not only does the continued rise in children in care create increased sufficiency pressures, but there is also the churn in children in care population during the year which can create pressure with seasonal increase in demands for fostering placements.



Children living with in house foster carers categorised by age groups

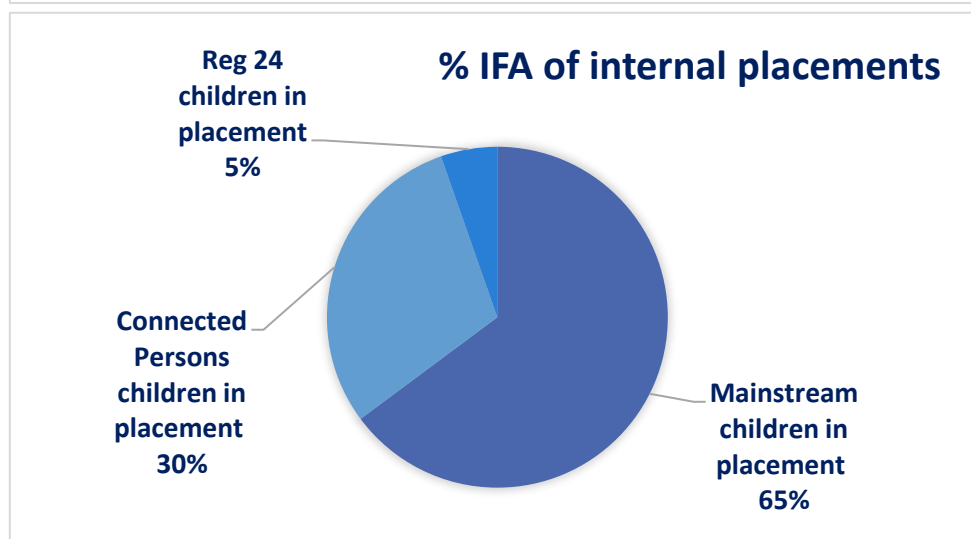
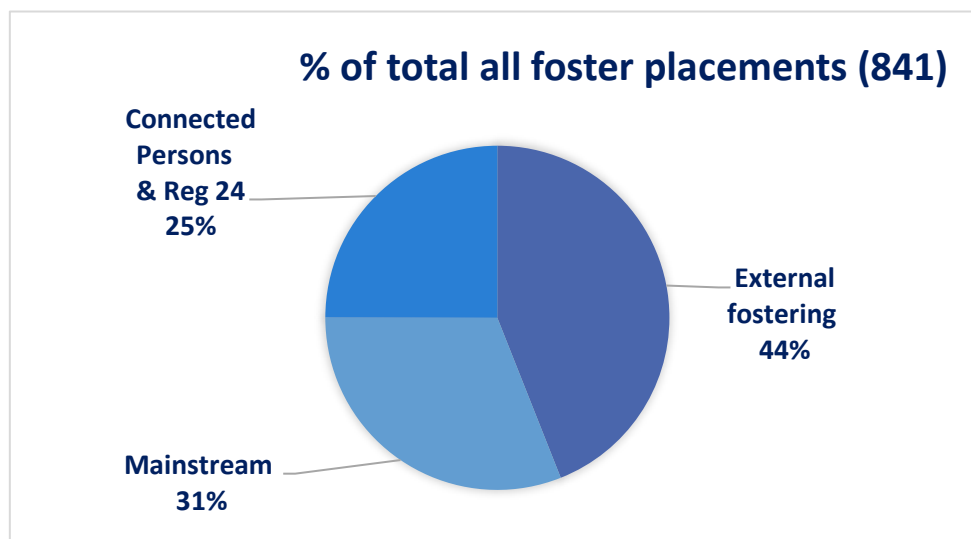
Approval	Age Groups			
	0 to 4	5 to 10	11 to 15	16+
Mainstream - Short Term	72	45	53	25
Mainstream - Long Term	0	14	30	18
Emergency/Respite	0	4	1	1
Parent & Child	0	0	0	0
Resilience	0	0	1	0
FFA	2	0	0	0
Connected Persons	20	51	44	20
Reg 24	4	7	7	1
Total	98	121	136	64



As last year, demand for placements for children aged 11+ remains high with 11–15-year-olds consistently being the largest group of children living in in-house foster homes.

Proportion of children living in internal and external foster placements

Fostering breakdown	Number of Children placed in foster care	% of LAC 1227	% of total all foster placements (841)
External fostering	370	30%	44%
Mainstream	261	21%	31%
Connected Persons & Reg 24	210	17%	25%
	841	69%	33%



Of the 841 Northamptonshire children who were living in foster care during this period, 261 children are placed with internal Mainstream foster carers (31%), 210 children placed with Connected person's carers (25%) with this figure including those children living with carers granted temporary approval under REG 24.

Whilst this is positive, there remains a significant number of children (370) living with foster carers approved by independent fostering agencies (44%).

Anecdotally these children have tended to be older in age, sibling groups or children with additional needs. Finding fostering families for these children remains a priority and recruitment and marketing activity continues to focus on recruitment of foster carers able to offer homes to these children.

6. Recruitment and Assessment of Foster Carers

On March 31st 2023, there were 209 Mainstream fostering households, Connected Persons' fostering approved households and 'Regulation 24' temporarily approved fostering households.

Current Fostering Households	Data as of 1st April 2022	Apr -22	May -22	Jun -22	Jul -22	Aug -22	Sep -22	Oct -22	Nov -22	Dec -22	Jan -23	Feb -23	Mar -23	Total
Households on hold		1	1	1	3	3	2	4	4	5	6	4	5	
Positive ADM		0	2	2	0	3	0	3	2	3	2	0	2	19
Closed Households		0	-5	-4	-2	-2	-4	0	0	-1	-3	-2	0	-23
Count of Approved Households		213	213	210	208	206	207	203	206	208	210	209	207	209

18 new foster carer households were recruited, 16 less than the previous year. Anecdotally, this remains a positive position in an ever increasingly challenging market in which to recruit foster carers across the sector.

Across this reporting period, 13 fostering households have closed, with 3 of these being through the action of the Agency and 'Termination of Approval.' 10 of these have been through the carers change in circumstances and a decision to retire or resign from fostering altogether. There have been no instances within this reporting period where foster carers have chosen to resign from NCT's Fostering Service but chosen to continue their fostering career with another fostering agency.

Our net position at year end was -4 households.

The number of approved foster carers has not kept up with demand in the sector, which has had an increase of around 3% in the number of children coming into care over the last 12 months in Northamptonshire.

Below shows the number of enquiries, approvals and de-registrations (for reporting purposes, this the term used to include all foster carer closures for resignation, retirement and at the Fostering Service's instigation) over the last three years:

Enquiries

20/21: 397

21/22: 252

22/23: 170

Approvals

20/21: 37

21/22: 34

22/23: 18

De-Registrations

20/21: 29

21/22: 32

22/23: 13

Description	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar -23
Number of Initial Enquiries received	397	252	175
Number of Initial Visits undertaken	145	85	72
Households invited to apply following positive visit	109	50	45
% of Households invited to apply from initial enquiries received	27%	20%	63%

From 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, we have:

- Received a total of 175 enquiries. This resulted in 72 initial visits (41%). Of these initial visits, 45 (63%) converted to a Registration of Interest (ROI), it is at this stage that Statutory Checks commence (Stage 1)
- This is a decrease of 77 enquiries for the same period in the previous year. Discussions in regional and national fostering recruitment groups have noted a continued drop in enquiries across the sector during this time period.
- The conversion rate from enquiry to approval of in-house foster carers is 10.5%. This is slightly less than the conversation rate achieved in 2021/2022 of 13%, though above the national of approximately 9% and the East Midlands region of around 6 - 7%.

In 2022/2023, 29 households withdrew from the assessment process (25 at stage 1, 4 at stage 2). The Fostering Service seeks to progress Stage 1 and Stage 2 of assessment of applicant foster carers concurrently which will mean that applicant households can be well progressed in Stage 2 of assessment before all of their Stage 1 checks are returned and reviewed as satisfactory. This does present a risk of late closures to assessment.

The stage 1 closed for the following reasons:

- A change of circumstances or change in family dynamics/work commitments meant that fostering was no longer viable/possible for them – this included 1 household needing to take on a caring responsibility for a relative, 4 where health needs changed within the assessment timeframe and 8 where fostering no longer fitted in with their lives due to job changes or changes in other personal circumstances.
- 1 household's immediate family members were not supportive of the application to foster and withdrew due to this.
- 7 stage 1 assessments were ceased by the Fostering Service: 5 noted that those applying were not suitable for the fostering role. 2 further households had major changes in their circumstances.

Of the stage 2 closures, 2 applicants were not suitable (one of these was a resilience applicant) and this was determined through late return of Stage 1 checks, and 2 had changes in their personal/family circumstances. Within this reporting period, the process for the review of applicants at Stage 1 has been undertaken.

Unavailable beds and Occupancy rate

We have seen a slight decrease this year in our unavailable beds (see table below) from 27% to 25%. During 2021 the reporting on unavailable beds was changed to align with Ofsted codes and descriptions. This has meant that the different reasons for beds not being able to be occupied is able to be reported more accurately. Foster Carers who are either placed 'on hold' by the Fostering Service (usually due to the carer being the subject of an allegation and investigation) or foster carers who place themselves 'on hold' at their request are regularly kept under review.

As detailed below, non-available beds are also kept under review, correct as of 31st March 2023:

This ensures that ensure maximum placement sufficiency is maintained. The vast majority of the 97 beds not available as detailed below arise from a foster carer having one bedroom but having terms of approval to care for one child or two if siblings. When a single child is placed in that bedroom, reporting details a 'lost' bedroom space which, in reality, was only available if the placement had been for two siblings who are able to safely share a bedroom.

Households on hold	5
Total number of approved places including exemptions	391
Filled Places	262
Occupancy rate	67%
Non available beds	97
Non available beds rate	25%
Vacant beds	16
Vacant beds rate	4%

Our Recruitment strategy and marketing campaigns

The Digital Marketing Specialist remains in post and supports all elements of our 'mainstream' recruitment activity, including to our specialist Resilience foster carer scheme.

A variety of marketing approaches are used including digital, social media channels, radio, as well as a range of outdoor engagement to promote fostering for Northamptonshire Children's Trust. The Lead Member and chair of the Corporate Parenting Board along with staff and foster carers within the organisation remain very supportive in promoting fostering within their networks.

We have an Annual Fostering Communications and Marketing Plan that has had input from the whole of the Fostering Service and offers a breakdown of digital marketing strategies, community-based activities, printed marketing, and the budget allocated to each of these. Different types of fostering are planned to be promoted on various weeks throughout the year. The duration and amount of advertising planned for each scheme is based on the sufficiency needs identified by the Independent Fostering Agency and analysis of referrals for children's placements received into the team. *Please see the separate Marketing and Recruitment Activity report.*

The Fostering Service continues to employ the talents of a specialist Digital Marketing Recruitment Specialist to support with:

- Recruitment Campaigns
- Targeted activity across the year to raise the Fostering Service's profile to include the use of
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Google Ads
 - LinkedIn
 - Social Media campaigns
 - Dedicated NCT Fostering Service webpage
 - Partnership working with other Local Authorities
 - Exploring partnerships with other local companies
 - 'Face to Face' and engagement activity locally across Northamptonshire.
 - Event planning

Brand

This year, we wanted to create a 'brand' and a uniformed look, so each type of fostering had their own tag line under the 'step up' brand.

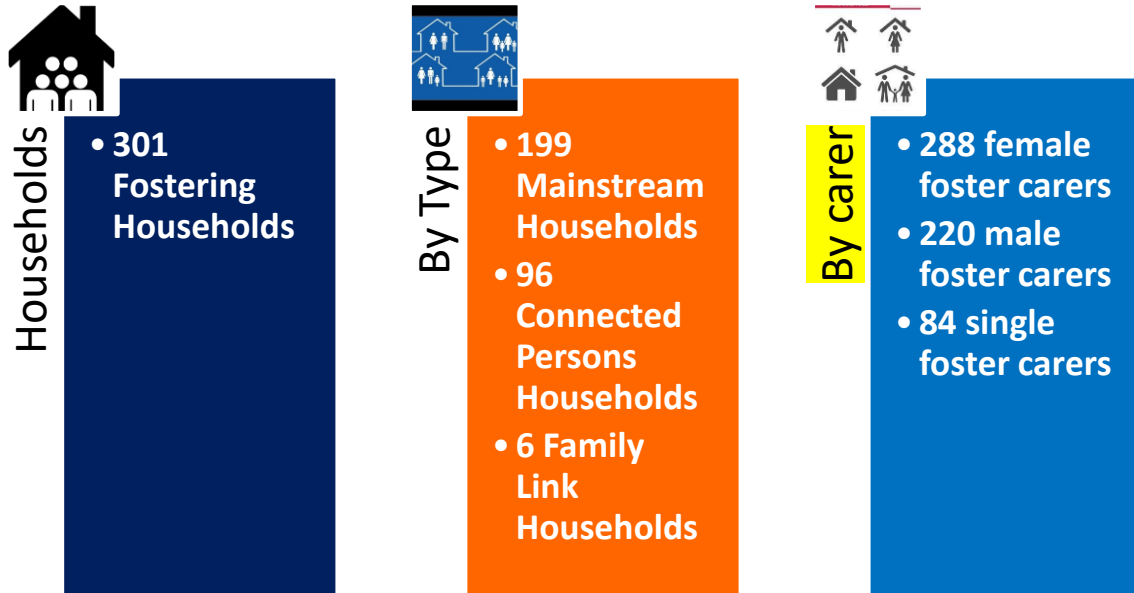
- Mainstream – Step up and make a difference
- Siblings – Help us to take steps together
- Emergency – Could you step in when I need you
- Resilience – Help us take steps into adulthood
- Parent and child – Supporting both big and little steps
- Family Link – Could you step in and support our family

2022/23 advertising examples



7. Post Approval Support and Supervision

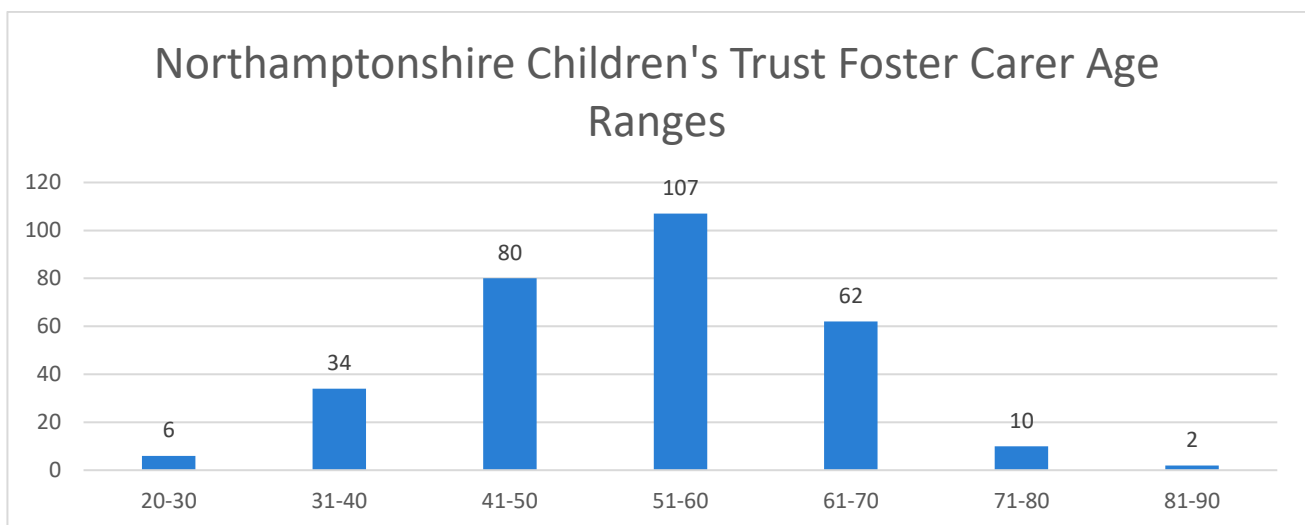
As of 31st March 2023, we had:



Single-carer households accounted for less than one third (28%) of all households.

Our foster carers come from a wide range of age groups, with our youngest carers aged between **20-30** and our oldest carers aged between **81-90**.

Most of our foster carers are aged between **51-60 (36%)**. This is slightly below national figures (**40%**).

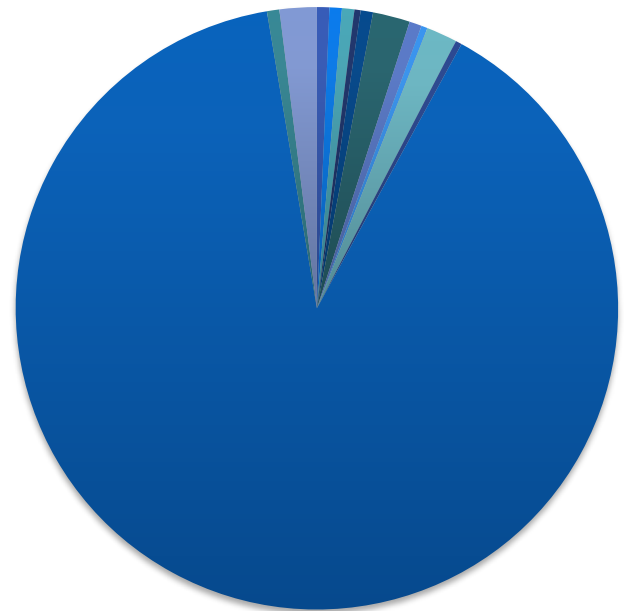


Our foster carers come from a wide range of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds including:

- Bangladeshi
- Indian
- Pakistani
- African
- African Caribbean
- Chinese
- Irish
- Black British
- White British
- Asian British
- White European

and foster carers from mixed heritage backgrounds. Most of our foster carers identified as White British.

Main Foster Carer Ethnicity



- ABAN(2)
- AOTH (2)
- APKN (2)
- BAFR (1)
- BBRI (2)
- BCRB (6)
- BOTH (2)
- MWAS (1)
- MWBC (5)
- OOTH (1)
- WBRI (269)
- WIRI (2)
- WOTH (6)

On 31 March 2023, in line with previous years, most foster carers were White British (89%). This also correlates with the overall demographic of our looked after population also being White British. This means that we are predominantly able to place child in households where their cultural and heritage identity are met and where we may have placed children with foster carers of a different cultural ethnicity and heritage to themselves, we have considered what other support, such as additional training or access to specialist hair or skin care, can be put in place for both the children and their foster carers in this scenario.

There are 8 Households with same sex Foster Carers.

The average time our Foster Carers have been with us is 6 years 1 months.
The current longest serving Foster Carer has been with us for 42 years and 4 months

NCT’s Independent Fostering Service continues to ensure this is consistently achieved, and we continue to evolve better ways of monitoring compliance with policies and procedures in supervision and performance meetings and audit and dip sample activity.

We track and monitor themes and patterns arising from Fostering Panels, with specific actions arising from any consistent areas for development through our panel chair meetings.

The performance of the service is also monitored by Ofsted inspections, the Corporate Parenting Board, the Sufficiency Board, the Children's Trust Board and the senior leadership team. The Fostering Service were subject to an ILACS Inspection across the whole of NCT's Children's Services undertaken in November 2022 and then a full five day SCCIF Inspection of the Fostering Service only in February 2023.

The performance indicator system initially established in February 2022 continues to be reviewed and refined to ensure that we have management oversight on all our fostering files and is now more sophisticated in the data we can hold and correlate. This supports foster carers receiving regular supervision and that their annual reviews remain on time, unannounced visits, DBS, medicals are up to date. This also measures if the child has been seen and if their bedroom has been checked. All of the regulatory compliance functions are now supported by practice guidance and policy updates to support a congruent approach to social worker practice within the Fostering Service. This has been a significant focus of the work undertaken within this reporting period and remains so moving forward. This remains a continued area of focus of development and improvement for the Fostering Service.

A new induction programme is being introduced this year which will be reviewed with the input from a group of foster carers to ensure that our Independent Fostering Agency reflects our new carers' journey to being able to care for their first child.

Since last year we have started to co-work cases between the Recruitment Team and Post Approval Team. This ensures a smooth handover and more of a managed induction to fostering for many of our newly approved foster carers, with the recruitment workers having been involved with initial matching discussions and supporting with first placements. There has been positive feedback regarding this arrangement.

As we are currently reviewing our existing induction programme, this remains in development and will be in the form of interactive online information covering the following areas:

- Role of SSW and what to expect in supervision.
- Role of Fostering Duty.
- What to expect in the first duty phone call.
- What to expect and to request in a Placement Planning Meeting.
- Expectations of Training, Continuing Professional Development, TSD and Annual Review.
- Introduction to the NFCA.

This will not replace the co-working arrangements currently in place and remain the usual practice.

Support groups

The following support groups are established within the county and are based around localities. They are free for foster carers to attend. The Registered Manager has visited each of the support groups below between September 2022 and December 2022.

Locality/Group Name	Meeting Frequency	Description/notes
Corby Support Group	Monthly	Locality support group for the Corby and surrounding areas. Has been successfully piloted as a training hub.

Kettering Support Group	Monthly	Locality support group for the Kettering and surrounding areas
Rushden/Wellingborough area	Monthly	Covers Rushden/Wellingborough as well as Irthlingborough and wider area
Northampton Support Group	Monthly	Northampton based group
South Northamptonshire Support Group	Monthly	Covers geographic area of West Northants below Northampton
Family Link Support Group	Monthly	Support group for Family Link Short Breaks carers
Northamptonshire Foster Carers Association (NFCA)	Monthly	Established Foster Carer Association
Male Foster Carer Support Group (countywide)	Monthly	Based in Rushden, male carer support group.
Special Guardians and Kinship Support Group (Countywide)	Monthly	County wide group.
BAME foster carer support group	Quarterly	Newly established support group in March 2023.
Karing Kids (County wide)	Special events throughout the year	For birth children of foster carers
Children with Disabilities Support Group	Quarterly	Based at the Penrith Centre
Single Carer Support Group	Quarterly	Based at the Penrith Centre
Separated Children's Support Group	Quarterly	Based at the Penrith Centre
LGBTQIA+ Support Group	Quarterly	Based at the Penrith Centre
BAME Support Group	Quarterly	Based at the Penrith Centre
Foster Carer Buddy Support Group	Quarterly	Group in development to support the existing Buddy Scheme.

Other support in place

"Share the Care" E Newsletter

This goes out to all carer households every two months via email and includes corporate and carer information. There are contributions from foster carers, staff and senior leaders, and also includes positive news stories about children.

"We see J monthly for supervision but know that she is contactable in between those times if we needed her. She is responsive to any requests or concerns we may have. She makes sure that she sees our foster and own children too."

NCT Foster Carers

"We now have been allocated S and she has been amazing at getting to know both myself and J as well as the children. We look forward to working with her on our journey as foster parents."

NCT Foster Carers

"A particularly found his candid discussions with SSW. A to be useful, using her as a sounding board and having realistic expectations for the nature of placements. We have also found the recruitment team to be particularly helpful in getting us back in the loop and ready for our first annual review following a long break from fostering.

NCT Foster Carers

"Taking on K was something new for us, K came with some behaviours that could be difficult to manage at times and so we had to look at different ways to help her, make the world a calm and safe place for her, but also showing her boundaries. We took advice from doctors and our health visitor as well as our SSW who were all great helping and supporting us throughout K's time with us"

NCT Foster Carers

Whilst approval of new foster carers is a priority, we recognise that work needs to be undertaken to ensure that we are effectively using the fostering resources available within fostering households already approved.

This has included reviewing and supporting foster carers who have been 'on hold' to see whether they can return to caring for children and the introduction of a clear process for foster carers who are requesting to be put on hold with guidelines around timescales, staying in contact, support and training needs during this period and return to fostering (including need for review).

In the last month of this reporting period (March 23) two families felt able to return to fostering after being contacted and visited.

This review allowed us to get a clearer view of our actual capacity as well as supporting those carers who might struggle to continue their fostering journey.

Where appropriate, we support changing foster carers approval where they have space in their home to care for additional children, and this resulted in 3 additional beds through a permanent change of approval and 12 additional beds on variation of approval for limited time.

Public Health Project

Supported by Public Health for 2 years from October 2020-22, the Fostering Support Fund increases the support for in-house Foster Families with foster children aged 5-12. The project focuses on the development of in-house skills and commissioning therapeutic interventions for children and carers, with the aim of improving mental health outcomes for children and to improve placement stability. Since the start of the project, we have supported over 80 foster children/families/care experienced young adults with individual therapeutic interventions, with real improvements to their mental health, wellbeing and resilience.

Within this reporting period, these supervising social workers have now received the DDP Level 2 training to support and embed their learning of this approach. Additionally, a senior Supervising Social worker role has been created to lead on Therapeutic approach and to act as an ambassador for the whole Fostering Service, who is responsible for ensuring that all new relevant research is cascaded down to the service. Additionally, this dedicated worker will continue to expand supervising social workers own 'toolbox' with strategies and responses they can offer to foster carers to develop and employ within their work with children. Foster Carers

have access to the clinical psychologist for consultations and complex case supervisions bi-monthly which has been reported as being beneficial and supportive by foster carers. The staff team's knowledge base of therapeutic parenting and approaches has increased significantly due to all of the above.

Resources available through this scheme are:

- All foster carers can access the National Association for Therapeutic Parenting
- Clinical Psychologist offering consultations to carers
- DDP training for SSWs which will be introduced at support groups

Below is an overview of the support offered by this scheme to date:

Group Work Therapeutic Parenting

Non-Violent Resistance

Therapeutic Parenting

Thera play

Therapeutic Stories

Therapeutic Life Story Work including Carer

Resilience carers

This scheme is to meet demands for a specific cohort of children aged 10+, who are at risk of being placed in (out of county) residential homes due to their complexities and difficulties in finding family placements. Resilience foster carers have a team around the child including therapeutic training and support. The residential sector supports the placement and social workers. We are working closely with a local psychologist service, Broad Horizons, who have developed bespoke training for these foster carers to address key challenges in caring for this cohort of children. Clinical supervision is part of their offer to staff and foster carers.

We set out to have 10 Resilience scheme households by the end of March 2023 which would have enabled a further 6 children to be stepped down from residential care. Within this reporting period, we have achieved 7 households with 5 children in placement as of March 2023, with two other Resilience carers significantly progressed in assessment at this time.

Training Offer for Resilience Carers

Please see separate annual Training Report, with the highlights from this being:

Before attending fostering panel there is an expectation that carers must complete the Specialist Foster Caring Training Programme presented by Broad Horizons.

The training further develops skills in relation to the understanding of the emotional and traumatic experiences of children and young people in placements that have been identified as having complex needs.

On completion of that training and clinical supervision, the foster carer achieves a certificate in Specialist Foster Care.

Broad Horizons exclusive DART model is tailored to meet the learning needs for each individual to become a specialist foster carer.

The core principals focus on:

Dissociation

Attachment

Resilience

Trauma

Family Link/Short Break Care for Children with Disability

Family Link gives disabled children in Northamptonshire the chance to spend time with another family to give their family a break. This could be for an afternoon or a few days.

There were 7 family link foster carer households at the end of March 23 which is 2 less than the previous year. During the year 2022/23 we did not approve any new households. Further work is currently being undertaken to ascertain how many families we need going forward which is one of the priority areas in our recruitment strategy.

The Family Link carers are supported by two dedicated Supervising Social Workers from within the Fostering Service who lead on this support alongside their respective allocated fostering households. This ensures that a 'joined up approach' to the support that our Family Link foster carers receive.

Parent and Child Placements

We currently only have one approved foster carer households who is able to offer 'Parent and Child' placements. There remains an area of focus for the Independent Fostering Agency within the forthcoming reporting period, A targeted workshop was delivered to the supervising social worker cohort to support a wider understanding of the specialist support required for 'Parent and Child' foster carers at the whole Service Development Day held in March 2023. This was delivered by our specialist 'Parent and Child' foster carer.

These placements have offered opportunities for parents to care for their children and whilst neither led to children and their parents successfully returning to the community. The foster carers have been supportive in transitioning the children to their permanent carers when it became evident that their parents were not in a position to offer the consistent, nurturing care for the duration of their childhoods.

8. Connected Persons and foster carers granted temporary approval under Regulation 24

Connected Persons Foster Carers and Special Guardians

The Connected Persons Team undertakes assessments of people who are connected in some way to children being supported by the Trust. These assessments are typically of family members but may also include those who are connected to the children in other ways for example, trusted friends of the family, other professionals supporting the children including teachers and others who have a meaningful relationship with the children and who are able to evidence a commitment to supporting the children to maintain family relationships into the long term.

Assessments usually consider applicants to be the long-term carers of the children as either Foster Carers or, increasingly, as Special Guardians. Indeed, over the period of this annual review there has been far more emphasis on supporting prospective Connected Persons to become Special Guardians and to this end an SGO training package has been provided to social workers across the Trust and to Connected Persons which helps them to make more informed decisions about the opportunities that Special Guardianship conveys as opposed to fostering.

In terms of trends for the Connected Persons Team there has been a levelling off of the number of family and friends' assessments being undertaken this year compared to last year. This is mainly due to the development, through training, through the sharing of updated policies and procedures and through greater co-working, of better understanding across the Trust of the requirements of fostering as specified within Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards. This enhanced understanding has meant that referring agencies are better informed when making referrals to the Connected Persons Team and considering other options for children in terms of permanence.

In 2022 - 2023, there were 217 referrals into the team which is a reduction from the figure of 254 in 2021 - 2022. This reduction is mainly explained because of improvements in the screening process which has meant that a higher number of initial referrals have not progressed beyond this stage as they were identified as not meeting the requirements of Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards.

Furthermore, in terms of Connected Persons being approved by the Agency Decision Maker there were 4 more approved Connected Persons carers at the end of March 2023 as compared to the previous year, 34 in total. Additionally, 35 other households undergoing assessment were closed prior to the assessment being completed for reasons including placements no longer being required, applicants withdrawing and children being returned to their parents following positive parenting assessments.

The specific challenges for our Connected Persons foster carers and Special Guardians are fully recognised within the Fostering Service and to this effect a specific Kinship support offer has been developed this year for approved Connected Persons carers and those undergoing assessment. This offer includes a quarterly Kinship coffee morning which gives carers the opportunity to meet other carers and members of the team on an informal basis to both catch up on current developments as well as to take the opportunity to meet current and new carers to share their experiences of the assessment process and the opportunities and challenges that go side by side with being Connected Persons.

Most recently a Special Guardianship group has been set up specifically focussed on Special Guardians. This is in its infancy but is already beginning to bear fruit with an Open Day event for all Special Guardians being planned for later in 2023.

There are also more formal meetings with the Northamptonshire Foster Carers Association which are for all foster carers whether Connected Persons or Mainstream and which are regularly attended by Connected Persons carers.

In terms of the support to families and children going through the assessment process the Connected Persons Team continues to provide high levels of support and training as it has always done. The Connected Persons Induction training programme has been improved and built on in that there is now an IT based training programme that sits alongside the face-to-face programme, which enables applicants undergoing assessment who aren't able to attend face-to-face training to access the same training provision.

Furthermore, as already alluded to an SGO specific training programme has also been developed and currently 6 face-to-face sessions have taken place with social workers from across the Trust and with prospective Special Guardians. It is expected that this provision will support more applicants to become Special Guardians thus supporting families and children to move on in their lives without the need for ongoing Children's Services input. However, this does not mean that further support is not available as, if requested, the Post Adoption and SGO Support team provides a range of support to those Special Guardians who identify a need post order.

9. Involving our Foster Carers

Our vision is to work as one team together with children and their foster carers at the centre of that team.



We aim to work in partnership with our foster carers and are facilitating opportunities for them to share their views and influence service developments. Plans to achieve this include the development of task groups which offer opportunities for co-production between the Fostering Service, foster carers, our children and young people.

Managers, including NCT Chief Executive Officer, meet regularly with the Northamptonshire Foster Care

Association and foster carers are actively involved in recruitment activities. Additionally, any new process or change in process is also shared at the monthly IFA/NFCA Forums to which all of our foster carers are invited and a diary of dates for these meetings have already been shared with all of our foster carers through until the end of the year. These monthly meetings have been in place since July 2022. Managers from within the Fostering Service attend the NFCA committee meetings held on a monthly basis which is a further opportunity to share any changes to policy and practice. The NFCA committee members then further disseminate this information through the area foster carer support groups offered across the county on a monthly basis.

In January, a joint Child in Care (CIC), NFCA and IFA Forum was established to meet quarterly to support the development of relationships with our foster carers with both the Fostering Service and the CIC teams. This

has been well received and is progressing the development of both the new Savings policy for Northamptonshire children in foster care and a joint children's social worker and supervising social worker visiting policy, to ensure the 'Team around the Child' approach is maintained.

Moving forward in partnership with Northamptonshire Foster Carer Association we intend to work together to further develop a support group programme and events for the year ahead.

As referenced elsewhere within this report, the NFCA continue to deliver support groups across Northamptonshire on behalf of the Fostering Service and within this reporting period, the SLA has been reviewed in this regard.

A bi - monthly magazine, 'Share the Care', continues to be prepared and shared with all foster carers to share information, updates, and good news stories in respect of the Fostering Service and foster carers report that this is really helpful in receiving all updates in one place.

One of our Foster carers attends Corporate Parenting Board and takes an active part in contributing to service development through this forum.

10. Involving our children

Foster children and birth children are encouraged to provide feedback for their foster families' annual review and it is positive to see that feedback was received from looked after children and young people in 83 % of household reviews, which is a decrease from 94 % last year, and from birth children in 93 % of household reviews, which again is a slight decrease on 98% from last year. Most children report to be happy and settled in the families they live with. Where a child might express concerns, this feedback enables us to respond in a timely manner.

Celebrating the successes and achievements of children in our foster families is an important part of what we do and foster carers and supervising social workers present these to managers within NCT and the IFA.

Young People who are currently in care or are care experienced young people are supported by the fostering service to lead a workshop during the 3-day preparation training for potential foster carers. This is enjoyed by participants and also allows the young people to assess how the participants naturally relate to them. They then provide feedback regarding the applicant's suitability to foster.

A children in care consultation group is planned for this forthcoming reporting period, with a dedicated survey to be undertaken with our children and young people placed within our in-house foster carers to help inform and shape the delivery of our Fostering Service for our children and to ensure that the child's voice is heard through our service development.

'Karing Kids' support group has been ongoing for a number of years in Northamptonshire in recognition of the key role that birth children play in fostering households and to thank them for their



contribution to fostering. One of the aims of this group is to support with the retention of foster carers and improve the stability of our children in care placements. In November 2022, we held a 'Karing Kids' competition to design a logo. We have used the winning entries to create a pull up banner to be used at our recruitment events and 'Skills to Foster' training to support applicant foster carers gain an understanding of our support offer to their own birth children.

We are rightly proud of all our children, and we will continue to capture and celebrate all they do and their successes.

Children and young people's views are integral to the fostering service.

Positive feedback is celebrated, and any worries children and young people raise about their care are taken seriously and addressed with the foster carers and where necessary in line with the complaints policy.

Children in fostering families are also consulted as part of the foster carer annual review. Children's lived experiences are explored in support and foster carer supervision.

11. Learning and Development

Foster Carer Training Programme

Please see the annual training report.

NCT's Fostering Service offers a comprehensive online and 'face to face' training offer to our foster carers. This is kept under regular review and supports the mandatory training requirements for our foster carers. An annual survey is undertaken each year to garner feedback from our foster carers as to the value of the training made available to them as well as individual feedback and reflection forms that are completed at the end of each training by the foster carers. Additionally, within the Annual Review process, foster carer are always asked to provide as to the feedback as to the quality of the training that has been made available to them. This ensures that the training offer remains of a good standard and meets the varied learning needs of all our cohort of foster carers.

A Foster Carer learning, and development programme is produced annually. All Foster Carers have their own eLearning accounts through which they can access training online. Feedback on each course is requested from attendees and tells us that foster carers are finding the available courses informative and of value. A personal development plan for each individual foster carer has been introduced which is discussed and reviewed in supervisions to measure impact of learning and how this is supporting the child in placement.

As an action of the SCCIF inspection undertaken in February, a mandatory training requirement policy for foster carers has been reviewed and updated. Foster carers had been written to and a specific tracker put in place to record progress made against this. This includes the following requirements:

All foster carers seeking approval with NCT's Fostering Service must complete the following mandatory training courses within initial assessment:

- First Aid
- Skills to Foster' for mainstream foster carer applicants
- Connected Persons Induction for kinship foster carer applicants
- Online Safety
- Basic Safeguarding- to include Virtual Reality
- Health and Safety for foster Carers – An introduction
- Safeguarding Children for Foster Carers and Adopters only

Within the first twelve months of approval, all foster carers must also complete:

- Signs of Safety 1 day Introduction

Additionally, each approved foster carer (i.e. both foster carers where a two carer household) must complete one of the following safeguarding courses within each review period (i.e. annually as an absolute minimum). This needs to be only one of the courses detailed below:

'Face to Face' safeguarding training offer

Keeping Children and Young People Safe Online for Foster Carers and Adopters - Webinar

Bitesize Gangs and Knife Crime for Foster Carers and Adopters only

Safeguarding Children for Foster Carers and Adopters only

Keeping children and pets safe in the home - Webinar

E-Learning safeguarding training offer

Contextual Safeguarding

Female Genital Mutilation

Introduction to Safeguarding

Peer on Peer abuse

Radicalisation

Children and Young People who Run Away or Go Missing

County Lines

Gangs, Guns and Knives

Child Trafficking

Digital and Internet-Supported Self-Harm

Harmful Sexual Behaviours

Child Sexual Exploitation

Online Safety and Cyberbullying

Pornography and the Potential Impact on Young People

Social Media, Selfies and Sexting

The identified safeguarding course to be completed in the forthcoming review period must be included within the foster carers' individual PDP as part of each Annual Review.

Additionally, within each three year period following initial approval, all foster carers must renew the following mandatory training:

- Safeguarding Children for Foster Carers and Adopters only
- First Aid Training

A Foster Carer learning, and development programme is produced annually. All Foster Carers have their own eLearning accounts through which they can access training online.

NCT offer both face-to-face and online delivery as we recognise that the needs of our foster carers vary according to the they care they provide, with our face-to-face training offer being significantly increased over this last year.

Face-to-Face Training	E Learning
Within our current training offer we have over 56 face-to-face courses which are offered throughout the year. They are bookable and the offer can be viewed online.	We have over 70 courses available via E Learning. The courses range from knife crime, drug and alcohol awareness to court skills, healing environments and positive parenting techniques.
186 face-to-face courses delivered	780 E Learning units have been allocated and fully completed.
1475 attendees booked onto the courses and fully completed them.	

In addition to the Skills to Foster Training and a number of face-to-face and e-learning courses, the Recruitment team continues to be accredited in using Virtual Reality (VR) training. This is a tool we use within every assessment for prospective foster carers. It allows applicants to experience abuse and neglect from a child's perspective, as well as understanding the impact of trauma and how certain stimulus can trigger a trauma response in a child or young person. This resource has been used to great effect within assessment and has provided strong evidence of how applicants will be able to support a child or young person in a more therapeutic manner once approved as a foster carer.

Training	Feedback
Critical thinking in assessment	<i>Great course, well delivered learnt a lot how to put critical thinking into practice</i>
Working With Anxiety	<i>This was an online webinar presented by Jessica van Maanen. It was a very good overview of the topic giving a good balance of theory followed by practical examples of how to help reduce anxiety in the children we are caring for. There was balance between the use of the PowerPoint slides and talking through the topics in such a way as to keep them interesting. I was particularly pleased that we were given references to some of the materials used so that there is an opportunity to go deeper into some of the ideas presented.</i>
Working With Anxiety - Webinar	<i>I was pleasantly surprised how engaging this training was. We have been promised a copy of the Power Point. I have already been reading more by Dan Siegel as a result of this webinar.</i>
Keeping children and pets safe in the home	<i>Useful training and relevant to our role</i>
Keeping Children and Young People Safe Online for Foster Carers and Adopters - Webinar	<i>Our trainer was excellent and one of the most engaging and knowledgeable trainers we have had on our journey. Thank you so much for making a difficult subject informative and effective!</i>
Working with Anxiety	<i>Very informative and the trainer was excellent in the way she delivered the course. She was very calm and kept me focused and interested.</i>
Critical thinking in assessment	<i>Great course, well delivered learnt a lot how to put critical thinking into practice</i>

More recent discussions with Foster Carers have shown that they would prefer more local training and we have successfully piloted some training at one of our local groups for foster carers in the Corby area which was very well received. Training and contact hub lets have been established in Local and Independent Libraries across Northamptonshire within this reporting period and have been very well received.

In addition to the formal 'classroom' training, Foster Carers have access to a wide range of resources to support them to develop which are available through the online subscription platforms - Research in Practice and Fostering Network, Coram BAAF.

Although it is improving, training compliance remains a challenge for the service and a Fostering Training review has produced a draft proposal to renew the training programme for foster carers and improve compliance with training.

Foster carers are supported in completing the Training, Support and Development (TSD) workbooks as well as Advanced Level portfolios. Completion of these documents is linked to carer development and progression, which supports carer retention.

12. Placement Stability

The percentage of children who have lived in the same placement for 2+ years has remained strong (66%) and this tells that most children are appropriately placed in homes that are meeting their needs.

We continue to see an increase in requests for children to become cared for and this, combined with the challenges experienced both locally and nationally in identifying suitable carers who can meet children's complex needs, has contributed to the reduction in short term placement stability. The use of emergency carers has increased and, whilst offering a place of safety to children and young people, they experience a change of carer within a short space of time. Work continues to be undertaken to scrutinise new placement requests with a focus on supporting foster carers to continue caring for children at times when instability is experienced and ensure support for challenges faced within the foster home.

Monthly sufficiency board meetings continue to take place with colleagues in NCT to assess what is needed to improve stability for all looked after children and to ensure that all children receive the support they need.

The aspiration is for all children to live within stable and nurturing homes for the duration of their childhoods. Focus is on provision of support to prevent likelihood of placement breakdown and includes developing skills, knowledge and resilience of foster carers through the public health funded fostering support project, use of placement stability meetings, and greater involvement of birth families through progressive contact arrangements. Further work is planned within this forthcoming year to better cement robust processes in respect of the reporting and recording of placement stability meetings and to ensure that learning is then taken forward and cascaded through the Fostering Service, to support the stability of children's fostering placements more widely.

We are seeing a positive impact of the completion of the Initial Matching referral document at the point a child is initially matched with a carer and the individual Safe Care Plans in which the child's needs are highlighted. These plans are being linked to foster carer's own Personal Development Plans. This is starting to enable the carers and supervising social workers to ensure the training plan is around the child and the

needs of the Fostering household. This remains an area of continued development and focus within the Fostering Service.

The Independent Fostering Agency continue to have a Clinical Psychologist role embedded through the Public Health project which focusses on the outcomes for children in our foster families through placement stability.

The Psychologist has developed a training plan for staff which include: DDP & PACE, Adverse Childhood Experiences', coping with change, Restoring Resilience, Emotional Regulation, Self-Reflection (tree of life), Managing difficult conversations, Therapeutic Stories, Blocked Care.

The cohort of SSWs, Practice Managers and Team Managers who attended DDP (Part 1) last year, have been offered DDP (part 2) training within this reporting period and this has further embedded their understanding of therapeutic practices and the wide learning across the fostering service. This enhances the support offer available to our foster carers and children.

Monthly drop-in sessions for staff to discuss possible referrals to panel and seek advice are in place and continued to be well attended. The reasons for attending the drop-in sessions have included: to ask for clinical advice around complex cases; to ask for advice around placements at risk of disruption; to ask for advice around how to meet the mental health needs of children and foster carers.

Permanency has been achieved for 8 children where long term matches between child and foster carer have been presented to panel this year, an increase on 6 children from the previous year. This number is still lower than we expect, given the number of children in long term placements who have not yet been officially matched. The Fostering Service are committed to working in partnership with NCT's children's teams to progress permanence matching for children in a timely manner and the Fostering Service Manager now sits on the Permanence Tracking Panels that are held twice monthly, once in the West and once in the North of the county, since September 2022 to support the early identification of permanency planning for children and to maintain the timely progression of these plans. It is therefore anticipated that within the forthcoming year, the numbers of children who become permanently matched with their foster carers will increase significantly.

13. Fostering Panel

Please see annual Panel Report.

Northamptonshire Children's Trust Fostering Panel continues to have a significant role in maintaining quality services for children in care. The recommendations that panel make will always be based on providing a stable, secure, restorative and therapeutic living environment for children in care. The independent Fostering Panel and decision maker make timely, qualitative, and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care.

Fostering Panel provides an important Quality Assurance function to the Fostering Service. This year a total of 115 cases (74.68%) were rated as excellent or good. This is a decrease of 5.62% from the previous year with satisfactory and inadequate reports rising by 7.36%. Quality Assurance is discussed at the regular Joint Chairs and Team Managers Meeting. Additionally, the Registered Manager has observed a total of four Fostering Panels (both virtually and 'face to face' and across a mixture of Panel A and Panel B) since coming

into post in late June to support the Quality Assurance function of her role and the delivery of Fostering Panel. The Fostering Service meets quarterly with panel chairs and panel members are also invited to participate in Independent Fostering Agency -learning events. Bespoke panel training is provided twice yearly, in May and November.

In November, Fostering Panels moved from being held fully virtually to being held virtually and 'face to face' on alternating weekly basis; there are therefore now two monthly virtual Panels and two 'face to face'. The transition to this new arrangement has worked successfully with positive feedback from applicants, carers and social workers. To continue to improve the experience of fostering panel for applicants, approved foster carers and professionals, feedback is sought after attendance at panel.

Panel feedback

"I found panel to be a very positive experience. This was the first face to face panel in a very long time and I was worried it would feel overwhelming, however it was quite the opposite. As always panel was well structured, and I found the questions for the applicant to be appropriate. The carer was given sufficient time to respond and was listened to. Every member on panel had a lovely smiley face which is very reassuring and puts people at ease."

"I felt Panel were excellent today. This was a complex assessment, but all questions were sensitive and supportive. I really got a sense that Panel were delighted to recommend such a positive outcome for both children in this case."

"I have enjoyed attending both types of panels. I usually find that new applicants prefer virtual as they prefer the comfort of their own home and do not feel as nervous. However today the applicants enjoyed meeting face to face as they had fostered before and felt it was more personable. This was my first face to face panel since the pandemic and it was nice to meet everyone, and I felt the panel experience overall was very positive."

"The panel members themselves were very welcoming and friendly to me and the applicants.

Appropriate questions were asked, and panel identified key strengths that were highlighted in the assessment.

I was also given positive feedback on the report and how previous information had been incorporated, which was valuable."

"We had what felt like a very honest meeting reviewing our unorthodox first year of fostering. Our professional and personal challenges were met with understanding and respect, while taking practical perspectives on how to move forward. We both felt that the panel were very supportive and encouraging, empowering us as foster parents despite our setbacks. The questions covered reassure us that we have answers where attention is needed and incite further consideration to how we can improve.

Our needs and requirements were well considered, to make sure that we are fully equipped and able to undertake the role to the best of our ability."

"We were happy with the panel process and welcomed the questions from the panel. We appreciated the way we were told that we'd be recommended to be approved at the time of panel and the individual panel members reasons and comments made it feel more personal even though it was via TEAMS."

"Thanks very much for making me feel at ease. The general introductions helped to relax and put me at ease along with the questions which were put across in a straightforward manner."

Application	Numbers
Mainstream Assessments	18
Connected Person Assessments	42
1st Reviews	59
Change of Approval	9
Other Reviews	14
Match - In-House	2
Match - Agency	6
Termination of Approval	3
Extension of Reg 24 Placement	26
Representations	0
Closures	61 (to include mainstream and connected person's foster carers)
Short Report: Connected Persons	3

14. Complaints

There were 4 complaints made by foster carers between April 1st 2022 and March 31st 2023:

- Two complaints were made by carers in response to delays in agreed building works being progressed to provide an extension to the carers' property to support the fostering task. This building work is now progressed in one case and cannot be progressed in another due to the property being Housing Association owed and agreement not being given for the work to be carried out.
- One complaint related to the fact that the children's social worker had arranged to visit the two children in placement at school against the foster carers' wishes. This was predominantly a complaint against the allocated children's social worker but did also consider the fact that the SSW had supported this visit.
- One complaint was received by a foster carer subject to an ongoing investigation following several disclosures being made by a child and the fact that the other child in placement, the sibling of the child who has made the disclosures, has not been allowed to return to her care.

The theme this year was that complaints received were about foster carers experiencing a lack of support from NCT, but not necessarily directly the Fostering Service.

Three of the complaints were partially upheld but not solely against the Fostering Service but NCT more widely and one complaint cannot be concluded until the outcome of the investigation is known. Following all complaint investigations and response, recommendations made focussed mainly on a need for improving communication and timeliness in responding to concerns before they escalate in an official complaint.

Learning from these complaints is cascaded through team meetings. Peer reflective sessions will be introduced in the coming months to understand themes from complaints and collaborative reflective practice discussions (CRPDs/case audits).

Within this reporting period, there were 13 complaints made by children:

- One related to a child who complained about the home conditions, the way the foster carers' managed the behaviour of the other young people in placement and the foster carers' dogs whilst staying in a respite placement.
- One was made on behalf of a child via their school as he had become very worried that he would be 'told off' by his foster carer when he accidentally spilt paint on his jumper in an art class.
- One related to a child alleging that the male foster carer had hit his own children.
- One child complaint that the Foster carer had, when checking the child's phone found a picture where the top part of her body did not have clothing on. The female carer had taken a picture of this image and the child stated that this picture was sent in a text message to an adult ex foster Child aged (31) who subsequently showed the child the picture. The carer has apologised to the child and said the picture had been sent via a text message in error.
- One young person raised concerns with her social worker and her birth mother about her previous foster carer who had resigned.
- Four related to children being upset by comments their foster carers had allegedly made about their birth families.
- One related to a foster carer damaging their property (PlayStation game).
- One was made on behalf of a child via their school as to his 'unkempt' appearance.
- Two related to foster carers hurting a child: One when the birth parents of a teenage child complained that he had sustained a small bruise to his chest when the carer took him out of his seat in the car to separate him when he started fighting with his sibling in transit and one of pulling hair when the foster carer went to stop a child from hurting herself and causing damage with a hairbrush.

The Fostering Service has managed all these complaints made by children or young people against their foster carers during this reporting period through the Schedule 7 notification process. LADO consultation was sought on each occasion.

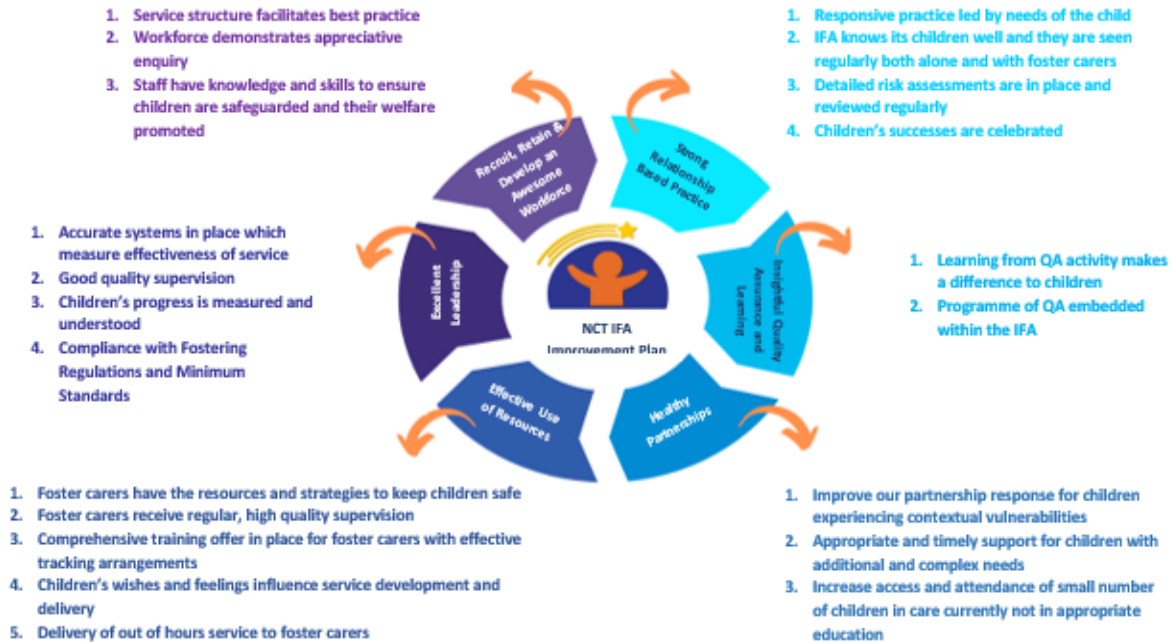
The expectation is that all of these children were visited by their allocated children's social work and their foster carer's allocated SSW very quickly after these complaints were raised. Training is identified where appropriate to support the development of foster carers in respect of the specific complaint raised.

Children are expected to be seen regularly in their foster placement and the dates and frequency of these visits are monitored within our Children's tracker. Children's 'wishes and feelings' are regularly sought, and children are made aware of how they can complain if they are unhappy with their fostering placement. Further tracking measures and auditing practices will be introduced to the Fostering Service to ensure that children are being seen in their fostering placements regularly and a new 'Visits to children' policy, to include reporting and recording expectations for SSWs, will be implemented to be able to better monitor this.

Children are always supported and encouraged to give feedback as to their experience of being in foster care for their own CIC Reviews as well as their foster carers' annual reviews.

15. Service Developments Planned for 2023 - 2024

Following the outcome of the SCCIF Inspection in February 2023, a robust Improvement plan remains in place for the Fostering Service which will be kept under regular review. The outcomes framework informing this plan include:



Additionally, the following targets for the growth and development of the Fostering Service remain in place:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Further develop of the infrastructure of the services reporting systems. NCT is committed to purchasing a system that is effective for a fostering service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The Fostering Strategy and Retention Strategy that has been implemented is progressed to ensure all the actions we are undertaking contribute to increasing our recruitment and the retention of our foster carers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Continue to analyse the CRPD’s by end of March 23 to measure quality and identify areas of learning and development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ongoing review and refinement of Review of Placement making/ Matching – implement use of matching tool and comprehensive recording system for vacancies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ To work together with our foster carers to improve on the training offer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Carer engagement: To continue to improve and do more, to engage, strengthen relationships, and develop a sense of belonging to the agency and have a broader reach with our fostering families.

✓ Continue to build upon the comprehensive foster carer support group offer now in place for carers.

✓ Review our support and financial offer in consultation with our foster carers. To ensure it is competitive and contributes to the retention of our foster carers.

✓ Ongoing recruitment to the Resilience Fostering Scheme.

✓ To progress the development of support to our carers and children outside of normal working hours by supervising social workers.

✓ Develop a regular and systematic way of reviewing all foster carer resignations and all placement break downs, to ensure we learn and continuously improve our practice and the support we provide.

✓ To continue to work in partnership with our marketing team and be instrumental in implementing our recruitment and communications strategy.