

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

**FOSTERTALK MEMBERSHIP
SERVICES – INDEPENDENT
EVALUATION**

March 2021



PART OF THE MARTIN JAMES FOUNDATION

Fosterline
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your fostering advice service

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Acknowledgements

The time and experience given freely by foster carers to complete the online survey and participate in interviews is gratefully acknowledged. The time given by a representative of the Department for Education has also been extremely useful. This report is dedicated to children and young people in care and foster carers.

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FosterTalk

FosterTalk is a not for profit organisation providing high quality independent support to foster carers and their families throughout the UK since 2004. FosterTalk offers a comprehensive benefits package which includes access to qualified advisors for fostering advice and information, tax and benefits advice, legal advice, medical, counselling and education advice and support, together with legal insurance for foster carers and their families. FosterTalk also offers the Foster Carers Independent Support service (FISS) which provides face to face support to foster carers during the investigation of an allegation or serious complaint. FosterTalk are currently supporting around 18,000 foster carers and their households through memberships.

Martin James Foundation

Martin James Foundation is a global charity group with more than 30 years of experience of providing children's care services through Key Assets and FosterTalk, so collectively we're uniquely placed to support children who have been displaced through family breakdown or forced migration.

Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE)

The Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education is an inclusive, playful, experimental research collective that interacts closely and dynamically with Birmingham City University's community of nationally renowned practitioner education programmes. CSPACE supports the development and fruition of the research ideas of BCU staff, students and people from the communities that the University serves. A central principle of CSPACE is that practice-based research is a key aspect of the professional identity of health, social work and education practitioners. Practitioner research is a vital form of knowledge production that needs to be fed back into the policy-making cycle.

Funding

This evaluation was funded by FosterTalk.

Foreword

On behalf of FosterTalk, I would like to thank all of the brilliant foster parents throughout the UK whom have contributed to this independent report carried out by Birmingham City University.

Many children can spend years, and sometimes their whole childhoods, living with foster families, receiving the stability and support that all children need growing up.

Fostering provides a safe haven for children and young people for as long as they need it, and it allows social work professionals to work on the best outcome for the child or children involved. It continues to provide a positive, long-term substitute family experience for thousands of children and adds a huge amount of social value to society.

The decision to foster is life-changing for foster carers their families and ultimately the children they will end up caring for. We understand this is not a decision taken lightly and are proud to be able to support foster families on every step of their journey from pre-approval through to retirement.

The aim of this research **is** to undertake an independent evaluation of FosterTalk membership services and the role these play in the retention of foster carers for fostering services. This research will allow fostering services to shape future recruitment and retention of foster carers by better anticipating and responding to their needs and motivations.

This report shows that foster carers value the services they receive from FosterTalk and details a road map for improvement. FosterTalk will use the outcomes from this report to reflect on our practises, improve our services, and in turn improve the support we provide to the fostering community.

Daniel Croft

Chief Executive Officer

FosterTalk

Table of contents

Acknowledgements	2
Authors	2
FosterTalk	2
Martin James Foundation	2
Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE)	2
Funding	2
Foreword	3
List of figures	7
List of tables	7
Executive Summary	8
Introduction and background	13
Brief overview of relevant literature	13
Current state of Fostering	13
Motivation to foster	14
Challenges in fostering	15
Foster carers under stress - allegations	15
Foster carer wellbeing	17
Support for foster carers	17
Aims and objectives	18
Research methodology and methods	18
Findings	19
Cost of recruiting, assessing and approving foster carers	19
Department for Education (DfE) priorities	20
Survey	20
Fostering experience	21
Length of placements	22

Views on fostering	25
Enjoyable aspects of fostering	26
Challenges for foster carers	28
FosterTalk Membership	34
Contact with FosterTalk	35
FosterTalk membership services	35
Foster Carers Independent Support Service (FISS)	46
Effectiveness / impact of FISS support	47
Interviews	49
Current wellbeing	51
Most enjoyable day in fostering	51
Most challenging day	52
How fostering role has changed over the last year	52
Continuation of fostering role	53
Reasons for contact with FosterTalk	54
Most beneficial aspect of FosterTalk	55
Least beneficial aspect of FosterTalk	56
How FosterTalk could change	56
Discussion and conclusion	58
Current DfE priorities	58
Fostering experience	58
Views on fostering	58
FosterTalk membership	60
Foster carers independent support service (FISS)	62
Conclusion	63
Recommendations	63
Policy	63

FosterTalk membership services	64
References	66
Appendix A	68
Demographic details survey respondents	68
Appendix B	71
Demographic details of interview participants	71
Citation	72

List of figures

Figure 1: Motivation to foster	25
Figure 2: Enjoyable aspects of fostering	28
Figure 3: Challenges for foster carers	29
Figure 4: Factors influencing decision to stay in fostering	32
Figure 5: Sources of information about FosterTalk membership	34
Figure 6: Length of FosterTalk membership	35
Figure 7: Type of FosterTalk membership	35
Figure 8: FosterTalk membership services used	36
Figure 9: Most useful membership services	37
Figure 10: Least useful membership benefits	39
Figure 11: Ranking of FISS benefits	47
Figure 12: Ages of survey respondents.....	68
Figure 13: Geographic location of survey respondents.....	69
Figure 14: Faith of survey respondents	69
Figure 15: Ethnic heritage of survey respondents	70

List of tables

Table 1: Fostering experience in years	21
Table 2: Number of children fostered in total	22
Table 3: Number of children currently being fostered	22
Table 4: Longest placement	23
Table 5: Factors contributing to length of placement (longest)	23
Table 6: Shortest placement	24
Table 7: Factors contributing to length of placement (shortest)	25
Table 8: Other motivation to foster	26
Table 9: Other challenges of fostering	30
Table 10: Factors contributing to foster carers considering leaving fostering	31
Table 11: Other factors influencing decision to stay in fostering	33
Table 12: General comments about fostering experiences	34
Table 13: Ranking of membership services	37
Table 14: Rating membership services	43
Table 15: Sources of help for foster carers	44
Table 16: Positive aspects of broader FosterTalk services	45
Table 17: Suggested improvements to FosterTalk services	46
Table 18: Rating of FISS	48
Table 19: Details of interview participants	50
Table 20: Demographic details of interview participants	71

Executive Summary

The **aim** of this research was to undertake an external independent evaluation of FosterTalk membership services and its role in the retention of foster carers. **Methods** included an online survey, to which 422 foster carers responded, and interviews with eight foster carers. The survey included both open and closed questions. Foster carers were asked about their experiences of fostering, experiences of FosterTalk membership services and ideas for future developments. Survey respondents and interview participants came from diverse backgrounds and had varying degrees of fostering and FosterTalk membership experience. A representative from the Department for Education (DfE) also participated in an interview. The data collection was undertaken in November and December of 2020 and January, 2021 during a global pandemic at a time of varying degrees of national lockdown in the UK when parents and carers were responsible for home school activities for children and young people and face to face contact with health, education and social services was limited or non-existent. Data analysis allowed descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to emerge from the survey and interviews.

A brief **review of relevant literature** showed that the number of fostering households and children in foster care have increased between March 2018 and March 2019. Foster carers are intrinsically motivated by an altruistic desire to nurture children and young people towards better outcomes. Challenges for foster carers include relationships with other professionals, challenging situations with children and young people (such as allegations) and challenging behaviour. The number of allegations against foster carers is rising. Foster carers experience high levels of stress that can sometimes be categorised according to clinical thresholds. Government, local authority and agency organisational and structural support for foster carers plays a critical role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Current DfE priorities - From a discussion with a **DfE representative** it emerged that the successful recruitment and retention of foster carers is crucial to meeting a key priority area

Foster carers play a critical role in the life chances of individual children that they care for.

for the DfE of improving the life chances and wellbeing of children and young people in

care. This is because foster carers look after 72–73 per cent of all looked after children. Foster carers provide safe nurturing environments for children and young people in

care. FosterTalk have an influential position on how the DfE develop national policy in relation to supporting foster carers to ensure they are equipped to carry out their role.

Foster carers' views and experiences of fostering - The online survey and interviews show that foster carers are motivated to provide safe nurturing environments for children and young people and have described their roles as personally satisfying but challenging as noted

It's been a wonderful, exhausting, thoroughly rewarding, utterly exasperating, soul lifting, challenging experience that I love.

in the literature. Satisfaction is derived from children's achievements and rewarding behaviour. Challenges arise from

challenging behaviour, relationships with birth parents, other professionals (agencies, social workers and police officers) and allegation situations. Lack of support from other professionals in allegation situations is one of the most likely reasons for foster carers to

I could deal with the kids but actually I'm not sure I can deal with social services' response to that. So, the social worker is the most challenging part of the job to me.

consider leaving fostering, especially where proceedings to resolve them are lengthy. The current pandemic situation has placed additional stress on foster

carers especially if they are caring for children and young people with complex needs with reduced education, social care and health services and additional pressures such as home-schooling.

Views on FosterTalk membership - FosterTalk membership services were highly rated by survey respondents and interview participants. Foster carers value the accountancy and tax advice service, the magazine and newsletters and support with allegations although not all

The allegation was tough and I had to find the strength to carry on really but this gentleman supported me. I was very close to giving it all up and going back to work. He [the FosterTalk advisor] was just very, very genuine and I felt like he did believe in me; that gave me the courage to carry on.

foster carers were aware of the full range of membership benefits on offer. Foster carers agree that information and advice from FosterTalk is useful; that staff are knowledgeable and

helpful; that the information and advice they receive enables them to decide what to do next; that resolutions to problems are progressed after contact with FosterTalk and that without

FosterTalk there would be insufficient appropriate independent support for foster carers. FosterTalk enhances the support provided by fostering service providers and these services cannot be accessed elsewhere. In terms of foster carer wellbeing, foster carers agree that membership makes them feel valued; empowers them; is an important wellbeing resource for foster carers; helps to reduce the challenges of fostering; is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

A low number of respondents to the survey had used the foster carers independent support services (FISS) (provides foster carers with independent face to face support and professional

Without FISS support, I would not want to be a foster carer at all, as there would be literally NO advocacy for any foster carer going through an allegation...the service is absolutely essential to our

advice when facing concerns, complaints or allegations). Of those that had, they were able to resolve their issue and their confidence improved following a

FISS intervention. This increased the likelihood they would remain in fostering in the future.

Future developments - Although there were ample affirming comments about FosterTalk membership services, for example ‘carry on as you are’ and ‘excellent service’, some improvements to them were suggested by respondents to the survey and interview

So, up till this day now I’ve never been able to utilise that App because, you know, it’s not accepting my information.

participants. Improvements to the App including more technical support for it; improvements to the high street

discount scheme; awareness raising of the full range of membership benefits and increased visibility of key contact information, more foster carer stories, consistent support throughout an issue/concern, direct self-referral, and peer support forums were all suggested.

Recommendations for policy - The DfE prioritises for children in care value the role of foster carers in the lifelong achievement and wellbeing of children and young people in care. Foster carers do not operate in a silo. They are supported by a network of agencies, professionals and membership services. The following recommendations are made for policy makers to consider:

- The membership services provided by FosterTalk play an important role in the retention of foster carers and the continuation of these services is essential.
- Commission research into the relationship and communication between other professionals (social workers, fostering agencies and police officers) and foster carers in order to understand current practices.
- Training for social workers, Local Authorities (LAs) and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) as well as other professionals such as police criminal justice professionals about sensitive and professional approaches to working with foster carers and children in care needs to be considered following research into current practices.

Recommendations for FosterTalk membership services - FosterTalk membership services play a key role in the retention of foster carers according to the findings of this evaluation. There are key strengths such as the services for tax and financial advice, support for allegations, the magazine and newsletters and the discount scheme has the potential to be useful. However there are some aspects of the membership services that could be improved as highlighted in the recommendations below:

- Provide/improve technical support for the App.
- Communicate with members about the full range of services available to them at the

I think they could make their services better known, because some people would get an email or a generic email or a generic magazine through the post and ignore it, whereas if someone came to support group and talked to them about what actually being a member of FosterTalk is, that that would be beneficial for everybody.

beginning of their membership and send frequent reminders. Consider alternative methods of communicating this information, for example

visiting agencies and LAs as well as social media platforms.

- Review the discount scheme and ensure that discounts are relevant to members and that the scheme is easy to use.

- Ensuring that all telephone numbers and communication media are visible and easy to find on the website and included in personal emails and other communication from FosterTalk to members.
- Ensure that foster carers are provided with consistent support throughout so that their story has to be recounted as few times as possible and to facilitate relationship-building with one key member of staff.
- Members would appreciate direct self-referral for services where agency or LA referral is required.

Do more of the real world, do more of what is real within fostering, for the carers as much as the young people. Fostering is very much seen as a hobby, and not necessarily as a profession. I don't want to know about the senior executive, or the one off, I want to know about the real people that are there at the coalface.

- Newsletters and magazines should focus on the lived experiences of foster carers with examples of ways in which they

have used the services and how they have benefitted from them. This would raise the profile of the services and enable foster carers to perceive situations in which they could use them. It would also enable other professionals to perceive fostering as a profession and elicit more respect for foster carers.

Introduction and background

The aim of this research was to evaluate FosterTalk membership services. FosterTalk is a not for profit organisation providing high quality independent support to foster carers and their families throughout the UK since 2004. FosterTalk was established in response to a perceived need for foster carers to have access to a greater degree of independent support and currently offers a comprehensive benefits package which includes access to qualified advisors for fostering advice and information, tax and benefits advice, legal advice, medical, counselling and education advice and support, together with legal insurance for foster carers and their families. FosterTalk also offers the Foster Carers Independent Support service (FISS) which provides face to face support to foster carers during the investigation of an allegation or serious complaint. FosterTalk are currently supporting around 18,000 foster carers and their households through memberships.

Since 2013, FosterTalk has also delivered Fosterline England on behalf of the Department for Education. Fosterline offers free, impartial advice information and support to foster carers and prospective foster carers via their interactive website www.fosterline.info and their team of qualified fostering advisors. Delivering these services give FosterTalk a unique insight into the challenges facing foster carers in the course of their work caring for some of the most vulnerable children and young people in society. Through their work, they seek to raise the profile of foster carers as key members of the children's social care workforce and strive to ensure that they receive the recognition and support that they deserve. In order to do this FosterTalk work closely with colleagues in the Children in Care Team at the Department for Education with whom they share issues raised by foster carers and attempt to seek solutions. They have also been able to represent foster carers views directly to the Children's Minister.

Brief overview of relevant literature

Current state of Fostering

According to the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), on 31 March 2019, there were 44,450 fostering households, a 2% increase compared with 31 March 2018. In the same period, there has been a 3% increase in the number of children in foster care. There were almost 55,000 children and young people placed with foster carers on 31 March 2019. Although the number of approved fostering places has increased by 1% since 31 March 2018,

the number of children entering foster care has increased at a faster pace (3%). This means that there were fewer places available for children to be placed in on 31 March 2019 than the same date in 2018. In total, 9,740 applications to be a foster carer were received during 2018 to 2019. This is a decrease compared with last year (10,540 applications). Of all applications received during 2018 to 2019, 6,235 (64%) were completed in year. This is a slight decrease compared with 2017 to 2018, when 66% of applications were completed in year. The number of approved foster carers has increased by 2%, from 73,530 on 31 March 2018 to 75,260 on 31 March 2019. The number of carers increased by 2% in both the LA and IFA sectors, with LA agencies accounting for almost two thirds of all carers (65%), as in previous years. (Ofsted, 2020)

Motivation to foster

Two main forms of motivation are well established: intrinsic and extrinsic (Rodgers *et al*, 2006). Intrinsic motivators play a key role in the initial decision to become a foster carer (Denby *et al*, 1999). In relation to fostering, intrinsic motivators may include: a sense of altruism or religious affiliations, foster carers' desire to have a child of their own to raise and love, a desire to prevent harm, to provide company for an only child or to fill a void created by an 'empty nest' (Rodgers *et al*, 2006). Key motivating factors can be meeting or knowing other foster carers as a child or adult or, less often, contact with a fostered child or young person (Sebba, 2012). Additionally, many kinship carers experience a sense of duty or obligation. Some kinship carers are motivated by personal life experiences and prior professional experiences (Blackburn, 2015). In a minority of cases, a foster carer's desire to improve their own condition through exploiting the child or system has been noted (Coulton, Roberts and Williams, 2008).

Denby *et al* (1999) conducted a large-scale survey of 539 foster carers in Ohio, America. The researchers found that whilst intrinsic motivators are regarded as central to the initial decision to foster, extrinsic motivators are a crucial factor in keeping foster carers in their role. Levels of financial compensation, clarity of expectations and a sense of being valued by a professional team who recognise the carers' knowledge of the foster child are important factors in the retention of carers (Randle *et al*, 2016; Rodger, 2006). The highest levels of satisfaction in fostering appear to result from an initial desire to be a loving parent combined with professional approval and appropriate guidance. It is suggested that the stronger the

initial internal motivation the greater the likelihood of foster carers remaining in their role (Denby *et al*, 1999).

It is apparent that the ability and intent to continue fostering also relies largely on social and professional relationships (Narey and Owers, 2018; Denby *et al*, 1999). Effective communication with agency workers and other foster parents can support carers' ability to remain in their role. Equity theory may help explain why some foster carers become dissatisfied and ultimately leave their positions. Rodgers *et al* (2006) suggest that when foster carers engage in social comparison they may form an unfavourable evaluation of the available financial compensation and the conditions of their role. In this situation, carers may then seek to redress the balance in one of three main ways: by changing foster agency to seek a higher level of financial compensation, reducing the amount of energy invested in the role or permanently withdrawing from the role.

Challenges in fostering

The main challenges reported by foster carers in their fostering role reported in 2015 related to communication and relationships with Local Authorities, Independent Fostering Associations and social workers as well as the communication between professionals within these organisations (Blackburn, 2015; 2016). Social workers can sometimes 'lack the skills to personalise their approaches to supporting children, treating them as a homogenous group without individual needs and personalities and managers in agencies and LAs reportedly have more in common with one another than they do with foster carers or children (Blackburn, 2016). A perceived tick-box approach adopted by other professionals to dealing with foster carers has also been reported with one participant from an evaluation of Fosterline England helpline (Blackburn, 2015) stressing that 'you cannot render the complexities of human behaviour within the context of box ticking' (Blackburn 2016: 170).

Foster carers under stress - allegations

During 2018 to 2019, there were 2,705 allegations of abuse made against foster carers. This is the highest number of allegations in any year since 2014 to 2015 (Ofsted, 2020). Just under two thirds of allegations of abuse in 2018 to 2019 (1,745 or 65%) were made by fostered children against their foster carers, which is the same proportion as last year. The other third came from other sources which were not discussed by Ofsted (2020).

In the same way as the previous year, the majority of allegations (59%) were made in the LA sector, which is to be expected because more children are placed with LAs. Physical abuse has continued to account for the largest number of allegations over the last five years. In 2018 to 2019, 58% of all allegations were related to physical abuse; this percentage has remained very similar since 2014 to 2015. Allegations of sexual abuse continue to be the least common, accounting for 6%. This is a slight decrease from 8% in previous years. Just over half (57%) of all allegations resulted in an outcome of no further action, and around a quarter (26%) were referred on, in line with previous years. Continued monitoring of foster carers was a more common outcome for LAs (19%) than for IFAs (14%) (Ofsted, 2020).

Findings from two small-scale studies examining the impact of allegations (Plumridge and Sebba, 2016; Minty and Bray, 2001) (with 30 and 22 set of carers interviewed respectively) reported that foster carers were almost routinely denied aspects of natural justice accorded birth parents. Participants in both studies recalled that following an allegation they were not clearly informed in writing of the allegation made against them, the processes involved in the investigation or, subsequently, of the outcome. Nor were they permitted to put their side of the story at case conferences and other serious incident meetings. Plumridge and Sebba also found that carers were not aware of the support they were entitled to receive. The combination of the initial allegation and the lack of clarity and support ‘led to confusion, destruction of confidence and dismay’ for some participants in Plumridge and Sebba’s research (2016:39).

Most recently, Narey and Owers reviewed foster care in England for the Department for Education (DfE) in 2018. This review states that allegations within foster care are not widespread and suggests that such risks are an aspect of many caring roles. This contrasts sharply with Ofsted’s report that there are rising number of allegations against foster carers reported (Ofsted, 2020) However, Narey and Owers (ibid) also recognise that processes around the reporting and handling of allegations are not consistent and that foster carers reported the demoralising impact of trivial issues which were treated as formal allegations. Narey and Owers focus in more depth on the pervasive fear of allegations and its impact on the relationship between foster agency, carer and child. For example, they cite one independent fostering agency who caution male foster carers against showing physical affection or even being alone in car with any children in their care. The review states that

foster carers are routinely advised to avoid hugs or kisses without explicitly checking with the child first. Narey and Owers highlight the nurturing potential of safe and appropriate physical contact, they urge the DfE to give clearer guidance around the issue and commend TACT (a fostering charity) for stating: ‘showing affection is a very important part of your caring role and should never be avoided because of the fear of allegations’ (2018:33). In an independent evaluation of Fosterline England (Blackburn, 2015) allegations were the second most common reason for foster carers using the independent helpline. One consequence of using the helpline was a reminder that they were ‘good enough to do the job’. (Blackburn, 2016: 175) as they felt listened to and understood.

Foster carer wellbeing

Harding, Murray, Shakespeare-Finch and Frey (2018) researched placement, carer, and child characteristics related to perceived foster parent stress in a sample of 158 foster and kin carers in Queensland, Australia. Carers completed a self-report online survey that assessed parenting stress, and carer perceptions of the child in their care and the child protection system. Overall, foster carers reported high stress, with 20% in the clinical range on the Parenting Stress Index (PSI-4-SF). This stress was significantly higher for those providing care for children with carer-reported high emotional and behavioural problems. Both foster carer stress and the child's emotional and behavioural challenges were significantly related to placement factors, such as, the length of time the child had been in their current placement, and the child protection court order under which the child had been placed. The findings of the study highlight the challenges to caregivers in out-of-home care and the need for individualised services, resources and supports for caregivers under stress.

Support for foster carers

There is mounting recognition of the difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining foster carers. In particular, the increasingly complex needs of children looked after, and the impact on viability of placements—has resulted in wide spread acknowledgement of the need to provide carers with a range of support services (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Sinclair *et al.*, 2000) including culturally sensitive and sophisticated support mechanisms (Thompson and Rickford, 2000). Alongside professional, the importance of peer support is also recognised. Carers report that support and advice from other carers is crucial – particularly during times of uncertainty. Peer to peer support occurs through sharing knowledge, experience, practical help, respite and social interaction (Narey and Owers, 2018). In their review of foster care in

England, Narey and Owers highlight *The Mockingbird Family Model* – a relatively small-scale project working with 17 fostering agencies. This project creates important networks between foster homes. One foster home acts as a hub, the carers are supported by a liaison officer and together they offer support to six to ten satellite foster homes. The hub home generates peer support, coaching, planned and emergency respite care, and social events for families. It is reported that this model, through increasing support and reducing isolation, is improving placement stability (Narey and Owers, 2018.)

Aims and objectives

The aim of this research was to undertake an external independent evaluation of FosterTalk membership services and the role these in the retention of foster carers for fostering services.

Research methodology and methods

Using a case study mixed-methods approach the evaluation combined findings from an online survey and in-depth interviews with foster carers and DfE stakeholders (Yin 2014; Ballach, 1999).

Strand 1: Survey. FosterTalk holds the details of a large number of existing members. It was beneficial to promote a survey to all service users in order to reduce any bias in the survey responses and increase the likelihood of a representative sample of survey participants. However, a response rate of 50 members was considered sufficient to provide a substantial evaluation. The survey a combination of closed questions so that descriptive statistics could convey an overall view of the benefits of membership and the role of FosterTalk in the retention of foster carers and open qualitative questions to enable foster carers to provide contextual information on their closed responses.

Strand 2: Interviews - eight carers/potential foster carers were selected for in-depth interview and discussion utilising an online telephone platform. Selecting participants from a socially and culturally diverse cross section was important. A key DfE member was also invited to participate in an interview as a stakeholder.

Analysis

Quantitative data from closed/rating survey questions is displayed as frequencies; in qualitative data, *a priori* themes was analysed to address research questions and emergent themes then identified.

Sampling

Case study participants were selected to provide a maximal variation of foster carers utilising the services of FosterTalk including diversity of social and cultural variables. All research participants were treated equally regardless of gender, colour, ethnic or national origin, (dis)ability, socio-economic background, religious or political beliefs, trades union membership, family circumstances, sexual orientation or other irrelevant distinction. The data was analysed systematically to allow both common and discrepant themes to emerge, both of which will be reported, in order to reduce any bias.

Ethical considerations

Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) were adhered to and informed day-to-day conduct and ethical standards. Approval was sought from Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences Academic Ethics Committee (FAEC), Birmingham City University for review of ethical issues related to the study as a whole.

Participants were briefed and provided with an information sheet explaining the nature, purpose and planned dissemination of the evaluation. Participants' right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any stage of the project was explicitly stated and at all times respected. A guarantee of confidentiality was provided and anonymity maintained at all times. No links between participants and locations is included in outputs to further secure anonymity. Pseudonyms have replaced names and establishments.

Findings

Cost of recruiting, assessing and approving foster carers

The number of approved foster carers has increased by 2%, from 73,530 on 31 March 2018 to 75,260 on 31 March 2019. The number of carers increased by 2% in both the LA and IFA sectors, with LA agencies accounting for almost two thirds of all carers

(65%), as in previous years (Ofsted, 2020 www.gov.uk). A freedom of information request was sent to the Department for Education by Dr. Matchett in order to elicit costs associated with recruiting, assessing and approving foster carers. The response received was that the Department for Education does not hold this information about the cost of recruiting new foster carers ‘as it is the local authority’s and the independent fostering agency’s responsibility to recruit, assess and approve a new foster carer’. However, a recent report from KEEP estimated that the recruitment and approval of each new foster carer unit costs around £13,000 ([Cost Effectiveness, KEEP](#)). The estimated cost to a local authority of supporting a foster placement is £45,982 per year, including all social care activity to support the placement, care plans and reviews, as well as placement fees/allowances. In 2017-18, local authorities spent £1.61 billion on the 79,000 looked-after children in foster care, £20,400 per child (Oliver Albert Freiberg Email communication 6th November 2020).

Department for Education (DfE) priorities

An interview with a representative of the DfE was conducted in order to highlight current DfE priorities for children in care. From this interview it emerged that the successful recruitment and retention of foster carers is crucial to meeting a key priority area for the DfE of improving the life chances and wellbeing of children and young people in care. This is because foster carers look after 72–73 per cent of all looked after children. Foster carers provide safe nurturing environments for children and young people in care. FosterTalk have an influential position on how the DfE develop national policy in relation to supporting foster carers to ensure they are equipped to carry out their role.

Survey

An online survey was developed, trialled with two foster carers and launched on the 19th November. The survey link was emailed by FosterTalk to members and the survey remained open until 14th December. An incentive of a Christmas Hamper was offered to boost responses after an initial low response. 422 responses were subsequently received to the online survey. One participant submitted two responses in error so their first response was excluded and their second included. The demographic and other contextual information about survey respondents can be found in Appendix A. It’s important to note that for the survey not all respondents answered all questions. Therefore total responses do not always equate to 100%.

The data were analysed thematically using the research questions as a priori themes allowing surprises to emerge. Both common and discrepant themes have been reported in order to reduce bias.

Fostering experience

Respondents had been fostering for varied lengths of time from less than a year (45 respondents) to more than 20 years (29 respondents) as shown in Table 1. The highest number of respondents had been fostering for 2 – 5 years (99 respondents) or 5-10 years (97 respondents).

Length of time fostering	Number of respondents
Less than 1 year	45
1-2 years	40
2-5 years	99
5-10 years	97
10-15 years	83
15-20 years	29
More than 20 years	29

Table 1: Fostering experience in years

Just over half of all respondents (255 respondents) had fostered 10 or less children, with a smaller number (83 respondents) having fostered between 10 and 20 children as shown in Table 2. Other respondents had fostered larger numbers of children and some respondents (3) had fostered more than 200 children.

Number of children fostered in total	Number of respondents
0-10	255
10-20	83
20-30	24
30-40	15
40-50	8
50-100	21

100-200	6
More than 200	3
Unable to classify	7

Table 2: Number of children fostered in total

The number of children currently being fostered by respondents also varied greatly with the majority either fostering 1 child (178 respondents) or 2 children (121 respondents). Smaller numbers of respondents were fostering 5 or more (3 respondents) and 55 respondents were not fostering any children at all at the present time as shown in Table 3.

Number of children currently fostered	Number of respondents
None	55
1	178
2	121
3	53
4	9
5 or more	3
Unable to classify	3

Table 3: Number of children currently being fostered

Length of placements

Longest placement

Just over one quarter of respondents had experienced child placements longer than two years and another quarter placements longer than five years shown in Table 4. Fewer respondents reported placements longer than 10 years (39 respondents). Some reported placements of 12-24 months (60 respondents), 6-12 months (36 respondents), 3-6 months (14 respondents), 1-3 months (7 respondents), 2-4 weeks (1 respondent) or less than a week (4 respondents).

Length of time	Number of participants
Less than a week	4
1-2 weeks	0
2-4 weeks	1

1-3 months	7
3-6 months	14
6-12 months	36
12-24 months	60
Longer than 2 years	133
Longer than 5 years	103
Longer than 10 years	39
Unable to classify	25

Table 4: Longest placement

As shown in Table 5, there were a number of factors that contributed to lengthy placements the most significant of which (83 respondents) was that the placement was successful or that the child(ren) was part of the family (58 respondents).

Reason/contributing factor	Number of respondents
Successful placement	83
The child/ren was/were part of the family	58
The placement had a pre-determined length (although may have varied from the original plan slightly)	56
The child matured into adulthood and went to live independently	39
The foster carer took time to develop a bond with the child and nurtured their	21
The foster carer received good support from social workers/education/fostering agency	20
The child remained with the foster carer until s/he was adopted	16
Child characteristics (for example the child was 'lovable' or the child was diagnosed with autism)	12
The child's family circumstances changed	11
External processes delayed other arrangements for the child	9
Covid-19 influenced the length of placement	6
Lack of support from social workers/other agencies	5
Foster carer training influenced the length of placements	4
Allegations from children	4
The placement was kinship care	4
A special guardianship order came into effect	3
Regular respite helped	2
The child moved into residential care	1

Table 5: Factors contributing to length of placement (longest)

Shortest placement

Approximately one quarter of respondents reported placements that lasted less than a week (105 respondents) as shown in Table 6. The spread of shortest placements was widely spread ranging from 1-2 weeks (28 respondents) to longer than 10 years (2 respondents).

Length of time	Number of respondents
Less than a week	105
1-2 weeks	28
2-4 weeks	46
1-3 months	51
3-6 months	46
6-12 months	46
12-24 months	16
Longer than 2 years	25
Longer than 5 years	6
Longer than 10 years	2
Unable to classify	51

Table 6: Shortest placement

As shown in Table 7, factors contributing to short placements range from child characteristics (such as violence) (54 respondents) to a pre-determined length for the placement (46 respondents) and the child absconding (13 respondents).

Reason/contributing factor	Number of respondents
Child characteristics (for example violence)	54
The placement was for respite care	47
The placement had a pre-determined length (although may have varied from the original plan slightly)	46
The placement was for emergency care	39
Unsuccessful placement	16
The child is in long term care and still with the family	14
The child absconded	13
The child matured into adulthood and went to live independently	9
The child was adopted	9
The placement was a parent/child assessment placement	4
The child was moved to join his/her siblings	4
The child moved to residential care	4
Parental factors (e.g. language, violence placing the child or foster family)	2

at risk)	
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Table 7: Factors contributing to length of placement (shortest)

Views on fostering

Motivation to foster

As shown in Figure 1, the majority (345 or 81.8%) of respondents were motivated to foster by an intrinsic desire to provide a safe nurturing environment for children and young people. A smaller number (roughly one third) had the accommodation and space and fewer entered fostering because it was suggested to them, they saw an advertisement for fostering or viewed it as a source of income. As the responses can be combined (participants were able to select more than one response) it's clear that motivation can be multi-dimensional.

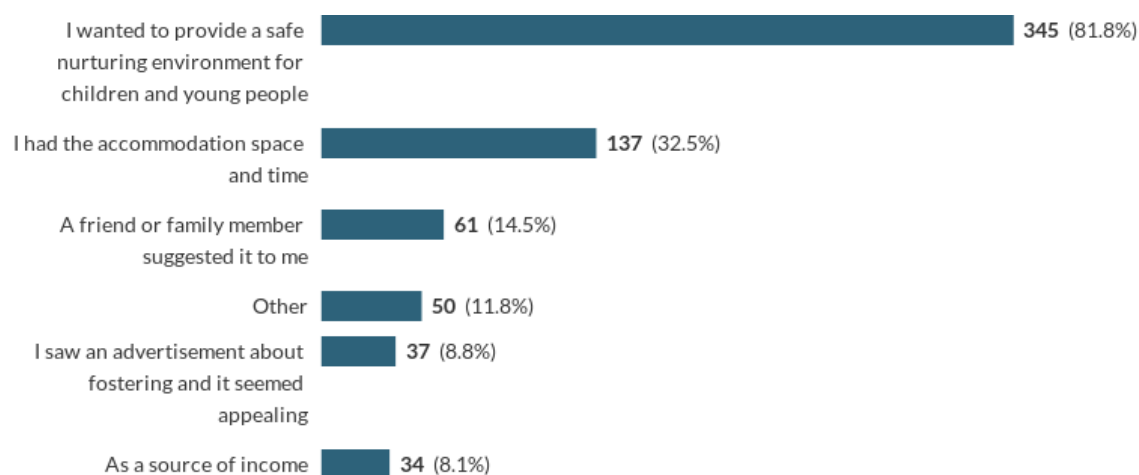


Figure 1: Motivation to foster

Even though only 50 people responded in the other category the following 56 responses were recorded and reported in Table 4. The most significant reason in this category reported by 18 respondents was the provision of Kinship care, followed by empathy for others (9 respondents) and wanting to give back after having been fostered personally (8 respondents). Previous careers, friends and/or family having been fostered or being foster carers themselves were reported by a few respondents as well as having space spare in the home following adult offspring leaving the family home.

Reason	Number of respondents
To provide kinship care	18

Empathy for others	9
Fostered themselves and wanted to 'give back'	8
Previous career (e.g. social worker, health professionals) motivated them	5
Other family members or friends were fostered as a child	4
Other family members were foster carers	4
Had the space due to adult offspring leaving home or a change in living circumstances	3
Not able to have their own children	1
As a route to adoption	1
A friend needed care for their child	1
Had a good childhood and wanted to provide this for children in care	1
To improve the foster care practice they had observed in other foster carers	1
Total	56

Table 8: Other motivation to foster

Enjoyable aspects of fostering

The most enjoyable aspect of fostering reported by 399 (94.5%) of respondents was providing a secure base for children followed closely by developing a positive bond with foster children (367 or 87%). Other important issues were the personal satisfaction from seeing foster children's growing confidence was important to 362 (85.8%), helping children with practical issues (302 or 71.6%), increasing their own understanding of child development (260 or 61.6%), helping children with friendships (233 (55.2%). Less significant but still important were helping children with school work (209 (49.5%), attending training (205 or 48.6%), sharing ideas with other foster carers (199 or 47.2%), working with other agencies (177 or 41.9%), relationship with birth parents (105 or 24.9%) and others (see table below).

Included in the other category were multiple individual comments mainly relating to enriching children's lives:

- Giving. Holidays, days out, clothes, inviting friends around
- Helping the child to move on to forever placements with confidence and keeping in touch to hear their progress and provide support to their birth/adoptive family
- Just seeing the difference you can make by not giving up on someone

- Helping children develop a strong and secure sense of self. Filling in their gaps in early development
- Giving children a family who accepted them as they are forever
- Giving the children a more positive life outcome.
- My daughter and I both love having more children in the house, we feel it completes our family and we love helping our foster children to feel part of our loved family, so they can enjoy their time with us as far as possible, have a secure base here, and have happy memories here form part of their positive life story and for a future successful life.
- Taking in children that would otherwise be in a residential setting and those that have complex needs and are hard to find foster homes for.
- Helping a child unpick and manage the trauma using therapeutic methods.
- Satisfaction in seeing a child achieves success in their goal in life and making a difference in their life.

However, some comments were also about families or fostering more broadly:

- Not all fostering is childcare. Its parent and child too - so I enjoy helping young parents form a positive and healthy bond with their baby.
- Supporting parents to remain with their children where possible
- Representing other foster carers to help them, the service and ultimately the LAC and young people.

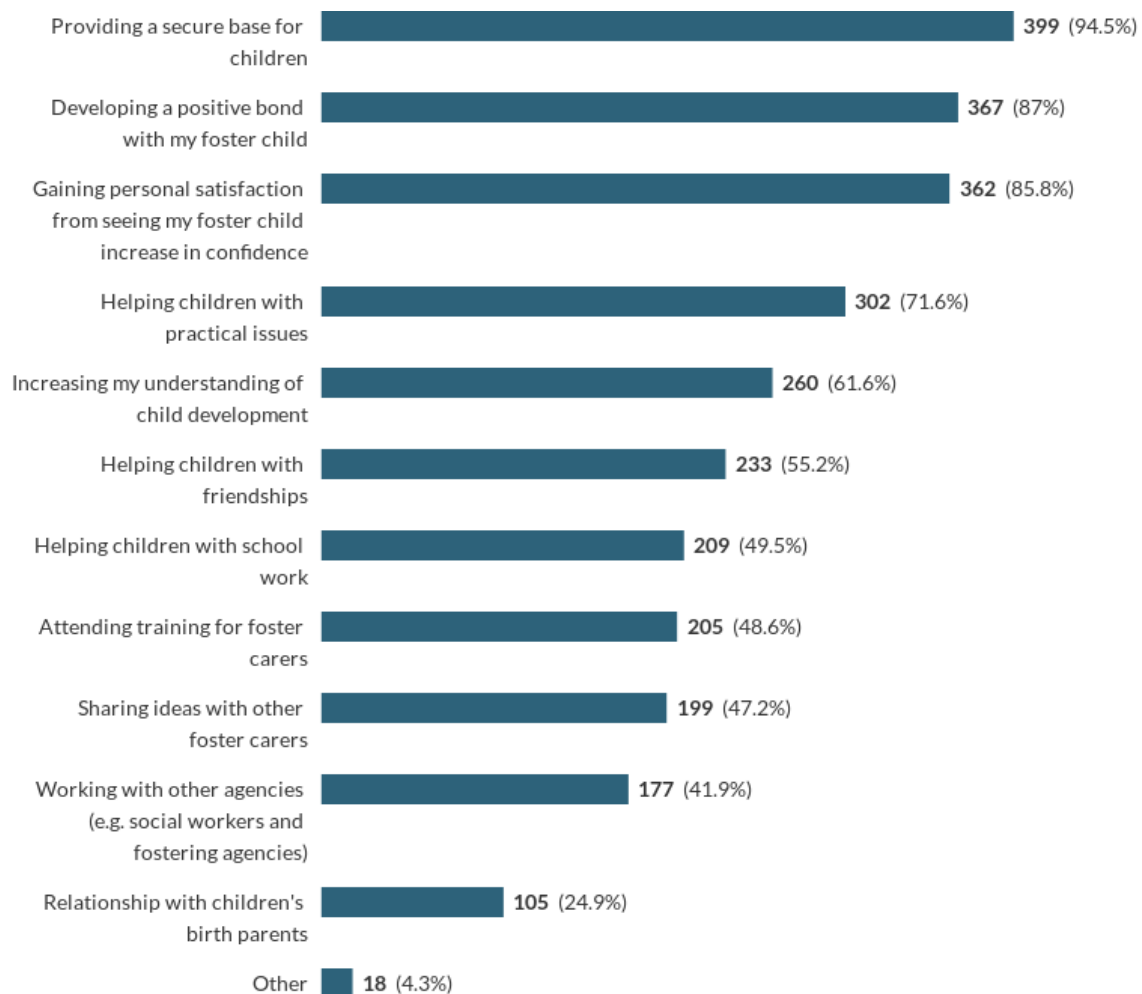


Figure 2: Enjoyable aspects of fostering

Challenges for foster carers

Just over half of respondents indicated that children's behaviour represented the most significant challenge (225 or 53.3%) and a further third (130 or 30.8%) mentioned allegations as being a particular challenge. Nearly a third (126 or 26.9%) mentioned relationships with birth parents and lack of support (118 or 28%) as being challenging. Other less significant but no less challenging issues included funding (93 or 22%), relationship with local authority (82 or 19.4%), relationship with social worker (80 or 19%), other challenges (41 or 9.7%), relationship with educators (31 or 7.3%), access to training 17 or 4%), relationship with fostering agency (13 or 3.1%).

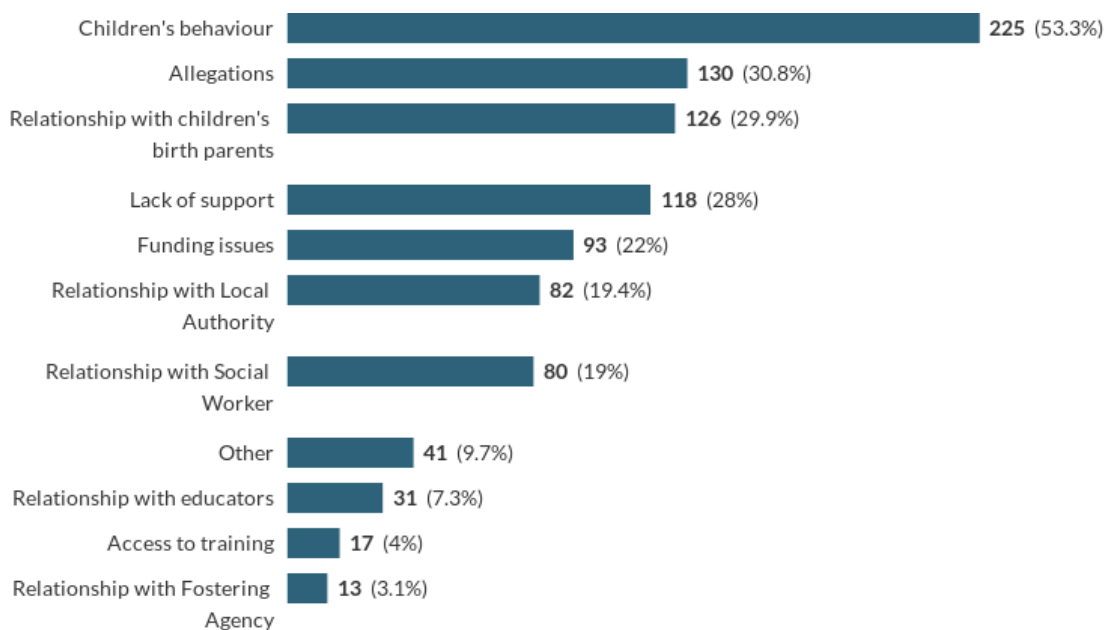


Figure 3: Challenges for foster carers

Included in the other category were challenges with services, child behaviour, resources and processes not to mention the impact of the current pandemic, exemplified by the following comments:

We love our job is good for us and good for them however we were with a private fostering agency and they could not provide the children that we felt we could help with best so we went to a local authority we have a lot of social worker problems as they do not remain in their posts for more than what appear to be just a few weeks or months.

Parting with them when they move on even though I know it is the right thing for them. A little piece of my heart goes with each of them.

We know the pandemic has put a strain on services and time, but we feel the expectation and demand put on us has been far beyond what was explained in our training.

Challenge	Number of respondents
Accessing support/equipment/funding for children with needs	5
Abusive/violent behaviour towards self or other family members from children	3
Training (travel to training or having to redo training)	2

The fostering system	2
Saying goodbye to children	2
Communication / information available / timing	2
Social workers	2
Conflict with child's family members	1
Other professionals (e.g. psychologist, occupational therapist	1
Lack of care planning by the local authority	1
Fragmented services	1
Insufficient information about children to tailor support for them	1
Lengthy assessment processes for children	1
Lack of parent and child knowledge in the system	1
Weekend support	1
Lack of respite	1
Lack of knowledge/sensitivity by others towards children in the care system	1
Support at home for parents who may have mental health or relationship issues	1
Impact of Covid-19 on home situation	1
Not being listened to	1
Trying to please others	1

Table 9: Other challenges of fostering

Just over half (216 or 51.2%) of respondents had their contract organised by a Local Authority with the remainder (208 or 48.5%) being organised by an independent fostering agency. 176 foster carers (41.7%) admitted to considering leaving fostering at some point in their fostering career for a variety of reasons as shown in Table 10. A high number of participants stated that they felt unsupported by their social workers and foster agencies. The reported lack of support was felt most acutely during times of crisis. Several respondents recalled a lack of support during difficult foster placements where the child in their care had been violent either towards them or other family members. Allegations made against foster carers were also cited as a time when support was needed but not received. Additionally, participants noted the length of time taken to resolve allegations (approximately a year) which contributed significantly to their sense of anxiety and distress. A lack of support during difficult placements and allegations contributed to the five most frequently cited reasons for considering leaving foster caring. Nine participants also highlighted poor relationships with social workers and fostering agencies as a reason for considering leaving their roles. The comments made by these participants were powerfully worded – the sentiments expressed by this participant were repeated in the other eight responses: [There was a] ‘lack of support,

feeling that our opinion is not worth anything, a general lack of respect from other professionals in the team’. Participants explained that they did feel their views about the foster child were valued and that too frequently they were not involved in decision making. Throughout these responses the emotional impact of fostering is conveyed and is described as ‘compassion fatigue’ three times in the survey. One participant captured the distinct challenges involved in foster caring, stating: ‘we went through a period of social workers changing, nobody knew the case and I felt alone. This was in addition to inconsistent decisions and money; if we hadn’t fallen in love with our placement I think it would have been very different’.

Reason/contributing factor	Number of participants
Lack of support from social workers and/or fostering agency	52
Difficult placement	21
The emotional impact	20
Allegations	15
Treated with a lack of respect (by social workers)	9
Concerns about how foster care is managed by agency or local authority	8
Placement broke down	7
Stress on family members	7
Break due to adopting a child or a special guardianship	6
Retirement	6
Hard work involved	5
Financial reasons	5
Lack of suitable placements	4
Personal issues	4
Pressures from fostering agency	3
Health concerns	3
Disappointment	1
Placement ended	1
Unsuitable placement	1
Age	1
Return to full time work	1

Table 10: Factors contributing to foster carers considering leaving fostering

A variety of factors influenced carers to stay in fostering, the most significant of which was that they enjoyed their fostering role and did not want to leave reported by 79.8% of respondents.

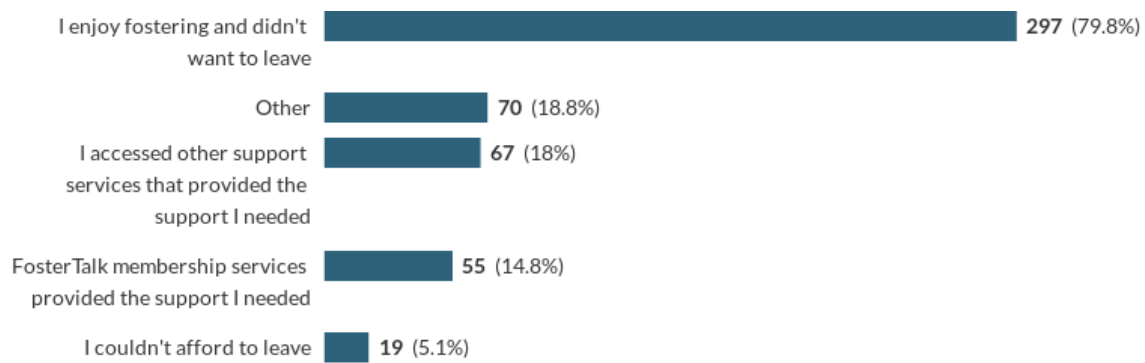


Figure 4: Factors influencing decision to stay in fostering

The commitment to the children in their care provided sufficient motivation to remain in fostering roles despite the challenges experienced as shown in Table 11. This reiterates the importance of personal commitment and supportive relationships in remaining in a fostering role. Where participants felt they had been supported effectively by social workers and/or fostering agencies they commented on the difference this had made to their ability to continue fostering. One stated: ‘My fostering agency recognised how difficult the placement had become, how hard I worked to try to get things back on track and they gave me a paid three month break to recharge with support from my social worker and still taking part in our support groups, etc.’. This response also appears to demonstrate that the foster agency treated carer with respect and that they valued their contribution. However, overwhelmingly participants commented on their sense of personal commitment to the children in their care. This factor was cited in twenty-three responses and is effectively captured by the participant who stated: ‘I couldn’t let the child down.’

Reason/contributing factor	Number of participants
Personal commitment	23
Support from social workers	20
Good placement	17
Became kinship placement	2
Placement ended so situation improved	2
Might still leave	2
Lack of choice	2
Changing role – moving to respite foster care	2
Took some time off	2
Early in foster care as a career – too early to give up	2
Change of personnel	2

Change of foster agency	1
Allegation proved as unfounded	1
Giving it 'one more chance'	1
It's my job	1

Table 11: Other factors influencing decision to stay in fostering

A general question about fostering experiences was completed by 209 participants and allowed them to comment on any aspect of their fostering experience and the comments shared highlight the wide range of emotions and experiences involved in the role. It is significant that 104 responses emphasized the level of personal satisfaction involved in foster caring with many participants commenting on the joy of seeing a child gain confidence and happiness. Many participants reflected on the challenging but ultimately rewarding nature of foster care. One respondent stated: 'it's been a wonderful, exhausting, thoroughly rewarding, utterly exasperating, soul lifting, challenging experience that I love. I'm so pleased I can keep my current sibling group of 3 together as a unit. 'Stress' is referred to seventeen times in this survey which further evidences the complex emotional impact of foster care. Respondents explained that foster care often involves several sacrifices in terms of lifestyle, family and/or finances. Three participants also commented on the distress caused by placements ending with children they have grown to love.

There appeared to be a tension in participants' accounts between the sense of pride taken in fostering caring and frustration at the way they felt the role can be perceived by social workers, fostering agencies and local authorities. Fifteen participants commented that at times their views had not been listened to and their experiences had not been valued. One participant stated that their treatment by the local authority had been 'deplorable'. Another detailed his/her frustration: 'There's a lack of respect from professionals. I have an honours degree in Youth Studies and an advanced post-graduate diploma in therapeutic counselling. I sit on several boards, I am the Deputy District Commissioner for Scouts, the Parent Council Chairperson for the largest school in the area, and I am spoken to like I am 5! Not by my agency, by the local authority!' Other respondents highlighted the associated challenges of social workers' demanding workload. Eight participants stated that they had experienced positive and supportive relationships which had proved to be invaluable.

Responses	Number of participants
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High levels of personal satisfaction expressed	104
Lack of recognition, respect and protection	15
Foster caring is challenging	13
Lack of support for foster carers from social workers	13
The emotional impact of foster caring	12
Concerns about poor management – concerns about Ofsted reports	9
Good support from social workers	8
Financial worries	6
Importance of relationship with social worker	5
Frustrations about the lack of clarity around processes	4
Lack of support for children from social workers and support services	3
Social worker's workload too high to offer meaningful support	2
Poor communication from social workers	2
FosterTalk support has been valuable	2
Mixed experiences of placements	1
Fostering caring is a lifestyle choice	1
Level of stress involved	1
The chance to develop long term relationships with the children	1
The importance of good initial matching	1
Lack of placements has been a surprise	1
Feeling undervalued	1
Frustration with the amount of paperwork	1

Table 12: General comments about fostering experiences

FosterTalk Membership

The majority of respondents had been informed about FosterTalk membership services from their Local Authority (48.3%) or from their Fostering Agency (46%).

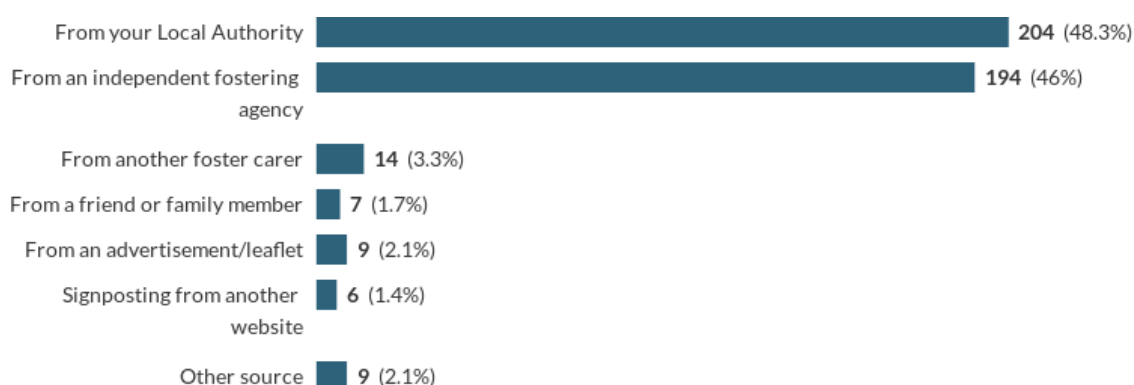


Figure 5: Sources of information about FosterTalk membership

Respondents had been members of FosterTalk for varying lengths of time as shown in figure 6 with roughly one quarter (102 or 24.2%) having been members for more than four years.

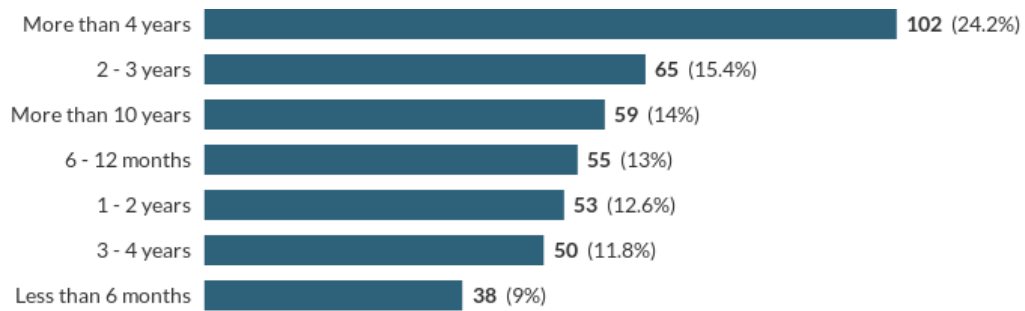


Figure 6: Length of FosterTalk membership

The majority of respondents had full or retired membership for approved foster carers (321 or 76.1%) as shown in figure 7.

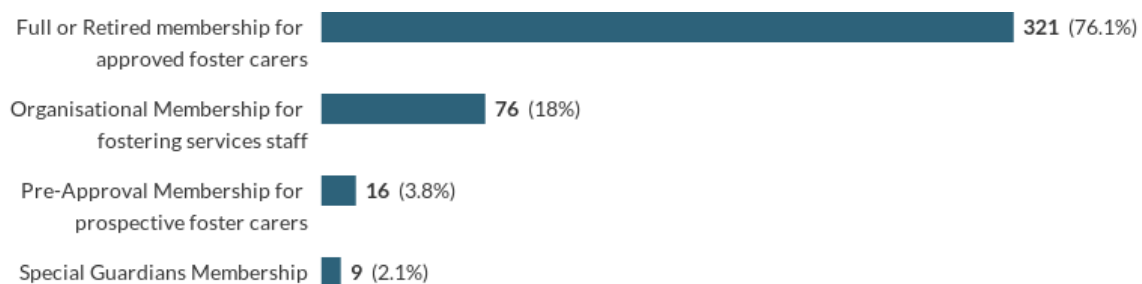


Figure 7: Type of FosterTalk membership

Contact with FosterTalk

The majority of respondents (246 or 58.3%) had not contacted FosterTalk in the last 18 months, whilst 17.1% had contacted them once, 17.8% 1 – 3 times, 3% 3 – 5 times, 2.8% more than 5 times. Of those who had contacted FosterTalk, the majority had used the telephone helpline (41.9%) whilst another 10.9% used email and a further 4% the web inquiry form. A minority used the online forum (0.2%).

FosterTalk membership services

Less than half (179 or 42.2%) of respondents had used FosterTalk membership services. Of those the service used by nearly half (48.6% or 87 respondents) was the accountancy and tax advice service followed closely by the FosterTalk magazine (reported by 41.3% or 74 respondents). The legal advice helpline and high street discounts were used by quarter of respondents (25.1% and 24.6% respectively) as shown in figure 8.

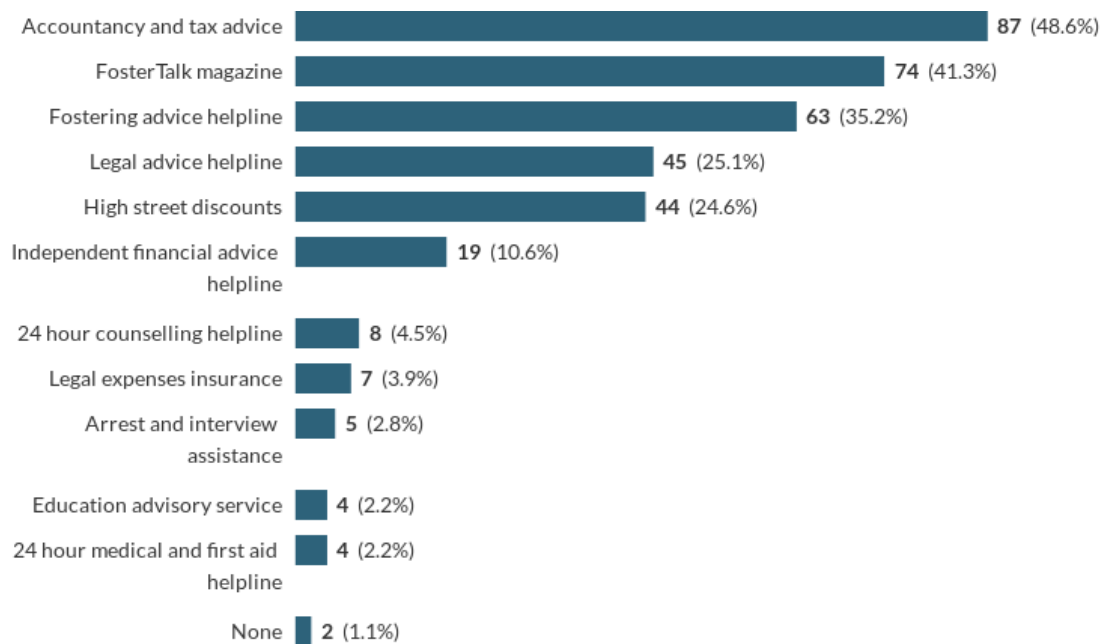


Figure 8: FosterTalk membership services used

The services ranked the highest by the largest number of respondents were the magazine ranked 4 or 5 by 102 respondents, the accountancy and tax advice service ranked 4 or 5 by 96 respondents, and the fostering advice helpline ranked 4 or 5 by 81 respondents as shown in table 10.

Service	Ranking (number of respondents and %)					
	5 is excellent, 1 is poor					
	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Accountancy and tax advice	2 (1.1%)	0	5 (2.9%)	16 (9.1%)	80 (45.7%)	72 (41.1%)
FosterTalk Magazine	1 (0.6%)	2 (1.1%)	9 (5.1%)	34 (19.4%)	68 (38.9%)	61 (34.9%)
Fostering advice helpline	1 (0.6%)	3 (1.7%)	7 (4%)	20 (11.4%)	61 (34.9%)	83 (47.4%)
Legal advice helpline	0	2 (1.1%)	5 (2.9%)	17 (9.7%)	46 (26.3)	105 (60%)
High street discounts	11 (6.3%)	1 (0.6%)	16 (9.1%)	24 (13.7%)	33 (18.9%)	90 (51.4%)
Independent financial advice helpline	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.6%)	4 (2.3%)	12 (6.9%)	29 (16.6%)	127 (72.6%)
24 hour counselling helpline	2 (1.1%)	2 (1.1%)	5 (2.9%)	9 (5.1%)	22 (12.6%)	135 (77.1%)

Legal expenses insurance	0	2 (1.1%)	3 (1.7%)	15 (8.6%)	22 (12.6%)	133 (76%)
Arrest and interview assistance	1(0.6%)	1(0.6%)	3 (1.7%)	11 (6.3%)	20 (11.4%)	139 (79.4%)
Education advisory service	0	1 (0.6%)	7 (4%)	9 (5.1%)	17 (9.7%)	141 (80.6%)
24 hour medical and first aid helpline	2 (1.1%)	0	6 (3.4%)	10 (5.7%)	18 (10.3%)	139 (79.4%)

Table 13: Ranking of membership services

The membership services most useful to respondents were the fostering advice helpline (111 or 62% of respondents), the 24-hour legal advice helpline (93 or 52% of respondents) and the accountancy and tax advice service (89 or 49.7% of respondents). The legal expenses insurance and quarterly magazines were useful approximately a quarter of respondents each with other services being reported as useful by fewer respondents as shown in Figure 9.

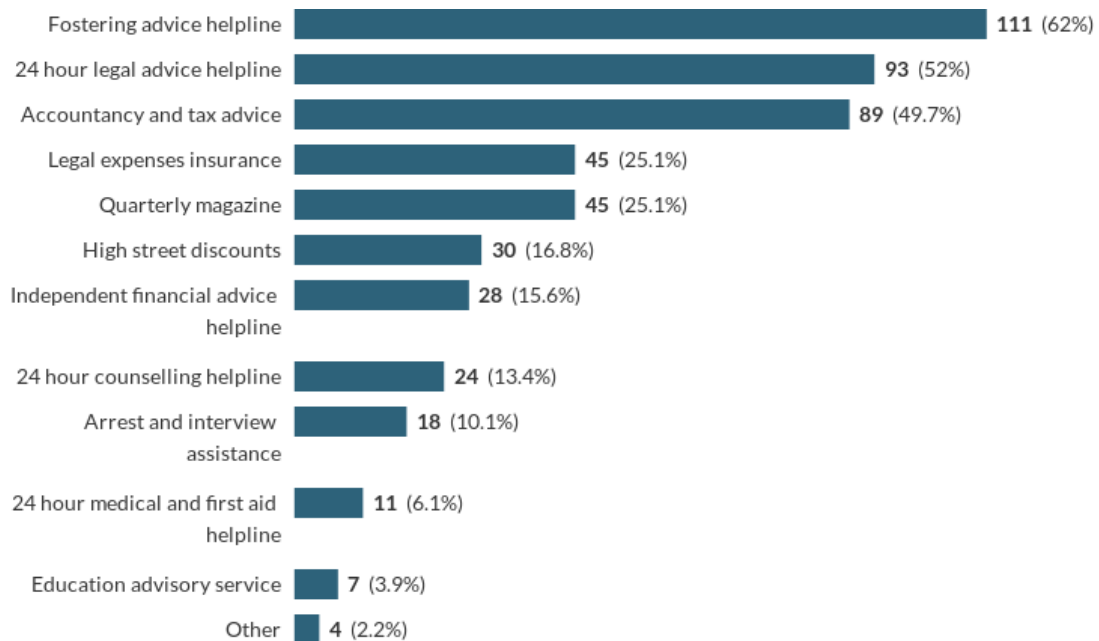


Figure 9: Most useful membership services

Comments in the other category included:

Positive:

- They are all important
- All benefits are helpful when needed.
- Information during lockdown. Activity ideas etc.
- They are all important to have circumstances change so it's vital they are all there to use if needed

Negative

- I haven't found any benefits. It's too hard to get hold of you and use the services so I don't bother trying anymore.
- I don't feel I am supported by you or anyone. Sometimes I just need someone to hear the hell I am going through but I can't find the best way to do this with you.

In terms of least useful membership services, these included the 24 hour medical and first aid helpline (78 or 43.6% of respondents), the education advisory service (75 or 41.9%) and the high street discounts (70 or 29.1% of respondents). Just over a quarter of respondents also mentioned the quarterly magazine and the arrest and interview service as being least useful. Other services were reported as being least useful by fewer respondents as shown in Figure 10.

It is interesting to note that whilst 62% of respondents find the fostering advice helpline the most useful, 8.4% find it the least useful and similarly 52% find the 24 hour legal advice helpline the most useful, 7.8% find it the least useful.

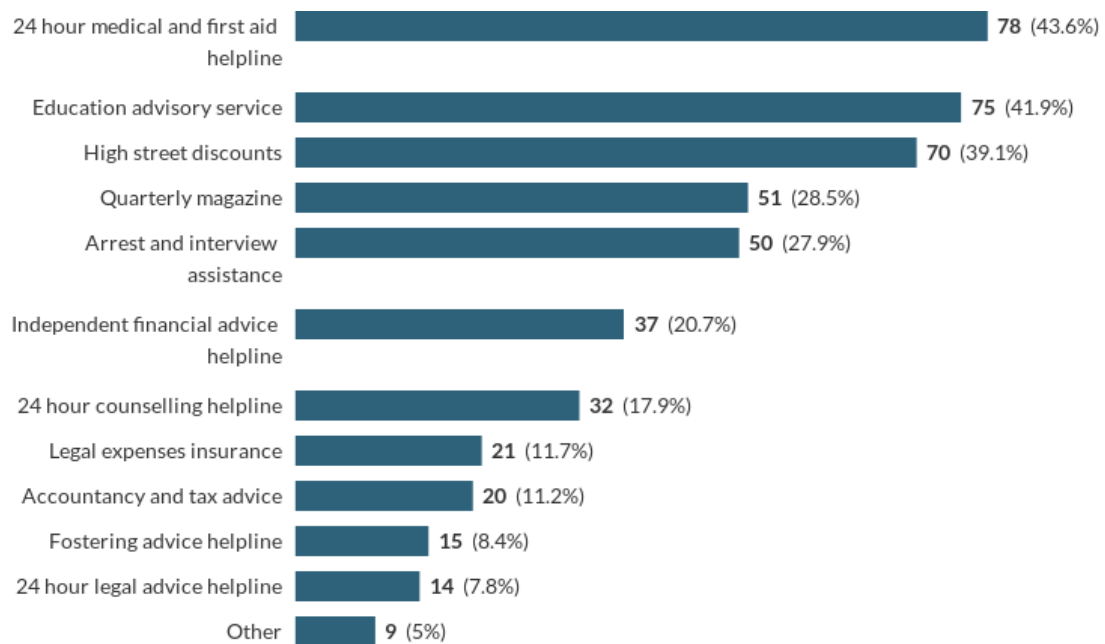


Figure 10: Least useful membership benefits

Comments in the 'other' category included:

Positive

- To be honest it's all relevant
- All very useful if required
- They are all important
- All useful as I may need them all at some point

Negative

- I haven't used many parts of the membership and feel let down by the ones I have.
- I haven't got any others but I find all the services potentially useful even though I hope I don't need to use them all
- I contacted FT several times for technical support regarding the Foster Talk App but to no avail. I am still unable to use the app.

Suggestions for improvement to **membership services** included:

Affirming comments

- Carry on as you are
- Excellent service
- It is all excellent.
- No. I did particularly find the booklet on filling in a tax return really useful.
- No the magazine is very informative and I can go back over any copy and find the info I need to
- Nothing to add. Foster talk gives a lot of useful information
- All the services are useful and I found it difficult to pick my three least useful.
- I think it is a very good organisation.

Suggestions for change

Many of the suggestions related to the discount scheme offered:

- More discounts from chain stores would be good.
- The discount offer needs to be clearer and easier to use.
- More High Street discounts
- We found the high street discount process complicated so didn't use it!
- More content needs to be in the app as it's easier to access then a website when you're on the go
- I was unaware of a discount scheme when shopping
- Discount card .that could be given out and kept by carers instead of having to search for offers
- The discounts could be easier to use if a code was issued and I definitely know people would use them

- I wonder if the discounts could be easier to access. I always find it a bit time consuming just getting to the information.
- I didn't know about the discounts so I'd like to find out how to access that
- I have never been able to get to grips with the discounts. Could it be made easier? I don't do a lot of online shopping
- I don't receive a magazine and didn't have knowledge of shop discount (card).

Other suggestions were more varied ranging from consistency of service, the way in which the service is delivered and further development of services:

- Make the helpline numbers more obvious on the website
- Maybe a better contact approach would be useful.
- Make it easier for foster Carers to offload in a safe forum and get advice from other carers. Also make it easier to contact you.
- Use current agencies support services and work together
- Carers need a face to face professional advice and representation service that encompasses any fostering issues (not just allegations) and self referral to Foster Talk without a need for the fostering agency first having to sanction the services. Several foster carers are considering union membership to obtain the professional support they seek
- Had some great advice when I needed it, then tried to follow it up and no one had any idea what I was talking about. But the advice was sufficient.
- When offering a counselling service it needs to meet the carers' needs. Not a session with different people at different times. The purpose isn't to go through everything each time but to move on from base
- More stories from foster carers and the challenges that they face day to day
- FISS being totally independent of the fostering organisation in respect of authorising the carer seeking the support.

- More assistance about parent and child placements.

14 respondents (7.8%) were members of other services such as BFCA and the Fostering Network (each mentioned by five participants), Trade Union GMB, The Exchange, NATP.

Effectiveness of services received from FosterTalk membership services

As highlighted in table 11, 162 or 90.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the information and support they receive from FosterTalk membership services is useful. 159 respondents (88.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that members of staff are knowledgeable and helpful. 143 (79.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that the information and advice they received enabled them to decide what to do next. 138 (77.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that after contact with FosterTalk, a solution to their problem was progressed. 148 (82.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that membership makes them feel valued and supported as a foster carer. 130 (72.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that membership empowers them and 153 (85.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that membership is an important wellbeing resources for foster carers.

Rating/ aspect of service	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Undecided
The information and support I receive is useful	96 (53.6%)	66 (36.9%)	3 (1.7%)	1 (0.6%)	13 (7.3%)
Members of FosterTalk staff are knowledgeable and helpful	99 (55.3%)	60 (33.5%)	1 (0.6%)	0	19 (10.6%)
I receive information and advice that enables me to decide what to do next	84 (46.9%)	59 (33%)	2 (1.1%)	4 (2.2%)	35 (19.6%)
After contacting FosterTalk my problem/concern is usually progressed	79 (44.1%)	59 (33%)	2 (1.1%)	4 (2.2%)	35 (19.6%)
Membership of FosterTalk makes me feel valued and supported as a foster carer	65 (36.3%)	83 (46.4%)	9 (5%)	2 (1.1%)	20 (11.2%)
Membership of FosterTalk makes me feel more empowered as a foster carer	56 (31.3%)	74 (41.3%)	11 (6.1%)	3 (1.7%)	35 (19.6%)
Membership of FosterTalk is an important wellbeing resource for foster carers	79 (44.1%)	74 (41.3%)	5 (2.8%)	2 (1.1%)	19 (10.6%)
Membership of FosterTalk helps to reduce the challenges of fostering for foster carers	52 (29.1%)	78 (43.6%)	9 (5%)	2 (1.1%)	38 (21.2%)
Without FosterTalk there would be a lack of appropriate	74 (41.3%)	70 (39.1%)	6 (3.4%)	2 (1.1%)	27 (15.1%)

independent support for foster carers in England					
FosterTalk provides independent advice and support that is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England	67 (37.6%)	63 (35.4%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (0.6%)	42 (23.6%)
FosterTalk is an independent organisation enhancing support available to foster carers from their fostering service providers	76 (42.7%)	79 (44.4%)	5 (2.8%)	1 (0.6%)	17 (9.6%)
FosterTalk provides a service to foster carers that they cannot obtain from other services	64 (35.8%)	63 (35.2%)	9 (5%)	2 (1.1%)	41 (22.9%)

Table 14: Rating membership services

130 (72.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that membership helps to reduce the challenges of fostering, whilst 144 (80.4%) argue there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in the absence of FosterTalk. 130 (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that the independent advice and support provided by FosterTalk is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers and 155 (87.1%) argue that FosterTalk service enhance the support provided by their fostering service provider. 127 (71%) agreed or strongly agreed that they cannot access services provided by FosterTalk elsewhere.

Respondents were asked who they would contact for support in the event that FosterTalk membership services were not available to them. The responses (n=179) were varied as shown in table 12. There were some very revealing comments about the number of people foster carers would need to contact to resolve any issues and the likely cost of that:

Not sure but would have to search to find a number of different sources who's specific knowledge of fostering would be limited and variable depending on where you live

For fostering advice it would only be my supervising social worker and fostering colleagues - but that wouldn't be independent! For legal I'd use my own solicitor. For finance my own accountant - but that advice all costs money!

Person/agency to contact	Number of respondents
---------------------------------	------------------------------

Unsure /don't know	43
Social worker	39
Other foster carers	27
Solicitor	17
Fostering agency	17
Family/friends	11
Citizens Advice Bureau	10
BFCA	10
Fostering network	9
Internet search for advice	6
Accountant	4
Local authority	4
Union	4
ACAS	1

Table 15: Sources of help for foster carers

Respondents were asked to describe 'the best thing about FosterTalk'. Responses were varied but dominant themes were 'knowing that they are there', 'Very good advice and always listen' and 'makes you feel valued as a foster carer.' The words 'independent' and 'impartial' featured heavily in respondents descriptions. Their descriptions are exemplified in the following comments:

It is there when and if we need support and this is comforting even if we don't need to use it at present. It's something that is always in our minds should we need independent advice with the absence of a fostering union for all

It is a service that covers and encompasses all you needs and unknown needs when you are or become a foster carer. It bridges lots of gaps in services by agencies and LA and has the foster carer at the forefront and recognises without them many more children and young people would be at risk.

Reassurance you are not alone. It can feel very lonely in this job.

Makes you feel safe

Specifically foster carers valued the following aspects:

Positive aspect of FosterTalk	Number of respondents
Being there/available 24 seven/impartial/independent	76
Holistic service that covers everything foster carers need	18
Legal helpline (especially for allegations)	17

Magazine and emails	12
Fostering information/newsletter	11
Knowledgeable, friendly, professional staff	11
Support not otherwise available to foster carers	9
Accountancy and tax support	8
Counselling support	2
Medical advice helpline	2
Links to education and learning	2

Table 16: Positive aspects of broader FosterTalk services

Whilst 88 respondents felt that no improvements to FosterTalk were needed (as shown in Table 14) others made specific suggestions for improvements such as providing a clearer and stronger advocacy role for terms and conditions:

There needs to be a stronger voice for foster carers in this country. Regular income and job stability are crucial in this day and age yet foster carers still have no guarantee of income and no wellbeing benefits meaning we are doing a very difficult and stressful job without recognition of this.

In the difficult times we presently are in FosterTalk have continued to reach out to carers and this has been appreciated so much.

Progress understanding and education regarding how to re-parent children coming into care, acknowledging the differences of this parenting and the risks of allegations. Target different groups of society to come on board for this task. We need a good basic wage with strong legal protection and we would get more educated people come forward. It's a 24/7 job on less than minimum wage. Not quite what people look for in a job?

Start fighting for solid policy's and legal rights for carers.

Suggestions for improvement	Number of respondents
Improvements to/development of services	
No improvement needed/stay as you are – positive comments were numerous and included: Can't fault it Make sure you keep going as you are I cannot think of a way to improve the service. I think it is very comprehensive.	88

Improved/more accessible discounts (including respite/days out with children/more supermarket offers). Discount card.	8
Ensure foster carers (especially new members) are aware of all services on offer (suggestion that FosterTalk visit local groups to discuss services available)	6
Be more of an advocate/lobbyist for pay/conditions for foster carers	6
Be 'truly independent'	2
More services available via the App and technical support for the App	2
Training material for foster carers/more local specialist training	2
Develop a buddy system for allegations	1
Membership card with all helpline telephone and contact numbers on	1
Improve tax and benefit service	1
Work with local cover services	1
Improvements to communication platforms	1
More contact with members	1
Consider the format of communication (paperless/hard copy)	1
Ensure that all telephone numbers/email addresses for different services appear on all forms of communication	1
Provide direct line numbers for each department	1
More depth in newsletters and other information more directly applicable to foster carers	1
Improve the website	1
Ensure telephone lines are always manned (24/7)	1
Send emails during sociable hours	1
Provide parent and child specialist support	1
Encourage more people to join the Talkout App	1
Better contact methods for example carer forums	1
Share young persons' stories	1
More surveys regarding children/moving on	1

Table 17: Suggested improvements to FosterTalk services

Foster Carers Independent Support Service (FISS)

Only 29 (6.9%) respondents said they had accessed FISS. The majority of those respondents had used the non-judgemental, confidential and impartial advice (19 or 65.5%) or the general advice about the allegations panel process (16 (55.2%). Few respondents had used other FISS services.

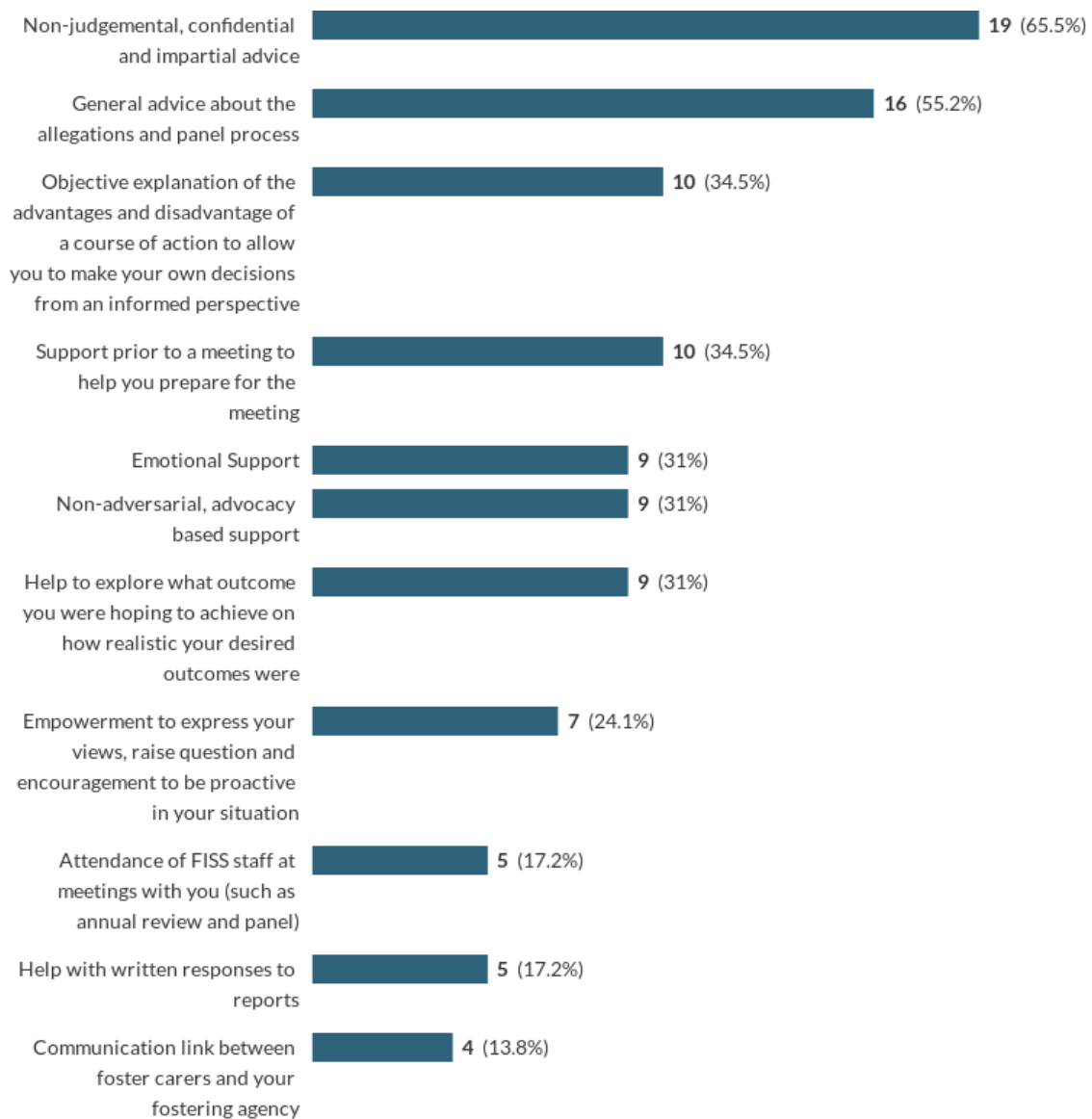


Figure 11: Ranking of FISS benefits

22 respondents said that their issue had been resolved to their satisfaction following FISS support. For respondents who said that the issue had not been resolved, one said that the issue was still ongoing, another said that the contact had been for allegation support and the contact was merely for an update. Another two mentioned that the issue could not be resolved with FISS support alone and that they were now relying on support from their fostering agency and another mentioned that FISS had not returned their call.

Effectiveness / impact of FISS support

Not all respondents completed this section so totals do not necessarily equate to 29 responses. Table 18 demonstrates that 75% (21) of members who had used FISS services agreed or

strongly agreed that resolution of issues was easier with FISS support, whilst 75% (21) agreed or strongly agreed that FISS services made them feel valued as a foster carer. 67.9% (19) agreed or strongly agreed that FISS services provided them with confidence to solve difficult fostering issues, 67.8% (19) agreed or strongly agreed that access to FISS played an important role in helping them to solve a difficult fostering issues and 67.8 % (19) agreed or strongly agreed that access to FISS improves the possibility they will remain in fostering in the future.

Rating /aspect of service	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Undecided
The issue that FISS supported me with was resolved more easily with their support	14 (50%)	7 (25%)	2 (7.1%)	3 (10.7%)	2 (7.1%)
Access to the FISS service made me feel valued as a Foster Carer	11 (39.3%)	10 (35.7%)	3 (10.7%)	2 (7.1%)	2 (7.1%)
Access to the FISS service gave me the confidence to solve a difficult fostering issue	11 (39.3%)	8 (28.6%)	2 (7.1%)	3 (10.7%)	4 (14.3%)
Access to the FISS service played an important role in helping me to solve a difficult fostering issue	13 (46.4%)	6 (21.4%)	4 (14.3%)	3 (10.7%)	2 (7.1%)
I am more likely to remain in fostering if I can access FISS support	15 (51.7%)	4 (13.8%)	3 (10.3%)	1 (3.4%)	6 (20.7%)

Table 18: Rating of FISS

Specific comments about FISS included:

- Helpful kind and knowledgeable
- My advisor was extremely helpful and patient, always available to give me advice and guidance
- Gratitude it's still supporting us through what is a difficult time for all of us.
Many thanks
- Excellent service

- Without FISS support, I would not want to be a foster carer at all, as there would be literally NO advocacy for any foster carer going through an allegation...the service is absolutely essential to our safety
- I couldn't thank my support worker enough. He gave me the information and support I needed. Very professional and excellent knowledge.
- FISS must be totally autonomous to the agency paying the memberships of carers.
Face to Face support and representation must be available to carers for any issues they seek help with.

By contrast one respondent mentioned the timing of knowledge imparted to them about the full range of services which meant that they missed out on important support at a difficult time:

We used it as an over the phone service for emotional support during an allegation. We were told that they could support us at meetings/interviews if necessary (it wasn't). We weren't given procedural advice etc, just emotional support.

We had no idea, until a visit from someone from FosterTalk, that they also provided support with a complaints procedure against a LA. It was too late by then.

Interviews

174 respondents indicated that they would be prepared to participate in an interview. Responses were screened in order to identify a diverse sample of interview participants. However, not all participants who left their contact details responded to a follow up email. Therefore due to this and time constraints the interview participants are as diverse as these factors would allow for. Interviews were conducted with eight respondents to explore themes resulting from analysis of survey data in greater depth. In addition a representative of the Department for Education participated in an interview. Seven of the eight foster carer participants were female; three were 41-50 and the remainder 51-60.

Participant number	Number of years fostering	Number of years FosterTalk member	Motivation to foster
1	11 years	4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needed to work from home • Empty nest • Parents were foster carers
2	16 years	16 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empty nest • Enjoyed looking after their own children who had now left home
3	6 years	More than 4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mum was a foster carer who adopted her sister • Had a difficult childhood • Wanted to help a child through a difficult childhood
4	14 years	14 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never had children herself and wanted to be involved with children
5	1 ½ years	1 ½ years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Father was adopted • Degree in psychology so understands child development • Wanted to give a child a better start in life
6	10 years	10 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own children were growing up • Wanted to make a difference to a child's life
7	19 years	19 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had been working in CAMHS and met children who were care experienced.
8	3 years	3 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own children were growing up • Had discussed it for a long time • Had a background in health visiting and mental health

Table 19: Details of interview participants

There was a fairly even spread of participants across the country from the South West to Yorkshire and Humber. Two participants identified as being disabled. The majority were White British and the remaining participant was of White and Black African heritage as shown in Appendix B. The length of time fostering and length of membership of FosterTalk for interview participants ranged from 18 months to nineteen years as illustrated in Table 19. Motivation to foster was also wide ranging from previous personal experience to changing family circumstances.

Current wellbeing

Five participants described their overall wellbeing as ‘good’. For three of these the reason for this was due to the child/ren they were looking after being a good fit with their own family, whilst for another it was because she did not currently have a placement. The remaining three described their mental state as ‘low’ due to an allegation or stressed/struggling due to Covid-19 causing the child stress and/or having vulnerable adults living in the house whilst numerous professionals needed to visit the house.

Most enjoyable day in fostering

Participants described their most enjoyable day in fostering mostly in light of the achievements of children and young people they had supported as exemplified by the following comments:

It was the first time she had asked for help and volunteered, like, I’m not scared to come to you because I know you’re not going to shout at me for doing that. And it was such a huge, like, trust bond moment where the light bulb had shone. (Participant 3)

My most enjoyable day of fostering is probably out and about somewhere, doing things, being together, having fun. Just all being together, I think, is probably my most enjoyable day. (Participant 6)

When the children themselves turn round and just give you a hug or just say something lovely which is unexpected or thank you for something that you’ve done which didn’t seem significant. (Participant 8)

Achievements such as a Head Teacher’s award for a child with few academic or social skills; the first time a challenging child asked for help; when children report what they have been doing at school with enthusiasm; when children give you a hug and a child who has a particular skill or interested that was not provided for locally finding a way to support them out of area; walking a previous fostered child down the aisle and adopting a fostered child were reported by participants highlighting their investment in the children as noted earlier by the discussion with the DfE representative.

Most challenging day

Not surprisingly, participants reported the most challenging day in foster carers as one that involved a complex situation related to a child. These ranged from violence from a child who was then removed by the Police; children who frequently absconded; attempted suicide by a child who was then removed by social services; a child who was newly arrived to the country showing videos of children being hanged; having to tell a child their birth parent had passed way.

The most challenging day was a child who was having a mental breakdown. He was ten and he tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of the social worker's car whilst it was moving on the road. And it resulted in having to call police officers to restrain him because he had absolutely lost the plot. And the challenging thing about it was not just trying to get him to calm down, because he came inside and destroyed the house. The challenging bit was the social worker not supporting us appropriately. (Participant 3)

A child disclosed abuse during lockdown. It was mainly to do with the fact that she was out of our county. So, when referrals were being made, you would go to them and they said well, she's not from our county she's out of county therefore she's not entitled to it. All of this just takes so long and laborious. And then you'd get hold of somebody and think there's a chink of hope and then it's all to be dashed again. Months were wasted in that and still she's not accessed the support and the therapy that she needs. So yeah, it's all a bit of that really. (Participant 8)

How fostering role has changed over the last year

Participants described how the current pandemic and frequent lockdowns had changed their fostering role over the last year. Although one participant said that nothing had changed for her as she was a respite carer only for the summer, others stressed the difficulty of supporting children without essential services such as respite care which limited their ability to have a day off:

One of young people had to be shielded, and was therefore unable to attend school for 13 weeks last year. When full time education is part and parcel of

the arrangement for care, that's a big ask. Home schooling isn't something that we'd necessarily expected to be doing with a profoundly disabled five year old. And not having the facilities at home to provide that level of care. That would have been equivalent to the specialist provision in a specialist education environment. Health support seemed to be withdrawn very quickly. You can't go to the doctors anymore because it's all done over the telephone. When access to A&E is limited because only one carer can go with the child and yet the child requires two to one support. When you've more than one child in place...it sounds like I'm whingeing, but it's been a tough 12 months. (Participant 2)

And the first lockdown, my children didn't go to school, so I was entertaining...me and my mum sat down the first day, with the work that the school had sent them back. Well x who's 17, is real special needs, so we were doing like, the clock. For y, school had just handed out random bits of paper, and they've given him history. So, my mum had y, and he's never done a history lesson in his life. So, giving the kids work that they're not interested in, can't do, was horrendous, so I just said, right, we're not doing education, we'll do other things. So, I had to do Mr Wicks, Mr Motivator, David Walliams did a storyteller, we cooked, we played games, just to get through the days. But there's no support. (Participant 4)

By contrast one participant said that things had been easier and the child they foster had less contact with siblings and school contact and was consequently less stressed and less anxious. Another said that she had won an award for home schooling due to the extensive and creative effort she had made in this regard.

Continuation of fostering role

Seven participants admitted they had considered leaving fostering either because of an allegation for two participants, poor relationship with a social worker, a traumatic placement, challenging children or lack of support:

I adore the children and I adore the job itself of looking after them. It's just very difficult sometimes to accept decisions which you can see damage the child. You can see the damage that is sometimes caused by bad decisions, and

decisions where they're not made with discussion. And that's tough. You know, you put all this work in to try and make sure the kid's okay and then a social worker will walk in and obliterate that child in five minutes. In my mind I was just like, I could deal with the kids but actually I'm not sure I can deal with social services' response to that. So, the social worker is the most challenging part of the job to me (Participant 3)

The allegation was tough and I had to find the strength to carry on really but this gentleman supported me. I was very close to giving it all up and going back to work. He was just very, very genuine and I felt like he did believe in me, that gave me the courage to carry on, and just his knowledge. I'd go into meetings and he seemed to have far more depth of knowledge than the social workers that were working for the council. (Participant 7)

The remaining participant said she had never considered leaving fostering. All said they stayed because of the children although one admitted that during the allegation when she could not pay her mortgage she considered an alternative career. The quote from Participant 7 above demonstrates the role that FosterTalk play in the retention of foster carers.

Reasons for contact with FosterTalk

Reasons for contacting FosterTalk related mostly to help and advice with tax returns and/or help and support with allegations (four participants each), although one foster carer had not contacted FosterTalk at all as she was not aware of the full range of services they offered:

I haven't really... I think maybe, that's a bit of the thing, because it as a service that was automatically, when you joined it, they said, at the agency oh, your access to FosterTalk and I didn't really know what that meant. I didn't really understand what was involved or what services they really provided or how they can help. I do know a little bit more now because I went to something regarding finances and things and so they helped in terms of my return and stuff which has been really valuable. But I probably wouldn't have been too clued up about that either unless I'd gone to something where some people from that department was there. (Participant 8)

Another participant had used FosterTalk's 'You're Not Home Alone' resources and ideas for homeschooling and education.

Most beneficial aspect of FosterTalk

The most beneficial aspects of FosterTalk membership described by interview participants were the social aspects such as the magazine and newsletters and tax advice (three participants each). The advocacy service for allegations was described as 'invaluable'. For one participant it was just they are 'there when needed' and another particularly enjoyed the cinema discounts.

I tried doing the self-assessment tax return and I ended up owing them £12,000, and I didn't, but you don't know all the allowances that you're allowed to claim for and FosterTalk helped with this. (Participant 1)

At the beginning of the lockdown, FosterTalk advertised a tax seminar, a webinar through Intellect, were doing some self-assessment tax webinars. And I signed up for one of those, got involved with that, and subsequently it's changed our life financially, to be fair. Had I not got involved in that, I would have still been paying too much tax it was a lights on moment (Participant 2)

We use the accountant that's been recommended by FosterTalk, that's useful. I think possibly just knowing they're there and the advice when it's needed. (Participant 6)

Yes, my advocate certainly has helped in fighting my corner with me and for me during meetings, particularly when I have gone to a meeting feeling very on the back foot and with, you know, five or six people in the meeting, feeling quite beaten down on an emotional level at that particular point in the investigation. And he has advocated for me, he has correctly understood my feelings on matters before we've gone into meeting and then he's advocated for me efficiently and represented my point of view. They had an evident lack of regard and lack of respect for me, the content of what I was saying, it was evident in their manner towards me, and he stopped it straightway when he identified it. (Participant 3)

Well, initially I had sort of like over the phone, you know, chats with the gentleman, and then he came to visit, but he used to ring me up, email me. The information that he had was just invaluable and he attended meetings with me as well and like then the final one, and there was obviously nothing awful with the outcome, it was all fine, you know, luckily it didn't end as bad as I was thinking it was going to be. But my word, did he give me the sort of courage and the support to carry on, because it was such a lengthy sort of battle as you may want to call it, and gosh, he was wonderful. (Participant 7)

Least beneficial aspect of FosterTalk

Although most participants agreed that there were no benefits that were least beneficial as they are all important when you need them, two stressed that the discount scheme was difficult to use:

I do know that you...or I think that FosterTalk have some sort of shop partnership discount. So you can, possibly, buy things through some sort of FosterTalk link and get discounts in stores or use a code. I think the service is there, I don't know how to use it. (Participant 3)

From when I read it, it said that you had to click on a link to get the code and then you've got to get this code or...I think. I've not personally used them. It's like you've got to get the code, then take it off the purchase, whatever, and I just think, oh gosh, I can't be bothered really to do that. (Participant 7)

How FosterTalk could change

In terms of future developments for FosterTalk, participants made various suggestions including ensuring that their services are available for all foster carers; avoiding logo placements on products to avoid stigmatising children; employing more people with 'real world' social work and fostering experience; doing more outreach and visiting work in order to inform foster carers about their full range of services; improving technical support for the App.

I think they could make their services better known, because some people would get an email or a generic email or a generic magazine through the post and ignore it, whereas if someone came to support group and talked to them

about what actually being a member of FosterTalk is, that that would be beneficial for everybody (Participant 1)

Do more of the real world, do more of what is real within fostering, for the carers as much as the young people. Fostering is very much seen as a hobby, and not necessarily as a profession. Now, bearing in mind, with the local authorities and with the agencies now, at least one member of the couple has to give up work full time, to be a foster carer, it's very much a profession. And I say the only people that know that, are fellow foster carers. I don't want to know about the senior executive, or the one off, I want to know about the real people that are there at the coalface. And put pressure on agencies as well. Let's recognise the agencies that do it really well, and let's shame the agencies that don't, that make the false promises, that don't provide the support, that hide behind the COVID. (Participant 2)

You know, I don't actually know how much the service costs because my agency pays for it. So, it's a part of my package being a private agency foster carer that they pay for FosterTalk membership, insurance, whatever you want to call it, to assist you when times get tough. So, that's a great service. And actually, since May I don't know how I would've survived without the service. I was going through really difficult mental health at the time during those months that the allegation went on because it was just so terrible and so stressful. The practical support got me through because there was just someone there to help me. All foster carers should be protected with FosterTalk membership, like, as standard, if they're not already, because it's just essential. (Participant 3)

So, up till this day now I've never been able to utilise that App because, you know, it's not accepting my information. So, that's the only side of it really, the technical support. (Participant 5)

It's just like I said before, sort of, more, you know, for new foster carers to know what services are out there and how they can help. I think, sometimes it's, maybe, hearing from other foster carers who have enjoyed the benefits of it, being able to share their experiences on how they've helped. Because, you

know, again it's somebody can say oh we're really good because we do this, but actually to have some anecdotal evidence or somebody to say, this is how, you know, in this situation it's been really helpful. I think, from...that you can relate to a little bit more. (Participant 8)

Discussion and conclusion

This independent evaluation was undertaken during a global pandemic at a time of varying degrees of national lockdown in the UK. Despite this additional stress for families 422 responses were received to an online survey and eight of them participated in a semi-structured telephone interview. An interview was also conducted with a representative of the DfE and information from this interview is discussed in the introduction to this report.

Current DfE priorities

From a discussion with a DfE representative it emerged that the successful recruitment and retention of foster carers is crucial to meeting a key priority area for the DfE of improving the life chances and wellbeing of children and young people in care. This is because foster carers look after 72–73 per cent of all looked after children. Foster carers provide safe nurturing environments for children and young people in care. FosterTalk have an influential position on how the DfE develop national policy in relation to supporting foster carers to ensure they are equipped to carry out their role.

Fostering experience

Respondents to the survey had been fostering for varying lengths of time, from less than one year to more than 20 years (see Table 1). They had fostered varying numbers of children from less than 10 to more than 200 (Table 2) and were currently fostering between one child and more than five (Table 3). The longest and shortest placements reported by respondents varied from less than a week to longer than 10 years (Tables 4 and 6) with reasons for length of placements diverse and complex as demonstrated in Tables 5 and 7. Participants in interviews had been fostering for between 18 months and nineteen years (Table 19).

Views on fostering

For survey respondents, motivation to foster for the majority of survey respondents (81.8%) arose from an intrinsic desire to provide a safe nurturing environment for children and young people (see Figure 1 and Table 8) as previously noted by other research (Blackburn, 2015;

Rodgers *et. al* 2006; Denby *et. al*, 1999) although other factors such as having space, being attracted by financial incentives or previous experiences with fostering were also evident as previously noted by Rodgers *et al* (2006) and Sebba (2012), demonstrating the multi-dimensional nature of fostering. Enjoyable aspects aligned the motivation to foster for survey respondents with 94.5% reporting the most enjoyable aspects as providing a secure base for children and 87% reporting developing a positive bond with foster children as shown in Figure 2. The most challenging aspects of fostering reported were children's behaviour (53.3% of survey respondents), especially allegations (30.8%). However relationships with birth parents (26.9%) and lack of support (28%) were also particularly challenging as shown in Figure 3. High numbers of survey participants felt unsupported by social workers and foster agencies which was magnified during periods of crises such as violent behaviour and allegations (Table 9). Poor communication and relationships with social workers and other professionals were previously noted by Blackburn (2015; 2016) and it is disappointing that this issue endures. Lengthy proceedings to resolve these situations worsened the foster carers anxiety and stress during these times. This lack of support was reportedly one of the most likely reasons for foster carers considering leaving fostering for survey respondents (Table 10) and interview participants. Where respondents had considered leaving fostering (41.7% of survey respondents and seven interview participants had considered leaving), the majority (79.8% of survey respondents and seven interview participants) remained because they enjoy fostering and didn't want to leave (Figure 4 and Table 11). The support from social workers and fostering agencies has the potential to influence retention positively or negatively of foster carers where challenging situations occur.

Foster carers experience high levels of personal satisfaction in their role (see Table 12) even though they sometimes make personal and family sacrifices in order to carry out their fostering role. This personal satisfaction is exemplified by interview participants' accounts of their most enjoyable day in fostering as being associated with achievements related to children and young people they care for. High levels of stress were reported by survey respondents which is concerning given the research from Harding, Murray, Shakespeare-Finch and Frey (2018) regarding foster carer wellbeing. Although five interview participants reported their overall sense of wellbeing as 'good', the remaining three were stressed due to allegations or the current pandemic placing additional demands on their coping ability. The pandemic has changed fostering for some interview participants in that services have been

reduced and they felt unprepared to home-school complex children. Interview participants' most challenging day in fostering related to complex and challenging children combined with lack of professional support. From the survey, foster also carers perceive lack of recognition, support and protection from agencies and other professionals which is worrying given the role of social workers and agencies in the retention of foster carers noted above and contrasts sharply with the perception from the DfE that foster carers are critical to the life chances of children.

FosterTalk membership

Not surprisingly from the survey the majority of members had been informed about FosterTalk by their Local Authority (48.3%) or independent fostering agency (46%), although there were other sources of information such as other foster carers and friends/family (Figure 5). Respondents to the survey had been members of FosterTalk for varying amounts of time ranging from less than six months to more than four years as shown in Figure 6 and the majority (76.1%) had full or retired membership for approved foster carers (Figure 7). Participants in interviews had been members for periods ranging from 18 months to nineteen years.

Not all members had contacted FosterTalk during the last 18 months with just over half (58.3%) having contacted them. Of these 41.9% had used the telephone helpline to do so with fewer members using email, web or the online forum. Not surprisingly therefore only 42.2% of all respondents had used FosterTalk membership services. The most used service, reported by 48.6% of these respondents, was the accountancy and tax advice service closely followed by the magazine (41.3%) as shown in Figure 8. These two services were also ranked most highly by the largest numbers of respondents as shown in Table 13. From interviews participants had contacted FosterTalk for advice and support with tax returns and/or allegations although one participant admitted she wasn't aware of the full range of services FosterTalk offered.

In terms of useful services, 62% of respondents ranked the fostering advice helpline most useful followed by the 24-hour legal advice helpline (52%) and the accountancy and tax advice service (49.7%), see Figure 9. However, it was clear from comments related to this that all services were useful when needed specifically, with a small minority of negative

comments to the effect that services were difficult to access. From interviews the most beneficial aspects were the magazine, newsletters, tax and allegation support.

By contrast least useful services were reported as the 24-hour medical and first aid helpline (43.6%), the education advisory service (41.9%) and the high street discounts (29.1%) as shown in Figure 10. Participants from interviews felt that all services were useful when needed but two participants commented that the discount scheme was not easy to access or understand.

Membership services were rated highly by respondents to the survey as shown in Table 14. 90.5% of respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the information and support they receive from FosterTalk is useful. 88.8% agree or strongly agree that members of staff are knowledgeable and helpful, 79.9% agree or strongly agree that the information and advice they received enabled them to decide what to do next, 77.1% agreed or strongly agreed that after contact with FosterTalk their problem is usually progressed. 80.4% agreed or strongly agreed that without FosterTalk there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers and 87.1% that FosterTalk enhances the support provided by their fostering service provider. 71% agreed or strongly agreed that these services cannot be accessed elsewhere as demonstrated by a number of comments to the effect that a wide range of sources would have to be contacted to access the same kind of services elsewhere (Table 15).

In terms of foster carers wellbeing, 82.7% agreed or strongly agreed that membership makes them feel valued and supported as a foster carer, 72.6% agreed or strongly agreed that membership empowers them and 85.4% agreed or strongly agreed that membership is an important wellbeing resource for foster carers (Table 14). This may be because 72.7% agreed or strongly agreed that membership helps to reduce the challenges of fostering. It is not surprising therefore that 73% agreed or strongly agreed that FosterTalk is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Given the mounting recognition of the difficulties experienced in recruiting and retaining foster carers, the increasingly complex needs of children in the care system and the impact on the viability of placements (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Sinclair *et al*, 2000) this is an important finding. As noted earlier in the report the number of approved foster carers has risen by 2% between March 2018 and March 2019 (Ofsted, 2020). Each recruitment costs around £13,000 (www.keep.org.uk) making

retention of existing foster carers not only important to future foster carer capacity but also an important economic consideration.

The most positive aspect of FosterTalk membership services reported by survey respondents was that they ‘are there’; they provide good advice and always listen and make foster carers feel valued. The fact that they are independent and impartial was important as shown in Table 16.

In terms of suggested improvements to membership services and FosterTalk more broadly there were ample affirming comments about the services and the organisation. However from survey respondents, improvements to the App including technical support for it, improvements to the high street discounts (more of them, easier to use, a discount card, not knowing about them at all), making helpline numbers more obvious on the website, providing a safe forum for peer support, consistent support from the same person for counselling services, more foster carers stories, direct self-referral for support (rather than referral through agencies) were included in the suggestions (see Table 17). From interview participants suggestions included ensuring that services were available for all foster carers, avoiding logo placements on products, ensuring that all staff has real world fostering and social work experiences, improving technical support for the App and ensuring that all members are aware of all services included in their membership.

Foster carers independent support service (FISS)

A low number of respondents had used FISS (6.9%). Of those that had the majority (65.5%) had used the advice service or the general advice about the allegations panel process (55.2%) as shown in Figure 11. For most, the issue had been resolved following FISS support. 75% agreed or strongly agreed that FISS services made them feel valued and 67.9% that FISS services provided them with confidence to solve difficult fostering issues. 65.5% agreed or strongly agreed that access to FISS services increases the likelihood they will remain in fostering in the future (see Table 18). There were a number of positive comments regarding the usefulness of FISS services and particular gratitude articulated for FISS support workers and advisors. This is important given the rising number of allegations against foster carers reported by Ofsted (2020) and the potential impact of this on foster carer retention and wellbeing. As noted earlier in this discussion 53.3% of respondents to the survey in this evaluation reported children’s challenging behaviour especially in relation to allegations

(30.8%) the most challenging aspect of their fostering role. As reported by Harding, Murray, Shakespeare-Finch and Frey (2018) foster carers who care for children with high emotional and behaviour problems are more likely to experience high degrees of stress that potentially falls within a clinical range. The need for support for foster carers is highlighted here and consideration should be given to developing more peer to peer support through FosterTalk as this has the potential to improve placement stability (Narey and Owers, 2018).

Conclusion

The outcomes of children in care are of paramount importance to the DfE. Foster carers play a crucial role in supporting children in care towards fulfilling their potential in life and society. The successful and sustained recruitment and retention of foster carers relies on a respectful and comprehensive suite of support from organisations such as FosterTalk but also from social workers, fostering agencies, LAs and wider society.

This report shows that foster carers value the services they receive from FosterTalk and quantifies the value they place on their services. The personal stories related by foster carers of the very real struggle they face in normal circumstances let alone during a global pandemic can only be face with professional respect and support from others.

There are aspects of FosterTalk membership services which serve as an organisational strength such as tax and financial advice, support for allegations and newsletters/magazine. However there is room for improvement in others. Some suggestions for improvement made by members would appear to be unrealistic such as FosterTalk adopting more of a lobbying and advocacy role as this may fall outside of their remit.

Recommendations

Policy

The DfE priorities children in care, and values the role of foster carers in the lifelong achievement and wellbeing of children and young people in care. The DfE representative acknowledged that foster carers do not operate in a silo. They are supported by a network of agencies, professionals and membership services. The following recommendations are made for policy makers to consider:

- The membership services provided by FosterTalk play an important role in the retention of foster carers and the continuation of these services is essential.
- Commission research into the relationship and communication between other professionals (social workers, fostering agencies and police officers) and foster carers in order to understand current practices.
- Training for social workers, LAs and independent fostering agencies as well as other professionals such as police criminal justice professionals about sensitive and professional approaches to working with foster carers and children in care needs to be considered following research into current practices.

FosterTalk membership services

FosterTalk membership services play a key role in the retention of foster carers according to the findings of this evaluation. There are key strengths such as the services for tax and financial advice, support for allegations, the magazine and newsletters and the discount scheme has the potential to be useful. However there are some aspects of the membership services that could be improved as highlighted in the recommendations below:

- Provide/improve technical support for the App.
- Communicate with members about the full range of services available to them at the beginning of their membership and send frequent reminders. Consider alternative methods of communicating this information, for example visiting agencies and LAs as well as social media platforms.
- Review the discount scheme and ensure that discounts are relevant to members and that the scheme is easy to use.
- Ensuring that all telephone numbers and communication media are visible and easy to find on the website and included in personal emails and other communication from FosterTalk to members.
- Ensure that foster carers are provided with consistent support throughout so that their story has to be recounted as few times as possible and to facilitate relationship-building with one key member of staff.

- Members would appreciate direct self-referral for services where agency or LA referral is required.
- Newsletters and magazines should focus on the lived experiences of foster carers with examples of ways in which they have used the services and how they have benefitted from them. This would raise the profile of the services and enable foster carers to perceive situations in which they could use them.

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Appendix A

Demographic details survey respondents

In terms of demographics, the majority of respondents live in the South East (19.2%), South West (16.4%), North West (15.2%), West Midlands (14.2%) or East Midlands (11.8%). However there were respondents also from Yorkshire and Humber (7.8%), North East (7.3%), East of England (5.2%) and London (3.3%). 190 (45%) live in a town, 142 (33.6%) live in a village and the remaining 90 (21.3%) live in a city.

Nearly half of all respondents were aged 51-60 and the majority (89.3% or 377 respondents) were white British.

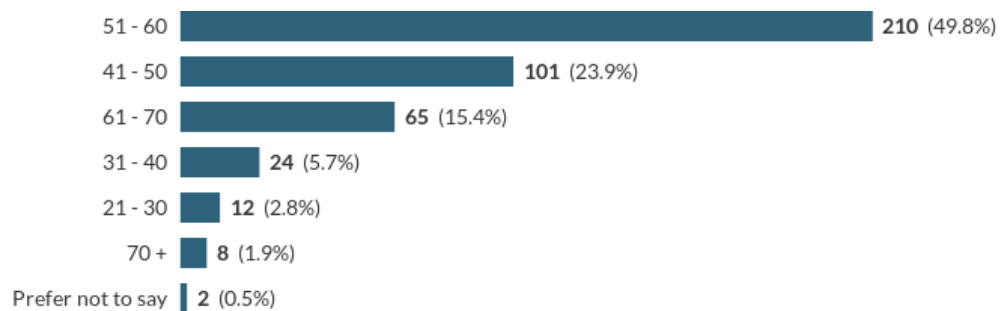


Figure 12: Ages of survey respondents

The majority (352 or 83.4%) were female, 66 (15.6%) male, one female to male transgender and three preferred not to say. 282 (66.8%) were married, 89 (21.1%) single, 41 (9.7%) living together, eight preferred not to say and two were in a civil partnership. 12 respondents (2.8%) were members of the member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and 18 reported having a disability. The majority of respondents live in the South East (19.2%), South West (16.4%), North West (15.2%), West Midlands (14.2%) or East Midlands (11.8%). However there were respondents also from Yorkshire and Humber (7.8%), North East (7.3%), East of England (5.2%) and London (3.3%).

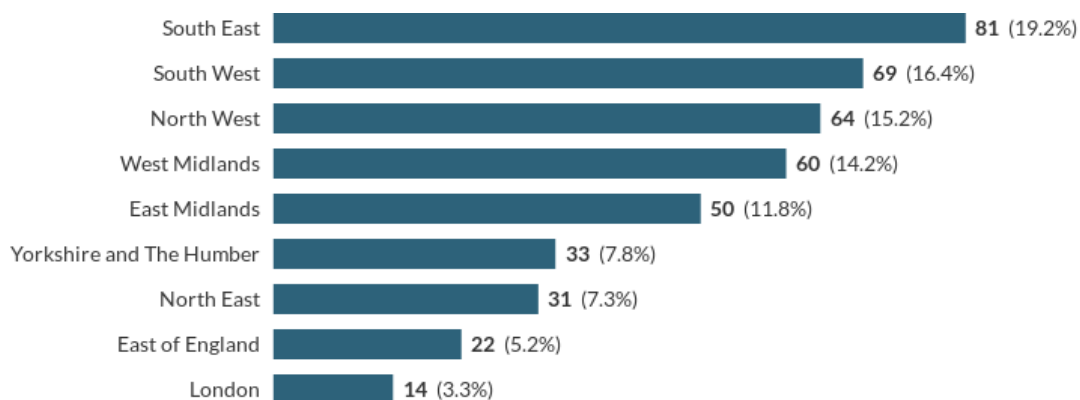


Figure 13: Geographic location of survey respondents

190 (45%) live in a town, 142 (33.6%) live in a village and the remaining 90 (21.3%) live in a city. The majority (352 or 83.4%) were female, 66 (15.6%) male, one female to male transgender and three preferred not to say. 282 (66.8%) were married, 89 (21.1%) single, 41 (9.7%) living together, eight preferred not to say and two were in a civil partnership. 12 (2.8%) were members of the member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and 18 reported having a disability.

Over half of all respondents (52.4%) held Christian values, whilst another 39.1% reported no faith and another 4% preferred not to say. A small minority reported their faith as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. In other category were Catholic (reported by 5 respondents), Church of England, Christian none practising, Humanism, Rastafarian and believer with no denomination.

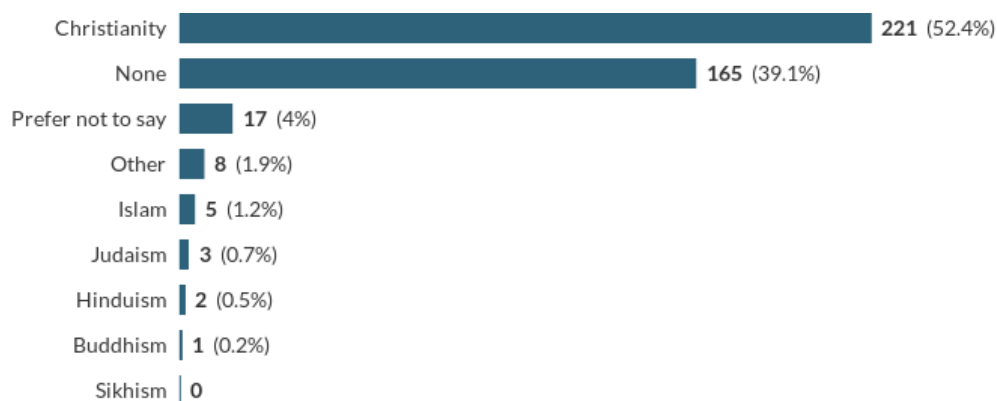


Figure 14: Faith of survey respondents

Nearly half of all respondents were aged 51-60 and the majority (89.3% or 377 respondents) were white British. In the other category for ethnic heritage were Scottish, Italian,

Mediterranean, British/Maltese, White English, White Italian, Slovakian, Belgian, and Portuguese.

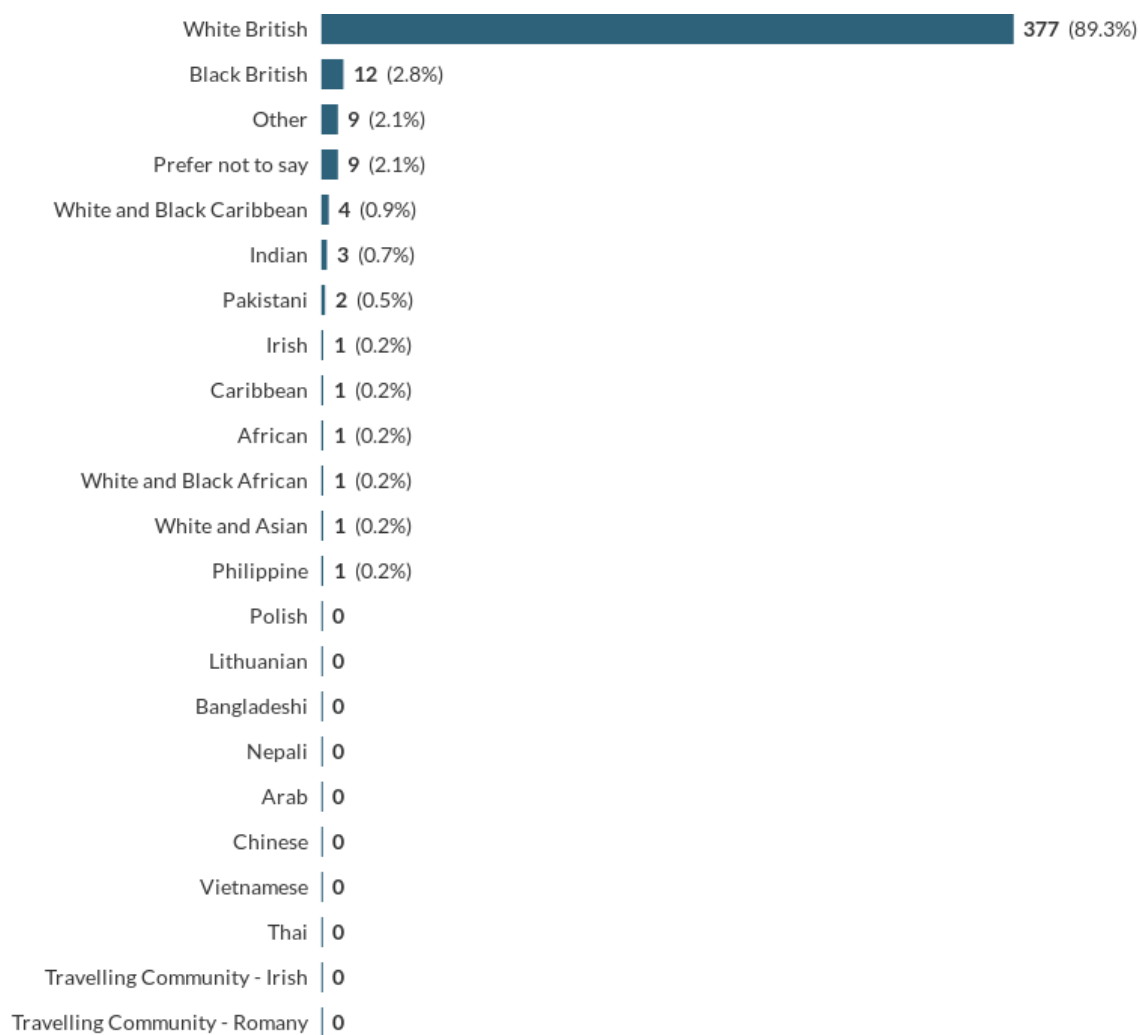


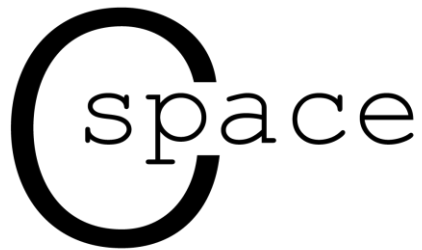
Figure 15: Ethnic heritage of survey respondents

Appendix B

Demographic details of interview participants

Geographic location	Town/city/rural	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Other characteristics
South West	In a village	F	41-50	White British	Identified as being disabled
North West	In a village	M	51-60	White British	
East Midlands	In a town	F	41-50	White British	
North East	In a village	F	51-60	White British	Identified as being disabled
Yorkshire and Humber	In a city	F	51-60	White and black African	
South East	In a town	F	51-60	White British	
Yorkshire and Humber	In a village	F	51-60	White British	
South West	In a village	F	41-50	White British	

Table 20: Demographic details of interview participants



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Citation

To reference this publication:

Blackburn, C. and Matchett, E. (2021) *Independent Evaluation of FosterTalk Membership Services* Birmingham: Birmingham City University

Published by: Birmingham City University, Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE), Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Westbourne Road, Birmingham B15 3TN March 2021



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