

The role of a national fostering helpline in the recruitment and retention of foster carers: implications for policy and fostering practice

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Abstract

There is thought to be a shortfall of foster carers currently in England as the number of children in care is rising faster than the number of foster carers. Supporting foster carers in their role of providing safe nurturing environments for children in the looked-after system is crucial in ensuring the recruitment and retention of foster carers. This paper reports on an evaluation of a national fostering helpline that provides independent, impartial advice to foster carers on a range of fostering concerns (Fosterline England). Findings suggest that the provision of a helpline service can influence foster carers' motivation to enter or stay in fostering. However, it is only one factor that can make a difference. Improvements to working practices in fostering is needed, including more effective communication with and between professionals.

Keywords: fostering, foster carers, fostering helpline, early intervention, education; social work

Introduction

As one of three types of care for looked-after children (adoption, foster care and residential care) fostering is reported to be 'bursting at the seams' (Harber and Oakley, 2012). Internationally, the number of children and young people in care is increasing faster than the number of foster carers (Rodger *et al.*, 2006). Understanding how to attract more foster carers is crucial (Sebba, 2012). In the UK, as noted by McDermid *et al.*, (2012), there was a 9% increase from 2007-11 of children and young people in foster care and a 2% increase in 2011-

12. There is thought to be a shortfall of foster carers in England of approximately 7,000 currently (Higgs, 2013). While the number of foster carers is increasing, it is not doing so as rapidly as the increase in children who need foster care. Retaining foster carers can also be problematic and this is reflected in Government programmes of work in relation to looked-after children that includes the recruitment, retention and training of foster carers. Also included in this is support for foster carers. This article reports on one aspect of foster carer support that is provided by means of a telephone helpline and interactive website.

Fosterline helpline: history and context

Fosterline is a national independent confidential advice and support service for current and prospective foster carers in England. The service was commissioned and is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) in recognition of the need for Foster carers to have impartial, confidential advice and support in their fostering role. FosterTalk (a non for profit organisation) have delivered the service on behalf of the DfE for the last two years. Fosterline provides information concerning legislation, policy, allegations, finances, placement, and even conflict with their service provider from a neutral but informative position.

Enquirers contact Fosterline by means of a Freephone telephone advice service. On response to their call, callers talk to a trained advisor. However, they can also communicate with advisors by email or via a dedicated website where they can access information and a link for webforms.

The helpline service is available during normal working hours (9.00 am – 5.00 pm) on weekdays with extended hours (until 9.00 pm) being available once a week. A voicemail and email service operates outside these times. Voicemails and emails are responded to by the end of the next working day.

Fosterline is only available to current and prospective foster carers in England as legislation differs throughout the UK. The service is staffed by a team of experienced trained advisors that have backgrounds as social workers, foster carers and adopters. They all follow legislation, national minimum standards and recognised good practise guides. All have undergone specific call handling training. The service is accredited by the Helplines Partnership.

Following strict practice protocol, advisors listen to foster carers concerns and remain neutral. They provide empathy, support and clarification about policies and procedures being careful not to criticise or give personal opinion. They do not take action on behalf of the caller. Advisors are equipped with organisational contact details so they can signpost callers to relevant agencies. If an advisor suspects neglect or a safeguarding issue they refer to and follow FosterTalk's safeguarding policies and procedures. Confidentiality is protected by FosterTalk policy and procedure and all information is recorded on encrypted laptops and password protected databases.

Fosterline provide a language line service and also a textphone service for the hard of hearing. Fosterline expects to receive over 33,000 visitors to the website, email service, forums and telephone lines this year, an increase from the 18,000 that sought information last year. Callers normally seek advice on concerns covering finance, allegation, assessment process, placement issues, Special Guardianship Orders, carer planning, support from Social Workers or fostering service, complaints about their fostering service, switching fostering service, Kinship or family and friends care. FosterTalk have recently set up Fosterline Foundation to raise funds to ensure the sustainability of the free service.

The purpose and benefits of helpline services

It is useful to locate the helpline service offered by Fosterline within the wider context of the purpose, effectiveness and function of helpline support.

The number of helplines across the UK is currently reported to be approximately 1,000 and increasing annually (HA, 2011: 5). The majority of these (92%) are organised by registered charities. Although helplines have responded to the introduction of new telecommunications channels by offering service users email, instant messaging, SMS and social media options, the quantity and complexity of telephone calls to helplines has increased. The Helpline Partnership (HP, 2014) - formerly the Helpline Association - reported a call volume increase of over 40% in the last year. Specifically, there was a reported increase in the number of callers with complex and multiple problems which was corroborated by Fosterline (2014) who reported an average call length of 33 – 36 minutes in 2014 compared to 17 – 20 minutes in 2013 and increasingly complex inquiries. This would appear to suggest that telephone helplines are seen as an effective method of providing support for services users generally and foster carers specifically to the extent that they are described as “an essential part of the social fabric of the UK” (HP, 2014). It is a concern to note therefore that whilst 86% of helplines reported that calls to their helpline had increased in the past year, only 9% of helplines have seen their income increase over that time. Worryingly, 36% of helplines reported that their income had actually declined, and within this group, all the affected helplines had reported call increases (HP, 2014).

Another interesting trend for helplines is the increasing employment of volunteers who outweigh paid staff by a factor of 3:1 (HA, 2011: 24). Helplines are increasing their range of services to meet user demand and increasing their use of social media such as LinkedIn for professional networking. This sets the context for the evaluation objectives and methodology.

Evaluation objectives

The objectives of the independent evaluation of a national fostering helpline and interactive website (Fosterline England, hereafter referred to as 'Fosterline') reported in this article were to identify the need and demand of Fosterline as an early intervention service in supporting existing and potential foster carers in their caring role. Specific questions included:

1. How can a helpline support the important government function of recruiting and retaining foster carers?
2. What is the impact of providing helpline support on foster carers' motivation to enter or stay in fostering?

Evaluation methodology

The independent evaluation was undertaken between January and March, 2015. The evaluation had three strands, including desk research of relevant literature; an online questionnaire and case study interviews with existing and prospective foster carers. The data from the questionnaire and interviews were analysed thematically to address the evaluation questions first and subsequently to allow emerging themes to be identified.

i) Online questionnaire

The main aim of the online questionnaire was to gather quantitative data on foster carers' motivation to foster, their reasons for contact with Fosterline service, the effectiveness of the Fosterline service and the impact of Fosterline service on their decision to either enter or stay in foster care. A degree of qualitative data was also gathered in relation to foster carers' perceptions of Fosterline service and any implications for policy and practice.

Two questionnaires were designed, tested and emailed to prospective and existing foster carers. Email addresses were provided by Fosterline. A total of 685 emails were sent to

current and prospective foster carers. There were 57 questionnaire participants in total. Due to the proportionate number of responses, results for existing foster carers will be reported in percentages and prospective foster carers in whole numbers. For some questions, more than one answer could be given so not all numbers and percentages are equal to 100%.

Results from questionnaires

Results for existing foster carers

A total of 48 existing foster carers responded to the questionnaires. Over half (26 or 54%) of these had a fostering contract with a Local Authority (LA) and the remaining 46% with an independent fostering agency (IFA). The sample was socially, culturally and geographically diverse.

Challenges faced by foster carers

Challenges faced by existing foster carers included difficulties in communication with social workers reported by four participants and difficulties in communication with LAs/IFAs reported by two, rather than concerns over how to effectively support children. One participant illustrated this by saying their social worker had changed six times in five years and that sometimes the difficulties in dealing with managers of agencies were so extreme that they were unmanageable.

Lack of effective communication between professionals was a concern raised by one participant who felt that this resulted in children and families receiving unsatisfactory care.

There is a disconnection between professionals, they don't communicate well and sometimes children don't get the help that they could.

One participant felt that social workers lacked the skills to personalise their approaches to supporting children, treating them as a homogenous group without individual needs and personalities. He stressed the high professional status that social workers appeared to award to themselves and felt that “it is how you conduct yourself that makes you a professional, not your job title.” This was corroborated by another participant who felt that managers in agencies and LAs had more in common with each other than they did with foster carers or children. Also mentioned was a perceived “tick-box” approach to dealing with foster carers that had been adopted by professionals with one participant stressing that “you cannot render the complexities of human behaviour within the context of box ticking.”

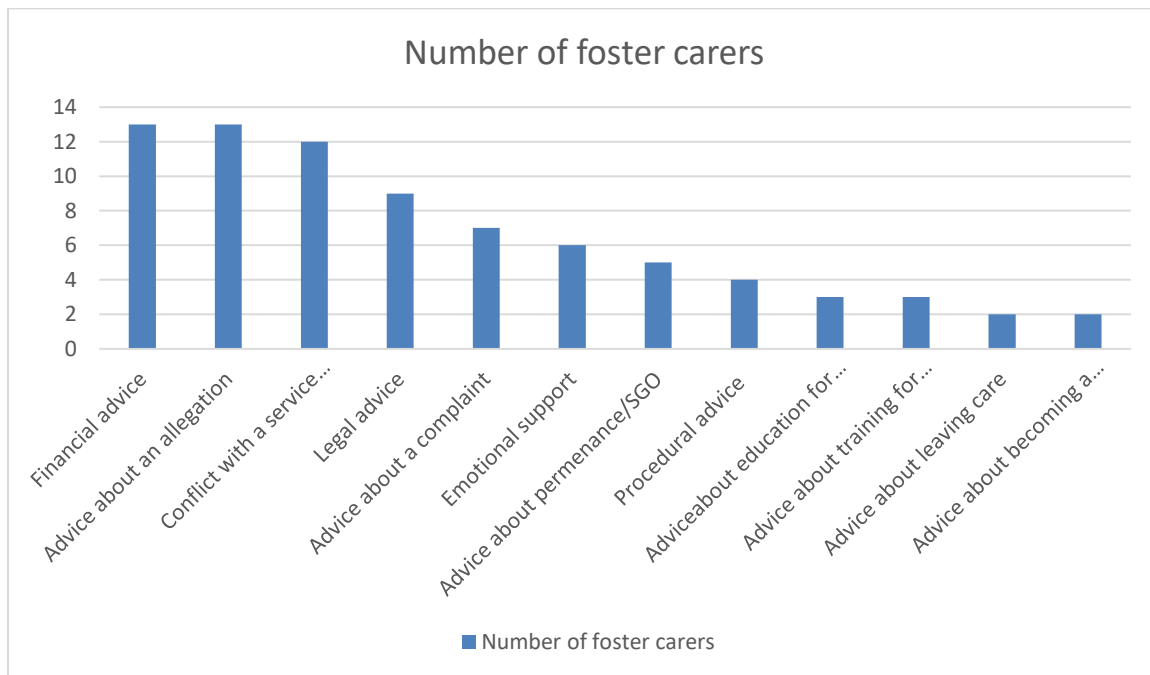
There were also suggestions that keeping up with training and fostering trends, seeing yourself as a professional, being valued by agencies and social workers and not being part of the decision making process had been problematic.

Prospective foster carers thought that challenges they might face would include difficulties with and bureaucracy in relation to social workers, lack of support, children’s challenging behaviour and not knowing enough about children before they were placed in their care. One prospective foster carer felt the policies and procedures involved in being assessed for fostering was a barrier to fostering.

Reasons for contacting the Helpline

Reasons for contacting Fosterline varied widely. The main reasons related to foster carers seeking advice about financial concerns (13 or 16%), allegations (13 or 16%), conflicts with social workers (12 or 15%), legal advice (9 or 11.0%), a complaint (7 or 9%) or emotional support (6 or 7%) as shown in table 1. Given the complex and sensitive nature of the issues being raised by foster carers and reported here, it is not surprising that telephone support was the preferred mode of contact by the majority of participants.

Table 1: Reasons for contacting Fosterline



Impact of contacting Fosterline on decision to stay in foster care

Before contacting Fosterline 16 (33%) of participants were considering leaving foster care. The reasons for this were not explored due to time and cost constraints. Of the 16, 11 (23% of all 48 participants) stated that they decided to continue as a foster carer after contacting Fosterline. In addition, 67% (32) of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that after contacting Fosterline they felt valued and supported as a foster carer and 59% (18) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more empowered as a foster carer after contacting Fosterline. Furthermore, 61% (19) of all participants decided to continue with their foster care career after contacting Fosterline and 50% (24) agreed or strongly agreed that contact with Fosterline was an influencing factor in this.

The majority (39 or 81%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that without Fosterline there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in England. Fifteen participants stated they did not know what they would have done had Fosterline not been

available to them, demonstrating that when there are stressful and complex problems, specialist, independent advice is needed as exemplified by these statements:

Without Fosterline there would be no future for a foster carer because it is the only service that supports the foster carer to find their way through the complexities that have been created in the foster care business!

Foster care is a role like no other, it is incredibly stressful and other people cannot provide the unique support we sometimes need. But Fosterline does provide that support and it is a life line when we need it.

Results for prospective foster carers

Seven prospective foster carers responded to the questionnaire. Four of these were applying or had applied for assessment with an LA and one was applying or had applied for assessment with an IFA. The remaining two had not applied for assessment.

Reasons for contacting the Helpline

The stated reasons for contacting Fosterline for all seven participants was advice about becoming a foster carer, followed by additional procedural advice for two, financial advice, legal advice, advice about a complaint, emotional support and advice about education for children for one participant each.

Impact of contact with Fosterline on decision to be assessed as a foster carer

After contacting Fosterline, three out of seven prospective foster carers progressed their application to the next stage, but adjusted their plans (for example changed the age range of child). Of the remaining participants, three were still undecided about what to do next and one had decided that fostering was not right for her. Three participants strongly agreed that Fosterline encouraged them to continue with their application to be assessed as a foster carer. Six participants agreed or strongly agreed that without Fosterline there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in England.

What would they have done without Fosterline

In the absence of Fosterline services, a wide variety of possible alternative sources of support were suggested by existing foster carers. Although some of these were fostering membership organisations, many were general advice services more suited to providing consumer advice on a wide range of topics than specialist advice to foster carers. In addition they were not necessarily independent and therefore impartial. These are shown in figure 1. Since some participants reported more than one source of support and some reported none, frequencies are reported.

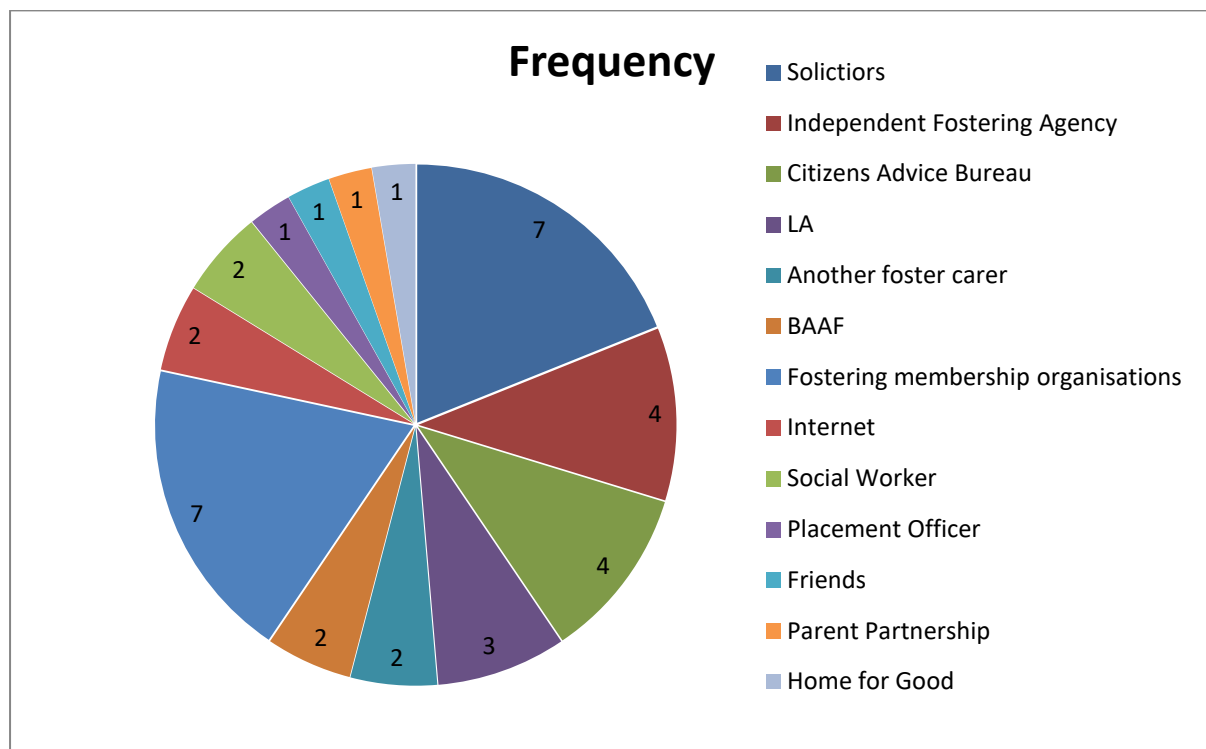


Figure 1: Alternative sources of support

For prospective carers, in the absence of Fosterline services, two participants said they would have turned to their LA for help. One said she would have searched on the internet for support services, whilst another said that Fosterline was the only impartial service available to her at the time she needed help.

However, 15 participants stated they did not know what they would have done had Fosterline not been available to them, demonstrating that when there are stressful and complex problems, specialist, independent advice is needed as exemplified by these statements:

Without Fosterline there would be no future for a foster carer because it is the only service that supports the foster carer to find their way through the complexities that have been created in the foster care business!

Foster care is a role like no other, it is incredibly stressful and other people cannot provide the unique support we sometimes need. But Fosterline does provide that support and it is a life line when we need it.

The participant above stated her disappointment in relation to the treatment of foster carers by LAs and IFAs which she expressed in quite strong terms, highlighting the difficult and complex nature of the support needed by foster carers.

ii) Interviews

The purpose of interviews was to provide in-depth qualitative data on foster carers' experiences of contact with Fosterline, their perceptions on the effectiveness of the service and impact of it on their foster caring role. The aim was not to compare experiences of foster carers, but to analyse the interview data thematically to address the evaluation questions.

The intention was to conduct interviews with a maximal variation sample of foster carers including existing and prospective foster carers. Of the 55 participants to the questionnaire, 25 left contact details and expressed an interest in participating in an interview. All 25 were contacted by telephone or email, of which 12 responded and participated in an interview.

Results from interviews

As stated above, 12 foster carers participated in a semi-structured interview that involved 10 questions related to motivation to foster, challenges in fostering, contact with and impact of contact with Fosterline and other agencies, foster carers' goals and hopes for children and

their perceived role in children's goals and hopes. Two were prospective foster carers and the remaining were existing foster carers. On average the existing carers had fostered for 13 years each and cared for 9 children. Of the two prospective foster carers, one had been assessed and was awaiting the outcome, whilst the other had discovered that her living accommodation was not suitable for fostering and had therefore not progressed her application.

Themes from the interview data have been organised in line with questions from the interview schedule.

Reason for contacting Fosterline

Reasons for contacting Fosterline rather than their supervising social worker, LA or IFA by existing foster carers mainly related to a perceived need to receive independent advice. This was because the issue they contacted Fosterline about was related to their LA or social worker for two participants or because they had already contacted these organisations in five cases and had been advised by them to contact Fosterline. One participant felt that their social worker was inexperienced and he needed to talk to someone who was knowledgeable, whilst another said "I needed to talk to someone who was on my side." One participant felt that professionals had become institutionalised to the extent that they seemed out of touch with foster carers' concerns or issues and therefore could not be trusted to receive information in a way that was helpful.

Prospective foster carers felt that Fosterline could provide them with independent advice about the type of fostering contract that would be most suitable with one saying she had searched the internet and could only find information that related to fostering abroad. The other said she had only wanted to foster babies and wanted independent advice about the feasibility of doing so.

The impact of Fosterline on decision to enter or stay in fostering

For existing foster carers, the impact of Fosterline on their decision to continue with fostering ranged from none at all reported by two participants to having “a strong influence” reported by three. For one participant, more practical support was needed that went beyond what Fosterline could offer and in the absence of this, they have decided not to foster again. The following comments exemplify the impact of Fosterline reported by three participants:

Contact with Fosterline made the job more financially viable and we were able to obtain financial assistance for other foster carers in the area as a result of advice from Fosterline.

They [Fosterline] kept me sane.. the message they sent me was we're here for you.

I knew where to go, which reports I had to write.. I won my case with the help of Fosterline, despite there being 15 people on the panel.. I knew I was good at my job, I love my job and Fosterline helped me to see that.

For others the impact of contact with Fosterline was reported as being useful as part of a support package from a range of sources; helping with the decision to foster older children; helping to de-stigmatise a very sensitive situation and “it has been useful to talk to someone that understands the concerns from a foster carers perspective” for one participant each.

For prospective foster carers, the impact of contacting Fosterline had a very positive effect for one participant who said “they [Fosterline] were very positive and encouraging which made me keen to continue” whilst for the other her lack of a spare bedroom meant that she was unable to continue with her application.

Support received from other agencies for existing foster carers was none for five, fostering membership organisations for two and one participant mentioned family and friends had been an enormous source of support. Two participants stated that local foster carer support groups, whilst being mandatory attendance, were of little value in difficult situations when the advice

and support from Fosterline had been invaluable. For prospective foster carers, both participants reported they had contacted other agencies who were either unhelpful or did not respond at all.

Fosterline's role in helping with the fostering role

Comments about Fosterline's role in supporting foster carers are reported below under the themes of what Fosterline currently do well and future enhancements to their service that foster carers felt would make their role easier.

A number of existing foster carers valued the re-assurance they had received from Fosterline that their problem could be overcome, would not result in long-term stigmatisation for them or the children they fostered and that someone could and would help them – that they were not alone. This gave them a sense of feeling listened to, valued, empowered and being in control. This was especially true in crisis situations such as allegations when Fosterline was the only service that was re-assuring to the extent that one participant said “they reminded me that I am good enough to do this job.”

One participant emphasised how difficult it could sometimes be to place a call to a helpline and discuss your problems to the extent that it sometimes felt as if she was betraying a child in doing so. The importance of receiving an instant reply to her call and an empathetic impartial response such as that provided by Fosterline was stressed. Another was grateful for the support of Fosterline in helping her to “work safely within the system” in terms of maintaining accurate records, describing Fosterline as “an invaluable service.” A number of participants stressed that it was difficult to talk to family or friends about their fostering concerns especially when there were allegations and that having Fosterline available as a service that understood the concerns of foster carers was crucial. The personal characteristics of the helpline advisors were an important factor that was mentioned. These included being

non-judgemental, independent, friendly, knowledgeable, experienced, and unbiased amongst others.

In terms of possible improvements, one prospective foster carer felt there was currently too much bureaucracy involved in fostering and wanted Fosterline to “be a voice” for foster carers in reducing that. This resonated with one existing foster carer who stated that foster carers needed “a new deal” in terms of more flexible self-employment that allowed them to register with a number of agencies. She felt that Fosterline could utilise their knowledge about fostering to advocate for foster carers’ rights in this regard. Another existing foster carer who had decided to leave fostering wanted Fosterline to have a more significant influence on policy at a higher level. Although she felt the service they currently provide was good, she would like them to operate at a higher level to influence change within the fostering system where she feels that social workers currently have “too much power” that is not necessarily used most effectively for children’s benefit.

Other enhancements suggested by existing foster carers included increased promotion of Fosterline’s services so that people know how useful they can be and providing periodic gatherings/meetings for members of fostering membership organisations to share experiences. One participant wanted Fosterline to gain legislative powers, to be able to attend panel meetings and to have a more significant advocacy role especially where there are allegations. Another wanted Fosterline to play a leading role in increasing the number of available foster carers.

Discussion

The sample of participants from questionnaire (55 foster carers) and participants in interview (12 foster carers) in this evaluation was relatively small given that there were 42,490 fostering households in England in 2014 (OFSTED, 2015). In addition it is likely that foster

carers who approach Fosterline are likely to include an above average proportion of carers who are dissatisfied with their IFA/LA or professionals such as Social Workers. Nevertheless, the sample in both cases included participants from across England and from a sufficiently broad demographic profile as well as a range of fostering experiences.

Participants in this evaluation reported that the main challenges for them in their fostering role related to communication and relationships with LAs, IFAs and social workers as well as the communication between them.

The range of concerns that foster carers contact Fosterline for is wide and varied, but many are complex and sensitive and require knowledgeable, attuned helpline advisors who can listen and de-stigmatise foster carers concerns.

Fosterline's role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers as reported by participants in this evaluation is to provide impartial and independent advice about a range of sensitive concerns and issues when foster carers feel they have no-one else to turn to. Sometimes when they contact Fosterline they are at crisis point in terms of their fostering career and in terms of their emotional resilience to cope with the situation.

Qualitative data from interviews highlighted that the influence of Fosterline in improving foster carers motivation to continue fostering is important. However, it is only one factor of many that could make a difference and as such Fosterline's ability to influence foster carers motivation is contingent upon foster carers feeling valued by social workers, LAs and IFAs and this is an area where both social work, LA and IFA practice needs to change.

Foster carers have suggested some improvements to Fosterline such as the possibility of them gaining legislative powers. This might not be practical or desirable and might serve to remove the impartial and independent characteristic of the service that foster carers have rated so highly in this evaluation. The purpose and function of a helpline also needs to be

considered and as already suggested in the literature review, there are practical limitations as to what can realistically be achieved. At the same time, evidence from participants in this evaluation suggests that considerable advice, support and reassurance is achievable and this is a particular strength of the Fosterline helpline service. The context of Fosterline's services must necessarily be impartial and independent with a reporting and formal representation function to the DfE. It's also not clear how foster carer's registration with more than one agency (as suggested by one foster carer) would be practical and a discussion of this suggestion is outside the scope of this paper.

Implications for policy

Implications for policy arising from this independent evaluation relate to the way in which fostering is currently organised in terms of foster carers' relationship with social workers, LAs and IFAs. Government can take a leading role in improving working conditions for foster carers. Immediate concerns relate to the way in which foster carers are treated in allegation and conflict situations. The need for provision of funding for the services of Fosterline as an independent advice and support service is demonstrated in this evaluation. Foster carers' reports of serious situations such as allegations suggests that such situations make them feel isolated, especially when social workers, LAs and IFAs do not communicate with them or each other in a way that foster carers find helpful. This has the potential over time to impact on the motivation of individuals to enter or stay in fostering

Future development and research opportunities

A number of areas for future research and development demand consideration following this evaluation. For example, a number of foster carers indicated they were considering leaving foster care before contacting Fosterline. Future research could usefully explore the reasons for this as well as exploring where else foster carers go for independent advice and support at

times of crisis and how effective they are in retaining foster carers. A study into more effective, collaborative and democratic ways for social workers, LAs and IFAs to communicate and work with foster carers would seem worthwhile.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn together findings from an independent evaluation of a national fostering helpline that gathered data from an online questionnaire for prospective and existing foster carers and interviews with a sample of them. The findings show that the provision of a helpline service such as Fosterline to support foster carers by enhancing the services offered by LAs and IFAs and helps with the recruitment and retention of foster carers. It is important that they maintain an independent, impartial role in this regard. Key to future practice in fostering are effective communication between Social Workers, LAs and IFAs and a more democratic way of working with foster carers to ensure that they feel valued thereby increasing the motivation of foster carers to enter or stay in fostering. Allegation situations need particular attention in relation to the way that foster carers are treated.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest; the evaluation was conducted by an independent researcher who is employed by Birmingham City University.

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