

Supporting Fostering Services to Recruit and Retain Foster Carers

a directory of case study resources



Department
for Education

The
**Fostering
Network**

Foreword



We know that recruiting and retaining foster carers is an ongoing challenge for all fostering services. It's why close, co-ordinated working together with an innovative approach is essential if we are to succeed and to meet the needs of children in care now and in the future. Our hope, when establishing this project in 2013, was that we would see genuine relationships built between local authorities and independent fostering providers. This has most certainly been the case, and I've been hugely impressed with the progress achieved by the regional consortia, with the support of The Fostering Network.

This directory pulls together key strategies developed over the life of the project to encourage and support people with the right skills and experience, to come forward and offer some of our most vulnerable children an opportunity to experience a loving, stable family life. For example, by carrying out a thorough needs analysis of their local area to identify gaps in provision, the consortia were able to develop targeted recruitment strategies and support existing carers. Using their existing foster carers as local service ambassadors, services have shown how valuable it can be to have foster carers involved in all stages of the recruitment process, helping to build relationships and a healthy foster carer workforce.

I'm also very pleased to see that The Fostering Network successfully secured support from the Innovation Programme to further develop the Mockingbird Family Model, piloted by the West Yorkshire consortia, in partnership with eight local authorities.

This project has proven that local authorities and independent fostering providers can achieve much by working together. The materials developed over the life of the project are freely available to all fostering services and I would encourage you to contact those listed in the directory to learn more about how you can implement the strategies outlined in your own local areas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edward Timpson'.

Edward Timpson MP
Minister of State for Children and Families

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Introduction

In 2013, the Department for Education grant-funded three consortia of local authority and independent fostering services in England and The Fostering Network as part of a project looking at how to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers in their local areas. The findings will help to inform fostering services nationally on how they can identify and implement actions to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers locally.

Each consortium was required to consist of at least one independent fostering provider and one local authority, encouraging joint working and best practice sharing across the sector.

Funds were awarded to:

- West Yorkshire: Calderdale Council, Core Assets, Fostering Yorkshire and Leeds City Council.
- South: Oxfordshire Council, PACT and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.
- North West: Barnardo's, Core Assets and Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Warrington and Wirral councils.

An additional consortium of Doncaster Council, Doncaster Children's Services Trust, Fostering People, By the Bridge, TACT, Start Fostering with Parallel Parents, The Fostering Care Co-Operative, Fostering Solutions were awarded funding for 2014-15. Fostering People was awarded funding in 2014.

The Fostering Network was commissioned to develop a suite of resources to support fostering services. This work included supporting 25 local authorities to produce bespoke local action plans, informed by the resources, to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

This directory contains a series of case studies detailing a selection of the actions and outcomes undertaken by each consortium, as well as those from authorities working with The Fostering Network between April 2013 and March 2015. Contact details are provided for each case study to gain further information.

Additional resources

Running alongside and underpinning this direct work with fostering services, The Fostering Network has produced a number of resources to support them to recruit and retain the foster carers they need.

Supporting fostering services to recruit more foster carers

Using the psychographic categorisation tool known as Values Modes™, The Fostering Network, in partnership with consultancy iMPower, has identified some of the key psychological drivers of why foster carers come forward.

The findings, summarised in the *Why Foster Carers Care* report, demonstrate substantial numbers of foster carers share a common, 'Pioneer', Values Mode. This has significant implications for how all fostering services can recruit and retain foster carers.

The *Combining Fostering and Other Work* report explores the key issues for foster carers who combine fostering with other work, including their experiences and the kind of support that would help them through the assessment process and, once approved, to foster.

The report includes foster carer recruitment case studies, information about fostering friendly employers and useful resources for foster carers, fostering services and employers. Almost half of England's local authority fostering services took part in our inaugural Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark survey in 2013, providing a wealth of performance data.

Uniquely combining information from Ofsted, CIPFA and all new metrics, the national report incorporates some of the headline findings from the research. The benchmark is the first step to identifying and improving fostering services' performance sector-wide.

Additional resources provided by The Fostering Network

The *State of the Nation's Foster Care* report provides a comprehensive snapshot of the key issues facing foster carers in the UK in 2014.

Informed by the views and feelings of over 1,000 foster carers, this report makes recommendations for the changes that need to happen to ensure that all fostered children are given the best possible care and helped to fulfil their potential.

All reports are available at www.fostering.net

For further information on the recruitment and retention of foster carers, please contact james.foyle@fostering.net

Understanding Data

Needs analysis

The importance of data in planning recruitment and retention activity.

The foundation for any proposed new way of working is a robust business case, informed by an evidence base which supports the recommended actions to be taken.

In the context of foster carer recruitment and retention, local authority fostering services require statistical information to understand not only the current landscape, but project need over time to achieve the implementation of Section 22G of the Children in Care Act 1989 – the sufficiency duty. By working in partnership with other local providers, fostering services can achieve their duty to provide sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children.

Each fostering consortia was instructed to undertake a comprehensive needs analysis to identify gaps in placement sufficiency and therefore inform targeted actions to achieve the aims set out in individual action plans.

Many fostering services operate with a database system, often Framework-i or CHARMS, a primary source for information with which to complete the needs analysis. Others function with a system of spreadsheets and other tools. Good data is imperative, and at the very least, attempting a needs analysis will identify the additional data your service needs to capture in order to complete it.

Completed needs analysis should be communicated throughout strategic partners and wider stakeholders – and made publicly available through the local authority's website. This can help ensure that only the right foster carers, able to care as per the evidenced need, are successfully recruited and utilised.

The needs analysis template is available for download at www.fostering.net

The statistical evidence base informing the actions of those authorities working with The Fostering Network, were the individual Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark reports.

Benchmark reports demonstrated the completing authority's performance against others across England, providing the insight for where processes needed improvement. By breaking down the approval process, for example, participating authorities could evidence where they were losing more applicants, relative to other authorities. Referring to other metrics, such as the time taken at each stage, services were able to target improvement by using innovative solutions, as evidenced later in this directory.

Reporting on over 30 key metrics, the benchmark provides invaluable operational evidence, to compliment a local needs analysis. The Fostering Network will continue to run the benchmark, expanding to include independent fostering providers, and capturing additional performance information to ultimately better meet the needs of children in foster care.

To register your service's participation in the benchmark, please email
benchmarkingclub@fostering.net

West Yorkshire: Leeds Council, Fostering Yorkshire, Core Assets and Calderdale Council

Completing a needs analysis.

Rationale

In order to improve recruitment and retention, a sound, shared factual baseline was needed across the West Yorkshire consortium. This would provide insight into the real picture of needs (demand) against fostering supply and highlight similarities and differences between the four fostering services. It would also allow change to be evidenced against actions taken.

Objective

- To determine patterns and trends in demographics of children looked after and compare them to foster carer supply.
- To identify data on the needs of children looked after and how these are met or unmet by different agencies.
- To highlight the capacity and differences between the foster carer population retained by each agency particularly by age, registration and professional/working status.
- To identify trends in foster carers (age, training, stranger vs family care).
- To focus the action research in the project to specific areas that would bring likely benefit to children looked after in Calderdale and Leeds

Implementation

- We had already started to consider our needs analysis when the Department for Education shared a suggested template which formed the basis of our data collection. This provided a challenging and wide set of data to aggregate but may have been more helpful than we first realised in ensuring we did not focus too narrowly, too quickly, on local concerns or preconceived ideas.
- We considered data we had already collated and how it may be repurposed to the needs analysis – this included statutory returns, Ofsted submissions, surveys and internal assessments in foster agencies of foster carer views and broader management information in services. This helped with the burden of fresh analysis.
- The consortium met regularly to maintain an oversight of progress of the needs analysis so that each agency could take ownership of data gaps and work to be completed.
- Summary and commentary was supported through drafting by a single author with verbal check-ins with consortium partners at meetings and circulation of drafts.

Challenges

- Motivating and challenging a set of services that had not worked together to share data needed effort. This required developing new relationships beyond the consortium membership to include data and performance colleagues.
- There is a significant difference in language between foster carer services which makes direct comparison of data difficult. Examples included variations of categories to denote skills levels – a local authority tiered skill model does not equate to the

practice of an independent fostering provider (IFP). Professional and working status was easily accessible to IFPs but for local authority agencies it was not held as a data item.

- Some data was not available either through collection issues or analysis capacity within the timeframe for the needs analysis. This meant no direct comparison between local authorities was possible in some areas.
- Some of the parties in the consortium also had another relationship, that of to some degree of being commercial competitors, both with each other and with wider IFPs outside the consortium. Some data was therefore felt to be sensitive to each organisation, particularly the financial data on agency costs. This was recognised in the consortium and a solution was agreed whereby this data was submitted confidentially to the DfE by each party in addition to the open part of the needs analysis. This allowed national cost comparisons and national strategy to be considered by the DfE but maintained confidentiality between consortium members in this regard.
- In this stage of the project we had not recruited the project team and therefore there was limited project capacity to progress the needs analysis.

Outcome

The needs analysis was fundamental to setting the direction for the rest of the project. The demographic data demonstrated the dynamic nature of demand in a context of certainty. For one authority there were no concerns for overall sufficiency. Critical, therefore, was the setting of an objective of targeted recruitment – developing joint agency capacity to recruit for particular needs or characteristics of children. For Leeds, we considered Eastern European carers and carers of children with complex needs / teenagers as two targets for improvement. We found that we had much to learn to understand how and why different agencies were able to recruit certain groups (for example, working professionals) with greater success. This directed in depth study with consultation groups of potential and existing carers to determine push and pull factors that would increase their number as foster carers. We found that while training, fees and agency approach were all important in retention it was not clear as to the relative merits of these in retaining good foster carers. This prompted consideration of how we may test new approaches to training and support particularly using a community support approach (a hub and spoke carer support model as a precursor to the full use of Mockingbird Family Model) as a way to improve the fostering experience and promote retention.

Sustainability

We want to make interagency data sharing the norm for the fostering services involved in the consortium and wider relationships in our region between IFPs and local authorities. We are using a results / outcomes conference in October 2015 to share the consortiums findings, needs analysis and discuss how this ambition may be achieved. There is already interest in a joint funded (IFP and local authority) role or part role to support ongoing work in this area. In the interim we are considering how we can use better open data approaches to provide a more live profile of children who are becoming looked after in Leeds and hopefully Calderdale. In Leeds we have made a sustainable investment in resources to undertake considered needs analysis. A tangible example is that since the

advent of the consortium project the profile of children becoming looked after in Leeds has changed with far greater numbers of young people (as opposed to young children) coming into care. There are potential local and national factors that have sensitised us to the needs of young people – the review of Rotherham's response to children at risk of CSE and wider enquiry(s) into sexual exploitation. It is timely to review our needs analysis and we are currently undertaking a detailed examination of the cases of young people coming into care to inform our prevention and care planning practice.

Top Tips

- Invest resource in conducting a thorough needs analysis to fully understand the needs of local looked after children and as a foundation to your foster carer recruitment strategy.
- Draw on existing data, collected internally or for external submissions, to substantiate the needs analysis and pool data in a central, dynamic resource.
- Assign an owner to the needs analysis document to ensure consistency and as a lead to flag gaps in the data.
- Be ambitious and engage wider services in your area. Overcoming the initial barriers to data sharing was a challenge, but understanding local needs will lead to better commissioning and outcomes for looked after children.

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Working Together

South: Oxfordshire Council, PACT and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Choose Fostering – a collaboration between Oxfordshire County Council, Tower Hamlets & PACT to focus on the recruitment and retention of carers for priority groups of looked after children.

Rationale

Although there are significant demographic differences between Oxfordshire and Tower Hamlets, there are common areas in the need for foster placements identified by each service's needs analysis. These include the need to recruit foster carers for:

- Sibling groups
- Disabled children
- Adolescents
- Parents and children

This project provided an opportunity to share good recruitment and retention practice across a diverse consortium to help each service achieve its foster carer recruitment objectives.

Objective

The Choose Fostering campaign had five key objectives:

- Generate new enquiries and applications from a wider demographic through a combination of proven and innovative channels for marketing.
- Successfully recruit 12 new foster care households able to care for priority groups through a customer friendly enquiry, assessment and approval process.
- Develop specialist training.
- Explore different payment models for priority groups.
- Create a carer support offer during recruitment and post approval.

Implementation

The Choose Fostering campaign launched in March 2014.

- The marketing plan was based on a mixture of online and traditional channels including cinema advertising, leaflets, email and online advertisements and Facebook. Most of the activity was online. A social media strategy was developed, which included using fostering ambassadors and specialist companies. Marketing platforms were combined to maximise impact.
- A Choose Fostering website and Freephone number were created and publicised across marketing channels.
- A dedicated enquiry officer (Oxfordshire County Council) was allocated to take responsibility for taking enquiries for each agency, providing a customer friendly, timely, efficient and effective response to minimise delay and improve conversion rates.

- One system for tracking and reporting on enquiries across the consortium was established.
- A steering group, containing representation across all consortia members was established to oversee the project.
- The initial campaign focused on the need to recruit foster carers for sibling groups, followed by a campaign to recruit carers for adolescents.

Challenges

The large geographic differences were initial challenges to overcome. To address this, it was decided to agree boundaries in which enquiries would be distributed.

A large proportion of the registered contacts were through online marketing, some generated through a paid for email distribution list. This resulted in a lot of follow up work by the enquiry officer and many did not want to proceed as the email reached households outside of the service's catchment. This channel also presented a further challenge as enquirers contacting Choose Fostering online were less committed than an enquirer attending an information session, for example.

Targeted recruitment campaigns take time. The initial plan to focus on four priority groups was too ambitious and had to be reduced to two, sibling groups and teenagers.

Choose Fostering received a number of enquiries from prospective foster carers outside of the target groups identified. A balance was therefore required to identify other looked after children these enquirers could care for and a decision taken as to whether they should proceed.

Working in consortia with three distinct fostering services takes time to establish. There were therefore frequent delays in agreeing workstreams and operational support to deliver initiatives when joint agency decisions were required.

Tracking enquiries also proved difficult due to the time and accuracy in feedback from all agencies.

Outcome

The Choose Fostering campaign achieved over 200 enquiries. Around 100 of these were successfully followed up, with 24 submitting a full enquiry. Of these, eight were approved to foster, providing a conversion rate of one in three.

Assessments took an average of 33.5 weeks, slightly less than the average reported in The Fostering Network's Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark report. Oxfordshire benefitted from having the dedicated enquiry officer locally as no time was lost transferring calls to other agencies to follow up the enquiry.

It was apparent that the range of recruitment marketing activities was important. However feedback from participants highlighted the value of talking to an existing foster carer. Facilitating this process will be important factor in progressing this work.

Sustainability

Despite the challenges, the shared learning was beneficial to all fostering services involved.

Each agency is planning to build on initial success of this scheme:

- Increased involvement of foster carers in the recruitment process.
- Recruitment of fostering ambassadors.
- Dedicated post to continue targeted campaigns.
- Dedicated recruitment team.

Top Tips

- Make sure your service is streamlined. The enquiry to approval process needs to be customer friendly, timely, efficient and effective.
- Create a dedicated enquiry service - having one point of contact works well. It is essential that enquirers are made to feel welcomed and valued, and are not left waiting for someone to get back to them right from the outset.
- Allocate one person across your partnership to have the main responsibility for tracking and having an overview of all enquiries and assessments in progress.
- Consider your marketing platforms. A range of recruitment activities is important but the sooner the enquirer gets to talk to someone the better – online enquiries can cause delays with prospective foster carers waiting for a call back.

Social media and online advertising produce a high number of online contacts through click through, email and online registration forms. We found people more readily applied online without giving it much thought, whereas they consider/ research more before picking up the phone. Make sure the click path leads to information so the individual can understand the basics of fostering, and make an informed decision before submitting their enquiry.

- Partnership working gives opportunities for sharing and learning. It can be difficult to collaborate on recruitment over a large geographical area, particularly across social media as the reach often extends beyond intended boundaries. Consider trialling working with fostering services in close proximity before broadening out to wider areas.

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Doncaster

Develop a provider partnership with independent fostering services in a local area to inform sufficiency planning

Rationale

Identified a need to develop the working relationships between all the independent fostering providers that have carers in the Doncaster area to improve sustainability.

Objective

To develop a provider group of IFAs in the Doncaster area, to inform sufficiency planning, and share good practice through meetings and a virtual learning pool.

Implementation

- Invited all 11 IFA partners to an initial meeting; seven signed up to be part of the provider partnership.
- Monthly meetings were held for the provider partnership, with regular email contact in between. Tasks were agreed and implemented by group members.
- Sufficiency planning - partners agreed to share basic non identifying information about foster carers in the Doncaster area in order to inform a shared sufficiency plan. This was a major challenge for all partners and four potential partners decided not to continue at this point. Those partners who did continue received collated information on the geographical spread of foster carers in Doncaster and specialisms. This will assist us to jointly achieve sufficiency in the Doncaster area.
- Provider partnership also undertook:
 - Local area research on incentives and disincentives to foster (see relevant case study).
 - A conference to share learning and research findings with foster carers from all agencies.
 - Developed information on financial resources (see relevant case study).

Challenges

Developing trust between all partners for information and data sharing to inform a sufficiency plan.

Partnership work needed to be limited to areas where providers felt comfortable and where individual and mutual benefit was clear.

Ensuring all partners played an equal part in the partnership and tasks to be implemented.

- An open and honest approach was adopted. As in any vibrant partnership, members did occasionally have differing opinions as to how to progress the work. These were discussed in the group and as a result the partnership grew stronger over time.
- Due to time pressure, much of the work was undertaken by Doncaster Children's Services Trust as the host agency, with considerable support from Fostering People, the initial partner. As a full time project manager was employed to lead on the work this was manageable.

Outcome

All seven IFAs that originally signed up to be a part of the provider group in September 2014, were still members of the group at the end of the pilot in March 2015. Time was taken to develop close and productive working relationships forming the basis for on-going partnership work.

This was achieved through:

- Commitment from all partners
- Clear partnership agreement
- Strong leadership from a dedicated project manager
- Honesty and openness with a willingness to challenge and accept challenge
- Hard work and persistence
- Trust from all in the quality of our own service provision which enabled us to support our foster carers to join in shared events

Through the successful work by the partnership, all Doncaster carers engaged with research into motivations and incentives to foster; a large scale community involvement exercise was completed and consultation was undertaken with children from across the partnership (see linked case study).



The research project was successful and feedback from foster carers, staff and national attendees at the fostering conference was positive with an average evaluation score of 4.8 out of 5

Sustainability

The provider partnership has evolved into a network of support for the sustainability of fostering in Doncaster.

The group have committed to continue the partnership. Quarterly meetings are in place for the duration of the next year. The group plan to provide joint training and an annual conference. We also plan to share further data to assess gaps across Doncaster and implement recruitment and retention plans.

Top Tips

- It is important to develop a clear, transparent approach of how working together will influence practice. Creating a trusting environment is critical to all parties participating openly and honestly.
- Appoint a project manager to lead on the work to make sure objectives are achieved.
- Bringing foster carers together from the different organisations was extremely positive and worthwhile to help share the objectives and receive their feedback.

An example of the partnership agreement is included at Appendix I of this directory.

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Targeted Recruitment

West Yorkshire: Calderdale Council

Bespoke training course for foster carers to look after teenagers

Rationale

The service's needs analysis identified a need for more foster carers able to care for teenagers.

As various reports have acknowledged, fostering services are struggling to recruit foster carers for these children. The service therefore decided to explore ways of upskilling existing foster carers to meet demand.

Objective

There were four key objectives this work sought to achieve:

- Increase the number of foster carers to look after teenagers.
- Develop skills of existing carers to assist them to continue to look after teenagers.
- Develop skills of carers of other age groups to encourage them to increase age range to include teenagers.
- Increase awareness of current workforce of need to recruit more carers for teenagers.

Implementation

- The service agreed the need to provide a bespoke training package for existing foster carers to broaden their placement potential.
- A two day Therapeutic Crisis Intervention course was created with input from both the local authorities and independent providers in the consortia. The training focused on the development of the teenage brain. Guest speakers were invited to discuss topics including child sexual exploitation, internet and social media and education.
- The course was publicised with flyers, which were sent to supervising social workers to identify carers thought to have an interest or experience in caring for teenagers.



Challenges

The main challenge the service faced was on the negative perceptions of teenagers. Some foster carers identified as potentially able to expand their placement range to care for teenagers expressed an unwillingness to enter into discussions or attend the training.

Many saw the training as a fait accompli when it was actually designed as an introduction and to begin discussions. Extra work was therefore required to engage prospective foster carers involved.

Outcome

The training was designed as a small pilot, with the objective of testing the confidence, advocacy and attendance of participants. To this extent, the training was very successful. It allowed the service to increase existing foster carers' knowledge and understanding of the needs of teenagers, and of those carers who are already caring for them.

Sustainability

The service is committed to continuing to support carers of teenagers with ongoing relevant and targeted training. Lessons learned from the pilot will inform marketing strategies to recruit new carers for teenagers.

The training package developed within this project is purposely unbranded so as to be shared across other fostering services.

Top Tips

- Target and tailor training to those with potential to care for teenagers.
- Emphasise the support and services available to carers of teenagers.
- Use varied delivery methods to fully engage attendees, including guest speakers (for example police, carers for teenagers and a teenager in care, drugs and alcohol specialists, and other local ornamental organisations with expertise in this area. Children's Society and Safe Hands) focusing on awareness of drugs and CSE and minimising risks.
- Use exercises to break the ice at the start of information sessions – designed to help attendees think about their own experiences as teenagers.
- Focus on content which improves understanding of teenager issues and improves carers' confidence to look after teenagers:

Knowing Me, Knowing You, an exercise for developing self-awareness and making yourself strong with a special focus on how stress works, the effect it has on the body, how you regulate your own emotions and how your response dictates the outcome of any situation including crisis.

We Are Biology, an exercise on the neurological changes in the brain during the teenage years.

Ordinary Magic, an exercise that focuses resilience and the importance of love and emotional support.

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Surrey County Council

Adopt a values-based approach to foster carer recruitment

Rationale

Research in October 2013 identified the following:

- 75 per cent of children needing fostering are placed with inhouse foster carers, higher than the national average
- The service had sufficient numbers of foster carers approved for one child aged 0 to 11 years
- More foster carers were being recruited than leaving, with the majority leaving either retiring from fostering or adopting a child in their care.

However the service faced the challenge of being split across two localities, and around 42 per cent of placements being made outside the authority's boundaries. Additionally, very few carers were able to care for children from BME backgrounds and an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum seekers were needing foster carers.

In addition, the service's bespoke Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark report demonstrated a low level of enquiries in relation to the service's looked after children population.

Objective

- To increase the number of inhouse foster carers available to meet the needs of children and young people who were currently being placed further than 20 miles away.
- To achieve 95 per cent of looked after children to be placed with inhouse carers and less than 20 miles from home.
- To increase the number of quality enquiries from the right people for our children needing foster homes.

Implementation

- Through research provided by The Fostering Network and iMPower, the service identified opportunities to use a values-based approach (the Values Modes™) to inform local foster carer recruitment activity and achieve objectives.
- The service commissioned iMPower to develop the local approach further, and become part of their Family Values project.
- A survey of foster carers and staff identified that both groups shared a 'Pioneer' Values Mode, a commonality that provided the basis for discussion, with 97 per cent of Surrey foster carers sharing a Pioneer Values Mode.
- Values Modes™ insight was used to rebrand the service's marketing material, introducing the strapline *Fostering, could you make a difference to a child's life?* with images reflecting the service's needs.
- A review of call handling identified an opportunity to increase the number of enquirers ruled out at the initial stage by changing the process to pass calls from business support to the duty desk sooner to talk about fostering in greater detail to better engage enquirers.

- Open evenings were not generating significant take up. The service moved to a more flexible drop-in approach and offered to meet enquirers in their own homes to boost engagement with the service.

Challenges

The service was unable to make the changes immediately to drop-ins as the open evening dates for the year had been advertised across Surrey for a long time. The decision was taken to continue them until the last published date in December 2014.

Outcome

Changes to the initial enquiry process have significantly improved the speed that initial visits take place. Prior to the changes, an average of 46 days elapsed between an enquirer making a call and receiving a visit. This has been reduced to 11 days.

These changes have also resulted in far fewer enquirers being incorrectly ruled out immediately – around three quarters fewer. The time taken for applications to be returned has also decreased from an average of 29 to 14 days. Local research has also identified the need to communicate regularly and consistently with applicants during the process, particularly if there are delays.

Foster carers currently without placements have also shown a willingness to participate, helping other foster carers attend training by offering respite.

The early success led to a follow up work, internally rebranded to be called Fostering New Ideas. A series of workstreams have been created and achieved to improve inhouse placement capacity to care for the target groups of older children and children from BME backgrounds as well as the service's specialist fostering scheme.

Newly approved foster carers are showing an increase in their level of satisfaction with the service's assessment process, up from 42 to 60 per cent. Satisfaction with the support offer has also increased from 27 to 54 per cent of foster carers being very satisfied.

Sustainability

Workstreams have internally involved foster carers, the fostering service, the commissioning team, business support and communications team. This joined up approach and buy-in to the service's foster carer recruitment objectives has undoubtedly contributed to the project's success.

Recognising the potential impact of the research, Surrey quickly invested in commissioning iMPower to help deliver the service's objectives.

The council continues to work with iMPower as part of the Family Values project.

Top Tips

- Understand your starting point. Use locally available data to identify where the gaps in placement availability really are to plan the recruitment approach.
- Bring people together and take them on the journey. The Values Modes™ theory provides a common hook to bring groups of people from different teams together to discuss the common objective.
- Communication throughout the fostering service is key to ensuring the success of adopting a values-based approach. Senior managers need to buy into and support actions to make them sustainable.
- Set SMART objectives in a clear plan of action. The Values Modes™ theory can be applied throughout the fostering service. Surrey has completed three waves of work in order to manage the implementation of improvements to the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- Speeding up the process in one area can have a knock on effect in others. Keep monitoring and evaluating processes and speaking with colleagues across the service to make sure changes are having a positive impact overall.

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Utilising and retaining the workforce

Essex County Council

Involving foster carers at the initial visit stage

Rationale

The service's bespoke Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark report identified that Essex is slightly below the national average in converting enquiries into approvals.

Values Modes™ research by The Fostering Network and iMPower identified that almost three quarters of the foster carer population share a common Values Mode, 'Pioneer'. Pioneers are characterised by being altruistic and community minded and value the opportunity for one-to-one discussions. There was therefore an opportunity to positively target individuals with Pioneer values by involving existing foster carers at the initial visit stage.

Objective

- To positively increase the percentage of enquiries that lead to assessment and ultimate approval of foster carers.

Implementation

- Approved foster carers were invited to attend an information session to hear the service's vision of involving them throughout the recruitment process.
- Two training sessions for the 40 selected foster carer ambassadors were arranged. These involved supervising social workers role playing what happens at initial visits and explaining the paperwork required to be completed.
- The service agreed an approach based on existing foster carer agreements and has given all ambassadors a letter of guidance that sets out expectations of them in terms of behaviour and confidentiality.
- Foster carers attend the first half of the initial visit, which includes having a look around the applicant's house, and discussing their motivation and any fears or anxieties they may have for them or their family. The ambassadors leave their contact details with the applicants in case they have any queries they need to direct to a foster carer after the visit. Applicants also have the opportunity to visit the foster carer's home to see a fostering family.
- As a result of the scheme, the buddy system has been enhanced as the carer who attends the initial home visit will become the applicant's buddy to maintain continuity.
- Fostering ambassadors have also been supported to staff information stalls within their own local communities and take an active role in recruitment events.

Challenges

Although 40 foster carers have been designated as fostering ambassadors for the service, ensuring a consistent, positive and passionate delivery of the messages given to prospective applicants has been the main challenge.

A perceived challenge was the response of supervising social workers to the involvement of foster carers in the recruitment process. This has not proved to be a significant challenge, with social workers predominantly supportive of the initiative. Demonstrating the value and involving all in discussions has helped this process.

Outcome

The service has received extremely positive feedback from prospective applicants:

'I was encouraged by the positive views of the foster carer about children and their behaviour, particularly teenagers and why they are behaving in certain ways.'

'Having contact with a foster carer in the initial visit helped me to feel there were other foster carers out there who felt the same way about children as I did and I was not alone. It was great to have the informality of having contact with other foster carers and helpful to talk to them during the assessment as a buddy.'

The scheme has also contributed to foster carer retention, by demonstrating the service's trust and value of Essex Council's foster carers:

'Foster carers can put the applicants at their ease more quickly. Some questions are obviously quite intrusive but having a foster carer there who has already been through the process and can say with direct experience why the questions are needed was helpful.'

'As I foster male and female children, youngsters and teenagers, mainstream and children with disabilities, I feel my experiences can be tailored to the applicants depending on their preferred type of fostering. I can answer an array of questions that social workers would not be able to.'

'Sometimes a social worker may be uncertain or just have a nagging feeling that may also have been picked up by the foster carer so a telephone call after the visit to confer seems to be very beneficial.'



'I personally have been happy on both occasions to leave my mobile number with the potential carers in case they have any questions, either because they are uncomfortable asking the social worker, or because they have thought of questions after the initial visit.'

'I feel that prospective foster carers like to speak to us and find out first-hand what it is that they are looking to do. Also I think it makes them more at ease as I found the experience myself quite overwhelming when someone is filling out a questionnaire.'

Although a relatively new initiative, the service is already seeing an improvement in achieving the objective.

Sustainability

Feedback from all involved in the process has been extremely positive. Fostering ambassadors have been engaged and willing to contribute their ideas for how the service can be improved. Word of mouth from our foster carers has brought many new ambassadors to the scheme.

Supervising social workers have also put forward carers they think suitable to join the scheme.

The scheme continues to be monitored and evaluated to identify its impact on key areas of the service. Discussions are ongoing as to how to take this initiative forward in the new financial year.

Top Tips

- Make sure the whole fostering service understands and supports the importance and benefits to having an ambassadors scheme.
- Ensure foster carers involved in the scheme understand their responsibility and the importance of being balanced in the views they share with applicants.
- Be positive and engage your foster carers not just in initial home visits; also use their expertise time and knowledge to generate ideas of how to market and recruit members of the public to become foster carers.
- Meet regularly with your ambassadors (bi-monthly) to inform them of changes and updates in the service.
- Give them feedback on the impact of the work they do and feedback individually if applicants they visited are proceeding or not.

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South: London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Involving foster carers in the recruitment process

Rationale

The service's bespoke Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark report identified an opportunity to improve conversion rates from the enquiries generated to the number of subsequent approvals. Follow-up research identified a number of online enquiries which did not progress, identifying a need for the service to generate fewer, higher quality enquiries.

A focus group with staff and foster carers highlighted that existing foster carers felt it would have been useful to be able to speak to an approved foster carer from the outset (especially when considering fostering for harder to place children). This is particularly pertinent in Tower Hamlets, where a number of the population have English as a second language.

The focus group also demonstrated that many carers were initially apprehensive about the prospect of speaking with a social worker when they were applying to foster, and highlighted their perception of being judged at such an early stage in the process. In addition, local research highlighted the very strong community spirit felt among Tower Hamlets' foster carer population.

Objective

- Grow 'word of mouth' recruitment and use carers to positively promote fostering in Tower Hamlets.
- Develop a fostering ambassador scheme.

Implementation

- Foster carers were invited to become a foster carer ambassador through support groups and supervision.
- Ambassadors were then selected on their ability to positively promote fostering. They needed to be confident in speaking to others and have the skills to be able to source and organise events they could attend. One ambassador was selected to undertake online recruitment specifically.
- All ambassadors received training on the changes to the new assessment framework and to understand the challenges of recruiting in inner London. This specifically addressed issues with English as a second language and a lack of a spare bedroom so that they would be able to help answer questions in the community. Ambassadors also received training on initial home visits to help confirm what their role within the visit would be.
- Ambassadors work closely with the service's Family Finding Coordinator and Community Worker so that they can be supported and guided on how to make effective links in their community. Foster carer ambassador meetings are run monthly in order to help keep the momentum, discuss successes and challenges and generate new ideas on recruitment.

- Fostering ambassadors organise and attend numerous events in local communities, attend information sessions and carry out recruitment activities online such as posting on the service's social media accounts to raise local awareness of fostering.

Challenges

The service has successfully recruited 15 ambassadors to the scheme, many of whom have brought enthusiasm and skills. The challenge is to help them continue to feel motivated to carry out recruitment activities, which is also influenced by the placements they receive.



The service continues to help build their confidence and skills, and also helps them to understand what is appropriate to say – there have been some instances where an ambassador has shared information which would discourage a potential applicant. Staff and carers are now encouraged to give each other feedback at the end of any activity to discuss what they thought went well and what could be improved.

Outcome

Although it is too soon to compare conversion statistics with previous years', the service has been greatly encouraged by how the initiative has developed and is progressing. Feedback has highlighted that the atmosphere at initial visits has been considerably lighter and more relaxed. Applicants have reported having an ambassador present to be of real benefit. Many keep in touch after the visit and ambassadors are available to support them during the assessment.

Ambassadors have also been extremely beneficial in helping the service with enquiries from families with limited English. In this situation ambassadors have been able to help ascertain an applicant's level of understanding of what fostering is and the support required to proceed. Ambassadors have also been paired up with any family that needs help and support with their English as the assessment progresses.

The service now offers applicants ESOL intervention in order to help keep prospective fostering families engaged.

Sustainability

The fostering ambassadors scheme is already well imbedded in the service. All fostering service staff are fully engaged with this new approach, which is a frequent item in meetings at team and strategic management level.

Ambassadors receive a payment for their time and this has been included with planning for the new financial year.

The service will review the impact on conversion rates and continue to seek feedback from fostering ambassadors and applicants involved in the process.

We envisage that the support and friendship gained from the process will continue as newly approved foster carers receive their first placement.

Top Tips

- Invite a broad range of foster carers to participate, who bring diverse skills to the role of a fostering ambassador. Not everyone will be suitable, but encourage those showing willing to participate.
- Provide a clear policy and briefing on the role of a fostering ambassador. Make sure ambassadors know what is expected of them and how their work contributes to the success of your local recruitment activity.
- Encourage positive sharing of information, but work with ambassadors to agree what is and is not appropriate to share with a fostering enquirer at the initial point of contact.
- Identify the positive relationships. Members of the social work team and fostercarers will develop positive, trusting working relationships – encourage successful partnerships but do not force people to work together.
- See the benefits for retention. Initial feedback from foster carers has been extremely positive. Demonstrating how you value your foster carers' input, inspires them to work closely with you, building relationships and a healthy foster carer workforce.
- Ensure that you have set up ongoing training and support for this role. This will help to support and monitor the work of fostering ambassadors.
- Be prepared to be flexible as your scheme develops. There may be some unique opportunities that you have not thought about!

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North West: Wirral Council

Family Mentoring Service

Rationale

The imperative for Wirral is to reduce the number of looked after children safely, and for those children who do need to be looked after to have placement choice, particularly sibling groups and teenagers.

The service also needs to retain carers who have been invested in, and who have skills, knowledge and experience to care for the service's most complex looked after children.

The Values Modes™ research has demonstrated foster carers' predominantly 'Pioneer' attributes; a willingness to be involved and make a difference to the society in which they live. There was therefore an opportunity to involve foster carers more and explore how their skills can be transferred to other areas of the service.

Objective

For family mentors (who are registered foster carers) to:

- work with children and their family, to prevent the need for the children to be looked after
- work with children and their family, to support a reunification plan for children to return home from care
- support care leavers to build their confidence and independence skills.

Implementation

The service consulted with foster carers to develop a vision of what the scheme could deliver:

- The scheme was branded as the 'Family Mentor Service' to differentiate it from other activities already provided. The agreed vision was for the role of family mentors to be similar to a supportive extended family member; they work with the family to identify changes and improvements the family wants or has to make, giving practical support and guidance to achieve their aims.
- The Children on the Edge of Care I report was used as the basis to inform the service about what children believed could have prevented the need for them to become looked after, and what support they thought they needed to return home from care.
- Care leavers were invited to share their early experience of independent living, to discover what they thought would have been really supportive and helpful. 'A Sunday Roast' was popular!
- Monthly support and development meetings were established with family mentors to continuously monitor and evaluate the scheme.
- A governance structure was agreed; family mentors are registered both as a foster carer and for the scheme. Family mentors are supervised by their supervising social worker, and reviewed annually.
- The fostering panel was consulted, which agreed to consider carers recommended as family mentors.

- Senior managers and the director were fully briefed and endorsed piloting the scheme.
- iMPower were commissioned through the NW Consortia to do a cost benefit analysis for the first 20 children (10 families) to identify the efficacy of the model, particularly if there were clear savings.

Challenges

Initially family mentors had to overcome some mistrust from families on why the family mentors were really there. They were aware the family mentors were foster carers, and as the families were identified as on the edge of care, or their children are subject to child protection plans, it is understandable that some parents mistrusted the motives of the family mentor. All family mentors used their transferrable skills from fostering to gain the trust of the parents and the children.

Family mentors often work out of office hours with families, providing support to families at various times, including advice and guidance. The continual review of the scheme allowed the service to address the need to make the support network for family mentors more robust.

A further challenge was the fostering panel. Although it considered these registrations, it was not fully supportive of the fostering service being involved with this type of work. The panel suggested other services were already offering support to these families.

The service sourced the following quote from a father benefitting from the involvement of a family mentor in order to distinguish it from other support services and evidence its impact:

'I like it when you come, you show us how to do things and you listen, the others come and tell us what to do, and go again. We don't know how to do the things they tell us we have to.'

A primary reason for this distinctiveness is that their family mentor has only one family to support, is flexible, can be texted and respond to texts anytime. They can therefore provide bespoke, peer-to-peer support to children in families in Wirral on the edge of care.

Outcome

Of the 20 children (from 10 families) involved in the pilot starting in August 2014, just three are now in care. Five are in proceedings, placed at home with the support of family mentors offering overnight stays at weekends, with one child to be home tutored two days a week.

Ten of the children have been, or will be, stepped down to Team Around the Family or universal services. One is due to become subject to an SGO, sharing parental responsibility with his main carer and relative. The final child, although now a boarder in a residential school for his education, did not come into care before the residential school

place became available, as was expected to happen. The family has accepted a 38 week residential placement, with their child returning to them in school holidays, with support from their family mentor.

The service has primarily worked with children from the 'edge of care', children of parents signed up to a child protection agreement, and children in need. Two children from one family with a reunification plan have also been supported by this scheme.

A key learning from the scheme has been in the linking of one family to one family mentor. This approach keeps the service flexible, giving the mentor time to respond almost immediately to the family's needs.

A maximum of two overnight stays a month were initially agreed for the scheme, but now court directed overnight stays can be for up to three weekends a month during proceedings. Otherwise, depending on the family's needs and tasks identified with the family, the family mentor may have up to three direct contacts a week. This can be with parents, or parents and children, or children alone, and includes text advice and guidance outside the direct contacts.

The service recognises that one-to-one support has a significant impact on resources, but mixing foster care with family mentoring allows for this and is critical to the demonstrable success of the service.

The parent-to-parent discussions and modelling seems key to the dynamics of the relationship to effect change. The Children on the Edge of Care report included statements from children that providing their parents with support could have prevented them becoming looked after. This model is attempting to act on what the children reported, and the service believes that the children in these families may feel safer in their family, knowing they are getting support, and less under threat of being separated from their parents.

There are examples of family mentors working more directly with the children, doing activities and providing lots of listening time, discussing their situation with their family, and things they want to change about their situation, and what they want to change about themselves. The family mentors were able to suggest strategies for the child to regain some control of the situation, along with doing fun things to build their self-esteem. One child wanted to practice putting his anger in a box which he named 'Volcano,' when he felt like attacking his mother and other children. He kept it in the box to talk about with his mentor. His mother reported more good days than bad days some weeks.

Utilising foster carers' skills to respond to need differently, rather than a process driven response from the service, has been a unique benefit of this scheme. Families involved have been able to identify what they want or need to change. Tasks are then defined to enable a family mentor to assist the family or child or both to achieve their aims, rather than setting up 'support to monitor' if the family are making required changes.

Sustainability

By reviewing and evaluating the Family Mentoring Scheme on a regular basis, the service has been able to address sustainability. The role of the family mentor has developed, and clear support networks have been put in place. The scheme has benefited from an abundance of foster carers putting themselves forward for the role of family mentor.

District social workers are now being encouraged to put families forward who are on the edge of care and may benefit from the support. It is hoped that this preventative work can continue to achieve the objective of safely reducing Wirral's looked after children population, as well as having a positive impact on the retention of foster carers.

Top Tips

- Develop a separate identity for your scheme. It is important to differentiate it from other services provided and makes it easier to establish and communicate successes from the work with senior managers.
- Care leavers' feedback was invaluable in helping establish how the scheme could work and benefit looked after children – be sure to involve them in early discussions.
- Make sure robust support systems are in place. Family mentors are working with troubled families on the edge of care who may be wary of their involvement.
- Meet regularly and seek feedback from everyone involved. Your local model may evolve differently; it's important to shape the service to meet local needs.

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West Yorkshire: Calderdale Council, Core Assets, Fostering Yorkshire and Leeds City Council

Peer support project based on the Mockingbird Family model, within a kinship care setting

Rationale

The consortia were aware of the need to reach kinship carers who traditionally can be less confident in their role as foster carers, appear isolated, access less training and support groups and have less interaction with other foster carers.

Family relationships can also often be complex with the result being that support is difficult to identify.

Objective

- To promote placement stability and create positive outcomes for the young people fostered within their families.
- To proactively support a group of kinship carers with a view to enhancing their skills and increasing confidence in their role as a foster carer.
- To access the skills and experience of a specific carer to focus on a specific group of kinship carers to provide an engaging network of support.
- To promote use of community resources by these fostering families.

Implementation

- Establish a stakeholders group to task, advise and support the project set up and development.
- Create a job description for the role of hub carer; to ensure expectations of the department and understanding of the role are transparent. This should include tasks such as provision of regular planned respite / day care / proactive planning of social group meetings for constellation families together with children but also separate for carers/ individual support for carers and their families to navigate the bureaucracy of the system.
- Produce written information to help raise the profile of the peer support model within the organisation.
- Identify a hub carer who had fostering experience plus transferable skills and confidence in their own abilities.
- Link the hub carer to kinship foster families over a period of time; families that professionals referred as being able to benefit from extra peer support.

Challenges

The role of the hub carer requires a balance between proactive advocacy and professional supervision with a supervising social worker relating to work to be undertaken. This continues to be a work in progress with all parties learning from events along the way and the adjustment of the job description.

There was an initial housing issue as the identified hub carer lived in a two bedroomed property on the edge of the city, however the carer did move to a three bedroomed property closer towards the city to help alleviate this challenge.

Given the nature of the Mockingbird approach, clarifying the roles of and increased number of professional associated with carers and children in the hub was a challenge. The service has made ongoing adjustment as the model becomes more familiar to all those involved.

Outcome

A survey of foster carers involved in the peer support project identified an increased level of confidence of individual constellation carers and evidence of positive peer support.

An associated benefit has been the establishment of positive relationships between children of foster families involved as part of the hub as they associate through group activities/respite stays with the hub carer.

The hub carer is very much valued and her support recognised by constellation carers as well as other related professionals. The service has also achieved its objective to increase access to training and support groups by constellation carers.

Professionals involved in the project have recognised the safeguarding element that the hub and peer support provided to foster children and families can create.

Sustainability

A financial package was agreed formally for the hub carer, which guarantees income for 52 weeks of the year associated with their specific role as hub carer and not linked purely to the children being in placement.

A clear policy for protecting their placements within the hub needs to be agreed. There is the temptation to utilise their capacity for other mainstream placements. To address this, the service is proposing access only by referral to the project leader.



The Fostering Network has been awarded funding through the Department for Education's Innovation Programme to develop the Mockingbird Family Model for the UK. The Fostering Network will work with eight fostering services, including Leeds City Council, that will pilot the new approach from April 2015.

Top Tips

- Be very precise about the role of the hub carer and the qualities you are looking for – creating a job description was very helpful in aiding recruitment of the hub carer.
- Appoint the hub carer from your experienced pool of foster carers. The breadth of the task will make it extremely challenging for a newly approved foster carer.
- Be clear that the hub carer is not available for mainstream placements. Given their qualities, there is the temptation to place children with them, but they need to stay vacant in order for the scheme to work properly.
- Communicate the value of the peer-to-peer support team throughout your fostering service, including staff and foster carers to help explain the benefits of the model.

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Redcar and Cleveland Council

Integrating foster carers into recruitment activity

Rationale

The service's bespoke Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark report identified that fostering enquiry numbers as a percentage of local looked after children were lower than the national average.

Work with The Fostering Network and iMPower identified an opportunity to increase the involvement of foster carers in the service's recruitment activity. This had previously been limited to the *The Skills to Foster* training, but research identified that the skills and knowledge of experienced carers could benefit the service's recruitment activities to help increase enquiries.

Objective

To enable foster carers and/or care leavers to support and be fully integrated into the fostering service's recruitment activity including: attending information sessions, recruitment events and *The Skills to Foster* training.

Implementation

- A request was sent in the fostering service's newsletter to foster carers asking for volunteers keen to participate in recruitment activity on behalf of the service.
- Volunteers were briefed about why they would be involved and what would be expected of them.
- A schedule of events of information sessions and events was shared with those keen to proceed to agree who would be able to attend alongside members of the fostering service.

Challenges

Early discussions identified that not all foster carers were comfortable with speaking to the public but they still wanted to do something in addition to their foster carer role.

The service explored other areas where it would be appropriate to involve foster carers, agreeing foster carer participation in different working groups, including those creating and revising templates and other paperwork used by the service, as well as organising social events. This extension to the service's initial objectives proved highly popular with foster carers motivated to participate.

The project has been impacted by a number of changes in personnel within the fostering team. This has included the addition of a new fostering manager as well as a high turnover of supervising social workers. Although it has been an unsettling period, the team remain positive and focused on foster carer recruitment and committing to the opportunities presented by this area of work.



Outcome

Foster carers are actively participating in working groups to revise the templates used by the fostering service. Foster carers' input has been invaluable in revising the:

Health & Safety Checklist;
Initial Enquiry Visit Form; and
Foster Carer Recruitment Enquiry Form.

They have helped ensure that while being fit for purpose, each document reflects the reality and experience from the perspective of existing foster carers with the service. Feedback received has been positive. Foster carers feel like they have contributed towards the service and feel valued.

Sustainability

As part of the service's overall action plan, a revised banding scheme with increased payments and a competencies framework was introduced in April 2014. Those carers who are on the higher payment band are now expected to be involved with the development and delivery of service.

This project has enabled the service to identify a group of carers who want to be fully involved in recruitment activity to support the service and local looked after children. They have proven to be the service's 'best asset' to encourage new foster carers to come forward.

Redcar and Cleveland's fostering service is keen to evolve our current experienced foster carers to become fostering ambassadors, able to go out to the public and represent the service on their own.

Following a process of training, guidance and signing up to an agreement, the service envisages the fostering ambassadors will co-facilitate initial enquiry visits or hold recruitment drop in information sessions.

There are many benefits to developing this role. Those enquiring will be able to speak first hand to an experienced carer and those current carers will be able to explore different career opportunities within the service and feel part of the team. The fostering team will also benefit from this by allowing supervising social workers to focus on their specific duties such as completing assessments, foster carer supervisions and annual reviews to better utilise resources.

Although the action was aiming to increase initial enquiries, the service has identified benefits in retaining foster carers through improved relationships between them and the service. It is hoped that this initiative will continue to improve our foster carer retention and benefit enquiry rates in the coming years.

Top Tips

- Utilise the skills of the whole workforce. Foster carers bring with them an abundance of transferable skills from their careers prior to fostering. Not all will be suited to being involved in face-to-face recruitment activity, and some will have greater aptitude in areas than others. Take time to assess where you can best match their interest and abilities to help with your recruitment activity.
- Communication is vital. From outlining the task and the service's objectives, to keeping them up to date with how their role is having an impact on recruitment activity, make sure you keep foster carers engaged, and commit to their involvement in your work.
- Target early. Assessments will identify foster carer's additional skills and qualities, which may lead to benefitting the service's recruitment activity. The Values Modes™ research has shown that many foster carers have 'Pioneer' values, and are therefore keen to be involved and help in their local community. This has been evident in the positive number of foster carers who have responded to the service's request for support.
- Ensure whole service buy-in. As with any new initiative, it needs the support and commitment of all members of the fostering team to work to its full potential.

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Lincolnshire County Council

Development of a Foster Care Association

Rationale

Lincolnshire is a large rural county covering an area of 2,284 square miles and with a relatively sparse population of 713,000. There are in the region of 640 looked after children at any one time and a total of 327 foster carers. A number of support groups have been set up over the years but at present none are in operation. There has never been a formally constituted Foster Care Association.

In the discussions that have taken place with foster carers in the recruitment steering group it became apparent that, due to the long distances between foster carers and the long journeys that supervising social workers have to make to visit their carers, some foster carers can feel somewhat isolated. Foster carers would value the opportunity to become members of a Foster Care Association that represented their views and worked in partnership with the fostering service to resolve and further develop the service.

The Values Modes™ research has substantiated this approach by identifying the key traits of local foster carers as Pioneers and as such made clear that they welcome the opportunity for face-to-face discussions and to ask questions of colleagues.

Objective

- To consult and involve foster carers in the development of a Foster Care Association for Lincolnshire County Council.

Implementation

Over the past six months there has been a series of meetings and the following has been achieved:

- Establishment of a shadow committee and appointment to the roles of Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer and Secretary.
- A draft constitution.
- A draft business plan including the aims of the association.
- A draft budget for the first year.
- Meeting with fostering teams to ensure they are on board.
- Newsletter articles to ensure inclusivity of all carers.
- An initial meeting with the Fostering Managers on 3 November 2014.
- Launched 7 March 2015 at a foster carer award ceremony.

Challenges

The main challenge has been building up sufficient momentum to generate the establishment of an association. Ultimately a small but committed group of foster carers was motivated to get on with it while being aware that ultimately a fair and transparent process of election is needed.

Outcome

The Foster Care Association was formally launched on 7 March 2015. Prior to this date the Association had begun to meet to reinforce their aims and objectives and plan how they envisaged their support would benefit foster carers throughout the county.

Critical to the successful launch was the committee of foster carers that had formed with a strong Chair who guides them in the work that they have already undertaken and is focused on what is required to make the Association a success in the future.

The Foster Care Association has also worked in partnership with the county council and the service has supported them to develop their own leaflet and merchandise. When local recruitment events have taken place, foster carers from the Association have supported county council staff. Additional ideas are being explored as to how the working relationship can further develop in the future.

Sustainability

The longer term goals of the Association are to take on responsibility for the recruitment steering group, supporting carers to hold their own events and attending initial visits with social workers to contribute to the service's recruitment needs. Furthermore, work has begun to deliver support to the sons and daughters of foster carers. It is hoped that the achievement of these goals will result in both an increase in enquiries and also contribute to the retention of the current foster carers.

Top Tips

- Local authorities should support foster care associations and this can mean allocating a budget to enable them to 'get off the ground'.
- Be prepared for the formation of a critical friend relationship with foster carers and learn from information passed to you.
- Always make time for others and if you don't know the answer to something, advise them what you will do to find it.
- Have good lines of communication and be accessible if practical support is needed.
- Allow the association to develop on its own and assume its own identity.

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Walsall Council

Foster carer working party

Rationale

Research by The Fostering Network and iMPower has highlighted the potential benefits of utilising foster carers' skills and experience to assist a service's recruitment activity as well as generating associated benefits in foster carer retention. By creating a working party, the service is aiming to formalise and structure the foster carers' involvement in future recruitment activity.

Objective

To establish a foster carer recruitment working party to consult with foster carers on recruitment activity.

Implementation

- All foster carers were written to inviting their participation in the working party.
- Joining foster carers in the working party were a member of the Council's communications team and two members of the fostering team (including the person responsible for taking the initial enquiries, and the person who runs the *The Skills to Foster* training) were also invited.
- Foster carers expressing interest were invited to attend an initial meeting.
- The working party's terms of reference were agreed, including the activity foster carers would participate in.

Challenges

Initially only three foster carers volunteered to be involved, two of whom were from the Walsall Foster Carer Association. All three were male and of White British ethnic origin.

Following discussion with the team, two female foster carers, one of Asian and one of Black Caribbean ethnicity were invited to join to balance representation on the group. Both agreed to be members.



Outcome

The working party has met every four to six weeks since November 2014. It has generated a number of ideas and actions, which have been explored in greater detail by the service.

Three foster carers are now regularly involved, one has attended a number of meetings and two have attended one meeting. Considerable activity was generated in May around Foster Care Fortnight™, but the activity has been ongoing.

A specific outcome from the working party has been the revision of the service's 'recommend a friend' scheme. The payment on approval will now go to the Foster Carer Association to fund collective activity. This is based on the knowledge that 'Pioneers' are more likely to respond to a collective need and to benefit others in their community.

Sustainability

The working relationship between the staff and the foster carers has developed positively and the communications team, which sits outside of the fostering service, has gained a broader understanding of fostering.

Although commitment to this initiative has not been as high as initially hoped, the service will continue with the regular working party meetings, while encouraging more foster carers to participate by demonstrating the impact the group has had to date.

Top Tips

- Invite a variety of foster carers on to your working party. Those who have been approved in the last few years are often better at relating to people who are interested in fostering than those who have been fostering for 30 years, but each bring skills and experience to the task.
- Encourage ideas and be positive about them. You may not be able to implement all of them, but recognise them and note them down – an impossible sounding idea may be adaptable through discussion.
- Do things which people will enjoy; they are more likely to be involved again in the future.
- Be realistic; it takes time, effort and money to arrange a big event. Work collaboratively where possible.
- Make the most of what you have got. If you have someone who runs triathlons, get them to wear a branded T-shirt to raise awareness of your service.

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Broadening the demographic

The Fostering Network

Combining Fostering with Other Work survey and report and launch of Fostering Friendly Employers scheme to encourage employers to support foster carers.

Rationale

The ongoing need to recruit enough foster carers with the right skills to meet the needs of children in care means that fostering services are increasingly looking to broaden the range of foster carers who come forward, including those who combine fostering with other work. However, there is a dearth of research about the experience of foster carers who are working outside of the home. The Fostering Network surveyed foster carers to explore their experiences both during and after approval to foster:

Objective

- To support fostering services to recruit and retain foster carers who combine fostering with other work.
- To identify ways that fostering services and employers can support foster carers who work.
- To encourage more fostering friendly employers.

Implementation:

- National online quantitative and qualitative survey of foster carers with 703 responses.
- Further consultation with foster carers, fostering services and employers, as well as desk research, to explore issues in more depth and identify practical solutions.
- Launch of report *Combining Fostering With Other Work*, including key messages for fostering services and employers, case studies and resources.
- Launch of Fostering Friendly Employers, The Fostering Network's new scheme designed to support and recognise employers who support fostering.

Challenges

The survey of foster carers highlights key messages for both employers and fostering services:

- Foster carers are clear that having an employer that understands and respects their fostering commitment is hugely beneficial to them. The support that would make most difference would be that employers adopt 'foster carer friendly' HR policies, including paid time off for training, time off for settling a child into a new placement and flexible working arrangements.
- Foster carers also highlight the need for fostering services to review recruitment and retention policy and practice to ensure that foster carers who work are included and supported. The report highlights issues around recruitment, foster carer pay, support for children and foster carers, flexibility round meeting and training times, and ensuring that the culture of the fostering team and foster carer community values the diversity of foster carers, including those who work outside of fostering.

- Consultation with fostering services suggests that some IFPs perceive that local authorities will only place children with their foster carers if they are at home full-time. Encouraging employers to become foster friendly requires time and connections,
- with fostering services taking a lead locally, together with national support from the Department for Education and The Fostering Network.

Please see the case study from Cumbria.

Outcome

- Fostering services are continuing to act as a local catalyst – in particular pushing local authorities to become fostering friendly employers, to champion fostering and to inspire other employers to follow.
- In 2014, the Department for Education became the government's first fostering friendly employer and is taking the lead across government departments.
- The Fostering Network launched Fostering Friendly Employers and continues to promote the scheme on a national level.
- The Combining Fostering with Other Work report is available from The Fostering Network website.



Sustainability

- Through Fostering Friendly Employers, The Fostering Network will continue to engage with and support employers, offering information and advice about fostering, template HR policies and advice, opportunities to share and celebrate good practice, including Fostering Friendly Employer of the Year at the annual Fostering Excellence Awards.
- Contact fosteringfriendlyemployers@fostering.net for information and support – and to add to the growing list of employers that support foster carers.

Top Tips

- Consider your own local policy first – do you encourage or at least support your foster carers to combine fostering with other work?
- Does a member of staff currently foster? Ask them for their first hand experiences of combining fostering and working for your service to inform your local offer.
- Work with local employers to understand what being fostering family friendly means for them and the wider community in which they work. Sharing your local policy is a good starting point, but do encourage respective HR managers to meet and discuss the application of the policy and how it will benefit.
- Be flexible. Ensure your whole fostering service and wider teams adopt the foster family friendly policies so they can offer support when it is needed.
- Share your experiences. The Fostering Network is keen to learn from fostering services who are implementing foster family friendly policies, and to identify other organisations who sign up to schemes, to keep improving the support available.

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Cumbria

Fostering Friendly Employer campaign

Rationale

For the past few years, Cumbria County Council has seen an increase in the number of children coming into care. Insufficient placement capacity within the in-house fostering service has resulted in an increased reliance on placing children with independent fostering providers.

The fostering service had operated in isolation of external marketing and communications support. There was therefore an opportunity for colleagues in the Council's central communications team to take a fresh look at the recruitment challenge.

Objective

- To increase enquiries without significantly increasing the services recruitment budget.

Implementation

- The communications team performed a literature review for foster carer recruitment and sought to identify existing best practice in other fostering services.
- A mystery shopping exercise of the service was complemented by a survey of existing foster carers and a socio-demographic analysis of the local population using Mosaic.
- Feedback pointed to a need to make fostering feel more inclusive, welcoming and positive.
- There were too many negative associations with the local Council (parking fines, refuse collection) and the public image of social work.
- Research shows the benefits of using foster carers to front the campaign, presenting them as normal people and make fostering a mainstream activity.
- The strapline, 'Become part of Cumbria's biggest family' was created, with the vision of making fostering accessible to more prospective foster carers through being 'fostering friendly'.
- To make sure the Council was fostering friendly, a new 'foster family friendly' policy was created. Working with the legal team to ensure consistency with existing policies, this new policy gave staff up to five days additional paid leave per year to undertake training related to being a foster carer.
- To overcome the challenge of generating more local media coverage, the Council used its existing contacts to agree a partnership with the CN Group.
- Launched in February 2014, the new fostering campaign included a two week period of intensive coverage in the local papers in the CN Group. Information on becoming a fostering friendly employer was mailed out to 150 of Cumbria's largest local employers.
- Local elected members, the chamber of commerce were fully briefed by senior officers in the Council acting as fostering ambassadors. Extensive promotion was also carried out across social media.



Challenges

The challenges were broadly:

- Finding fresh material for the newspaper.
- Control of editorial content.
- Finding the right contacts within employers – worked best when the Chief Executive and directors acted as ambassadors and spoke directly to their counterparts in other organisations.
- Lengthy internal decision making processes – the process could have been improved with a better monitoring system for new enquiries who had seen the new campaign.
- Significant commitment of time and effort – a lot of time was invested making headway with small businesses. This would have been better invested in larger employers with a bigger workforce.
- Maintaining momentum over time – attending business events helped engage wider audiences over time.
- Providing fostering friendly employers with ‘content’ – ie information they could communicate with their members of staff beyond the initial contact.

Outcome

- The Council is now a fostering friendly employer. The extra days leave to complete training has been a positive step in recognising the needs of foster carers.
- Fifteen local businesses signed up to be a fostering friendly employer, equating to approximately 21,000 employees or eight per cent of the Cumbria working population.
- 36 per cent increase in fostering enquiries
- Facebook likes increased from 79 to 1,600 through targeted advertising and consistent content.
- 71 per cent increase in web traffic

Sustainability

- The Council is committed to continuing as a fostering friendly employer.
- The effort to achieve contact employers was significant, and it was largely due to the media coverage that the campaign was a success. This approach would not be sustainable going forward.
- Due to the monitoring process, it has been difficult to isolate the impact of the Fostering Friendly Employer scheme. There has been a clear impact of newspaper coverage on the increase to the website, and the campaign has positively tackled myths about who can foster.

Top Tips

- Focus resources on the larger employers in your area. Investing time in chasing small enterprises does not achieve as great a reach.
- Engage senior staff, including your Chief Executive and directors for them to have conversations with their counterparts in organisations to increase the likelihood of signing them up to the scheme.
- Involve local media outlets to help spread the message further, but plan content in advance to sustain the impact.

Contact

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Appendix 1

Partnership agreement between Doncaster Children's Services Trust and

Purpose

To set out the remit of the working together arrangement, with clear guidance and expectations regarding professional conduct.

Outcome

To develop a partnership between Doncaster MBC and local independent fostering providers (IFPs) to develop a co-operative learning and sharing relationship to improve placement sufficiency within one local authority area.

Aims

- To develop a learning pool of providers in a local area, to share best practice and improve outcomes for all. To celebrate fostering in the local area and share learning with all carers through a fostering conference
- To build on national research on 'money matters' advice to develop and pilot e learning resources for foster carers
- To research effectiveness of financial and other incentives for foster carers
- To develop sufficiency in a local area through sharing information on placement availability; mapping to the Local Authority needs assessment and exploring means of increasing the numbers of foster carers available to meet identified needs in the local area either through informal or commissioned relationships.

Principles and protocol

Effective working relations and achievement of the aims outlined above will depend on an open sharing approach from all members. Members will be expected to share non-identifying information about foster carers in Doncaster and to share best practice as part of the leaning pool. In order to achieve these aims within a safe framework, all organisations will agree to the following:

1. Organisations will not, either actively or indirectly, seek to 'poach' each other's foster carers at any point in this process.
2. Organisations will not, either directly or indirectly, be critical of the other organisations in front of foster carers or staff. If concerns are raised at any point they will be referred back to the project manager for prompt resolution.
3. Any request by a foster carer to transfer to another organisation involved in this partnership will be scrutinised carefully by both services to ensure the request has not been influenced by the partnership arrangements.
4. All of the IFPs operate in a highly competitive environment and there is recognition that sensitive commercial information may be disclosed to other IFPs signed up to this partnership agreement. If in the event of this agreement ending, organisations will still keep confidential any business information they have gained about the others during the course of this relationship.

- 5. All organisations agree to work to the aims of the project as outlined above. Direct marketing is prohibited as part of this grant funding and any publicity gained as a result of local public engagement or the fostering conference will be purely used to raise the profile of fostering in Doncaster. Organisations may benefit indirectly from an increase in interest in fostering but must not seek to link specific marketing campaigns to this work.

Signing of the agreement

This should be signed by a senior manager within the organisation

Signed

Position.....

Date

Doncaster Children’s Services Trust

Signed

Position.....

Date