'Championing Education': Summary of initial evaluation of the Fostering Potential programme

November 2019

About this report

This report summarises an initial evaluation of the Fostering Potential programme, which aims to support the educational outcomes of looked after children who are placed in foster care. The work is funded by the British & Foreign School Society and the Sir John Cass Foundation. The programme period runs from May 2018 until April 2020.

The Fostering Potential programme was created due to concern about the 'attainment gap' that exists between fostered children and the general population[1]. The programme design and training drew on some of the available research evidence around the education of looked after children, including the evaluation of London Fostering Achievement[2], a programme delivered by The Fostering Network and Achievement for All in 2015-16

The programme

The Fostering Potential programme aims **to raise the educational outcomes of fostered children** by increasing foster carers' knowledge and confidence in their role as 'first educators'.

The project delivery work creates an **educational peer support network** in each participating local area, delivered by experienced foster carers in the role of Education Champions.

The programme is supported by an **information dissemination strand**, which aims to share information about research evidence, best practice and practical approaches to support the education of looked after children and young people.

It is important to note that the programme did not involve direct work with children and young people. The approach is based on Education Champions providing peer support to foster carers, with the aim of increasing their knowledge and confidence so that they can better support the outcomes of the children who are placed with them in foster care.

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[1] In 2018 just 35 per cent of looked after children in England reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage Two (the end of primary school) compared to 65 per cent for children who were not looked after (DfE, 2019).

[2] The London Fostering Achievement programme was evaluated by the REES Centre, the University of Oxford and Loughborough University, 2016.

Evaluation

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- report on project implementation and activity
- report on impact at foster carer, child and service level
- explore barriers, challenges and enablers to project implementation.

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach, involving analysis of surveys and project data alongside interviews giving more in-depth consideration of stakeholders' experiences across the project.

The report covers the programme planning phase and the first phase of project delivery from September 2018 until July 2019. Project delivery is ongoing and a supplementary report will be published before the end of the programme period in April 2020. The supplementary report will also evaluate the information dissemination strand of the programme.

Project delivery

Seven local authorities joined the programme by September 2018. The participating authorities were:

- The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- The Royal Borough of Greenwich
- The London Borough of Islington
- Kent County Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Suffolk County Council
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets

The participating local authorities were able to define the target cohorts of their project activity and were encouraged to embed the project into their existing services. The intention was that a locally tailored project would be more likely to be sustainable in the longer term.

Training

The aim of the training was to provide Education Champions with an introduction to the Fostering Potential project and peer support framework, so that they could begin to work with foster carers in their local area. A total of 58 foster carers (45 female and 13 male) were recruited and trained as Education Champions across the seven local authorities. The overall feedback on the training was very positive and participants felt that it prepared them well for the role of Education Champion, with 45 of 63[3] respondents rating the training as very good and a further 13 rating the training as 'good'. Following the training Education Champions were matched to foster carers of children in the target cohort, to enable peer support contact to take place.

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[3] The total number of attendees 63 was greater than the 58 Education Champions due to local authority employees also attending the training.

Project activity and participants

Participants	Number
Education Champions active as of May 2019	53
Foster carers who received 1-1 support from an Education Champion[4]	71
Children and young people whose foster carer received 1-1 support[5]	68

Findings drawn together across project data and survey responses suggests that a **face-to-face meeting** between Education Champions and foster carers (either at home or in another place) was the most common form of contact, followed by contact by **phone**. The most frequent type of support provided by Education Champions was **talking about a child's progress**, followed by **discussing specific issues/problems** and then **suggestions to support English or Mathematics**.

Wider project activity in local areas
A wider beneficial consequence of the project work was the hosting of locally produced events, training and the development of resources to support the programme. This activity was generally made available to the whole cohort of local authority foster carers, therefore extending the benefit of the project beyond the target participants. The activity included:

- events held at museums or higher education settings
- providing educational resource packs to foster carers
- additional training on subjects including supporting attainment and progress, pupil premium plus and personal education plans (PEPs)
- training foster carers how to use online education subscription sites
- locally produced resources written and produced by Education Champions, for example a leaflet for foster carers on what makes an effective PEP.

Summary of key findings
The main findings from the evaluation include:

- Overall, stakeholders feel that the project is an **excellent concept**. Local authorities and Education Champions are keen to take part and feel passionate about doing so. Education Champions' enthusiasm for the peer support work was recognised by all stakeholders and there has been a low rate of attrition among Education Champions.
- There is **a wide variation in progress between different local authorities.** In some local authorities the project is now well established, whereas in others, it is still very much in its infancy.
- The greatest impact on foster carers was found to be increasing **foster carers' confidence in working with their fostered children to support their education**.
- Local authorities have been using one of two methods to recruit foster carers: identifying and engaging foster carers whom they think are appropriate for support; and asking for self-referrals**. Identification and engagement of foster carers had a greater rate of uptake than self-referral.**
- Stakeholders described **positive impacts of the project for fostered children**. These included improved attainment and confidence, increased interest in learning, greater use of resources and increased foster carer contact with the school.

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[4] This refers to foster carers receiving direct contact from an Education Champion in the evaluation period.
[5] The child total differs from the foster carer total due to children entering or leaving care during the period.

- Foster carers also reported **positive changes in the activities they do with their fostered children**, including completing and discussing homework together, reading together every night and increased use of education websites.
- Most contact between Education Champions and foster carers has been **face-to-face,** which seems to be preferred by foster carers. This comprises contact in the foster carer's own home and elsewhere. The next most frequent form of contact was by phone.
- The most common category of support provided during contact between Education Champions and foster carers was **talking about the child's progress**, followed by **discussing specific issues or problems**.
- Many stakeholders felt that the project has helped to **improve the working relationship** between fostering services and virtual schools.
- While not a direct aim of the programme, both local authority coordinators and Education Champions spoke about the **positive impact of the project work on Education Champions themselves.**
- Stakeholders also flagged some **wider benefits** of the project for foster carers and for services. For instance, local authorities developed and hosted **educational events and activities** that were open to the whole fostering cohort, Education Champions have written **locally produced resources** and local authorities have worked with external stakeholders, such as the Museum of London.

This evaluation highlighted the following barriers and enablers to project delivery:

- **The seniority of the local project lead** was a key factor in local project progression. Some stakeholders felt that a senior local project lead would be able to ensure the project was perceived as important and build momentum. Others felt that senior individuals had a lack of time and capacity to run the project. Configuring the project responsibilities across a small team may be a solution to this issue.
- Although local authority coordinators promoted the project and encouraged foster carers to participate, a key challenge was **engaging foster carers to receive support from Education Champions**. This particularly applied to more experienced foster carers and related to them feeling 'singled out', which in turn acted as a barrier to accessing peer-support.
- Linked to this, were difficulties in **achieving 'buy-in' from other local authority team members**. There was some feeling that an increased project investment from more senior staff, and social workers, would help project progression, as well as encourage foster carers to take part.
- **Education Champions** were perceived to be important enablers to the project by all stakeholders. Many noted their enthusiasm and passion for the role, and their project input was perceived to be vital to project success. The **collaborative team working** among Education Champions also helped to promote the work and support the development of several locally-produced resources.
- The **relationship with virtual schools** was perceived as very important to the project. A positive working relationship was perceived as helping to drive Fostering Potential forwards, but several stakeholders referred to initial challenges in engaging virtual schools to become involved in the project although, in most cases, this has now improved.

Next steps for Fostering Potential
The programme period runs until April 2020 and the planned work in this period includes ongoing peer-support work between Education Champions and foster carers in local authorities, with an emphasis on local authorities embedding the approach into their ways of working. There will also be further activity on the information strand of the programme, including the production of resources based on the peer-support work.

Further information

For further information about the Fostering Potential programme please contact Susan Soar, Project Manager on susan.soar@fostering.net

The programme webpage is available at thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/fostering-potential

Authors

Qualitative research fieldwork, analysis and reporting was carried out by Dr Katie Rix, an independent researcher commissioned by The Fostering Network.

Additional reporting narrative and information about the programme delivery process was provided by Susan Soar, the project manager of Fostering Potential.

Thank you to the individual employees and foster carers who participated in the research.