# Foster Carer Retention Project: Project report

## Introduction

The Foster Carer Retention Project has provided the first opportunity of its kind to work alongside fostering services and foster carers to understand further the reasons why foster carers leave their service, and the processes services use to capture and learn from these.

We have identified isolated areas of good practice where services conduct exit interviews aiming to capture the experience of the foster carer and learn from it in order to retain other foster carers and help recruit new ones to meet the complex needs of looked after children in foster care. Conversely, the project has demonstrated that there are opportunities for improvement in the absence of exit interviews or where exit interviews have been conducted poorly to the detriment of all parties. We have also conducted surveys of the general population to understand the value placed on exit interviews as well as focus groups with foster carers and fostering services to help shape our findings.

Data reported by OFSTED shows that around a fifth of fostering households left their fostering service between 31 March 2017 and 1 April 2018. This is slightly more than the same statistic from the previous year[1]. Previous research has shown that very few fostering services have a systematic, robust and comprehensive approach to conducting exit interviews in order to fully explore why a foster carer leaves their service although key reasons are acknowledged. We are confident that fostering services can and will enhance their practice by conducting foster carer exit interviews.

Anecdotally, we know that foster carers voluntarily leave fostering due to a number of reasons such as a change in personal circumstances, a negative experience of fostering, or simply retiring. Many stay in fostering, transferring to a different service due to a change in location or seeking a better experience of fostering. For those that leave completely, however, information as to why they leave is not routinely collected or acted upon. This information could provide valuable insight into improving placement stability and evaluate how resources are apportioned to retain and recruit foster carers and inform future practice.

As in all organisations, understanding the reasons why staff members or volunteers leave can provide insight into poor practice or a process issue that can be addressed to attempt to prevent others departing for the same reasons, as well as what may motivate others to join. Competing priorities and significant workloads often contribute to exit interviews not being conducted but, for some local authorities, trusts and independent fostering providers, we have that it is not a part of the organisational culture.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2017-to-31-march-2018

This project has enabled us to develop an Exit Interview Toolkit, piloted by a number of fostering services, which includes easily accessible information, suggestions and data capture and analysis solutions. The toolkit aims to ensure that foster carer exit interviews are conducted, and that the data is used to enhance both foster carer retention and recruitment strategies.

Undertaking this work has contributed to The Fostering Network's strategic priorities to influence policy and the legislative framework so we can support and promote excellence in foster care; and to support fostering families and the services that work with them to provide the best possible care for children and young people. It also contributes to The Fostering Network's mission to support those who foster, improve opportunities for fostered children and young people and provide expert guidance to all fostering services.

The project, funded by The Exilarch's Foundation (Dangoor Education), leaves a legacy of resources including an Exit Interview Toolkit for members of The Fostering Network to use.

We recommend foster services utilise the findings, detailed in the following report, and the resources available to help make foster care the very best it can be.

## Background

Everyday there are 65,000 children living with 55,000 foster families in the UK. Every 20 minutes another child comes into care needing a foster family. The majority of these children are placed in care due to abuse or neglect.

Foster families give looked after children the love, support and stability that they so desperately need. This is often their first positive experience of family life.

Despite the trauma of coming into care and their difficult start to life, we know that good foster care is a protective factor for fostered children's education and wellbeing. Good foster care transforms children's lives and enables them to flourish.

Many thousands of new foster carers will be needed in the UK over the next year[2], replenishing a similar number of foster carers who will leave fostering in the same period. The number of new foster carers needed will be influenced by any rise in the number of children coming into care as well as provision for placement choice, allowing those children coming into care to be matched with a foster carer who can best meet their needs.

Of those foster carers leaving their service next year, some will transfer to other services, others will leave foster care altogether. Our research suggests that very few fostering services captured the detail beyond the primary reason for leaving or considered how this information might be used constructively to inform future practice within the service. Without this information, fostering services are missing a clear opportunity to review and enhance local practice, as well as contribute to regional and national improvements of the fostering sector by retaining high calibre foster carers.

## Project objectives

The objectives of this project were to support fostering services to:

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1. better understand the reasons why foster carers leave their fostering service
2. identify any themes as to the reasons why foster carers choose to leave
3. explore attitudes to exit interviews and current practice in their delivery
4. identify the optimum timings for processing exit interviews
5. create a robust process for future exit interviews
6. embed learning to enhance retention and subsequent recruitment of foster carers.

## Methodology

The project worked with five partner fostering services during 2018/19 to understand their local practice around exit interviews for foster carers, and to hold focus groups with their foster carers to gather their opinions on exit interviews and test solutions.

These findings were supported by a review of existing practice outside of fostering and three online surveys of foster carers, fostering services and the general population to understand attitudes towards exit interviews and gather information to complement the research.

Details of the methodology used to inform our research and develop the Exit Interview Toolkit can be found as an appendix to this report.

### Hypotheses

To support the research, the following hypotheses were put forward on commencing the project:

1. Exit interviews will be common in sectors other than fostering.
2. Few fostering services will conduct exit interviews but isolated practice will be positive.
3. Fostering service staff attitudes to exit interviews will be largely positive with many seeing their benefit, however they would struggle to allocate resource to complete them faithfully.

## Findings

### Reasons and themes as to why foster carers leave their fostering service

Becoming a foster carer is a significant life decision for a person or a family to take. Considering that it costs many thousands of pounds to recruit a foster carer, it makes sense to combine knowledge and experience to ensure that foster carers continue to foster for as long as possible.

All foster carers will at some point stop fostering and some of the reasons why they often leave prematurely have been put forward in recent years – financial hardships, gaps in placements, poor training and support and a lack of respect and being treated as a member of the team. Eighty-five per cent of foster carers who responded to our online survey as part of this study have considered stopping fostering at some stage during their fostering career.

While many consider stopping completely, a number of foster carers transfer to a different service in order to continue their fostering career elsewhere. The main reasons given by foster carers who were considering leaving their fostering service were a lack of communication, support and timely responses to queries, when responding to our survey.

Examples of services failing to treat foster carers as fellow professionals, and of times when children they were caring for had been let down, were also referenced as to why a foster carer might consider

leaving their service. The challenge of carrying out their fostering duties, in the face of the processes and procedures of the service they foster for, or the corporate parent, could also be a factor in a foster carer's decision to leave.

Echoing the findings of the online survey, foster carers shared during focus groups conducted during the project that a lack of communication, their service not keeping their promises and not being treated as a fellow professional were key reasons why they would be unable to continue to foster for their service. Foster carers also shared that feeling appreciated, without being patronised, was an important element of the support offered to them and a lack of this could contribute to a feeling of wanting to leave.

The reasons why foster carers may leave their fostering service or stop fostering altogether can be characterised under several themes including communication, support, financial constraints and professional respect.

Conversely, many foster carers completing our project survey referenced their commitment to the children they care for as the primary reason that keeps them fostering and makes it difficult for them to leave. Participants shared their belief that they make an important contribution in the lives of the children they look after and that it is vital that other professionals recognise this, especially at the exit interview stage. For many, their commitment to the children they care for deters them from leaving foster care, contributing to their 'stickability' as foster carers.

Some foster carers do stop fostering for positive reasons – adoption, retirement, a change of family circumstances and so on. These are all reasons that may be relatively easy to discuss and to deal with emotionally. In the case of other, more challenging, reasons, a foster carer's relationship with a member of their service, for example their supervising social worker or a team manager, may create difficulties during an exit interview situation. We know that supervising social workers are invested in the lives of their foster carers and, as such, may find conducting an exit interview difficult. Our research has demonstrated the need to consider who will conduct each interview for foster carers to ensure as positive an experience and outcome as possible.

In the event of a negative reason for a foster carer stopping fostering, the opportunity to talk things through could provide a pivotal opportunity for services to turn around the opinion of a foster carer who has decided to leave so that they might talk favourably about the service in the future (which may impact on foster carer recruitment through 'word of mouth' referrals) or indeed continue to foster.

Focus groups conducted as part of this project demonstrated that foster carers have a lot of ideas that can improve fostering services. These include supporting each other with groups, peer mentoring, as well as more practical resolutions to every-day-problems such as conflicting school runs for example, alongside, for instance, how supervision can be more family friendly and how communication can be streamlined to reduce workloads for all. Building a culture of communication and feedback may lead to enhancements in practice but also will impact positively on the exit interview process with more foster carers willing to participate if they feel their service is consistently listening to their views.

When a foster carer does decide to leave their fostering service or to stop fostering, it is at this point that the individual reasons for leaving can be captured. Through this process it may be possible to identify the specific factors that influenced the decision, and whether any policy adjustments can mitigate against more foster carers leaving for the same reasons.

**Attitudes to exit interviews**

Developing an exit interview toolkit was the primary output from this project. Ensuring fostering services have the resources to embed the approach will be key to the legacy of this work.

The project hypothesised that exit interviews were typical practice for the general population. A survey of those who work outside of the fostering sector though proved that they were not as popular as originally thought. Around half of the 249 respondents had not been offered an exit interview by any of their employers. However, those who had been offered an exit interview, and took up the offer, found them of value to themselves and believed them to be beneficial to the organisations they were leaving.

As part of our research, we interviewed some organisations about their own exit interview practices and the results were varied. One university indicated that they no longer carry out formal exit interviews for their employees due to a perceived lack of value to them. This echoes the opinion of Kerry Hannon, a contributor to Forbes Magazine, who says that, 'some of your most effective exit conversations can take place outside of the formal exit interview'[3]. The director of The Mortgage Brain, a partner of The Fostering Network, is proud of his organisation's commitment to exit interviews, valuing employees and finding ways to offer flexible working to enable them to remain. Each of the fostering services we worked with for this project offer exit interviews but not universally for their foster carers.

Where exit interviews are carried out, and 'properly' according to the opinions of those who take part, they are very much welcomed and deemed 'useful'. It was felt that an important consideration for exit interviews may be that organisations actively listen to what people tell them. Finding an interviewer who could do this during a 'confidential conversation' was deemed important, but not easy or simple. Our review of current practice in industry demonstrated that an exiting professional's knowledge could be highly beneficial to the organisation they are leaving and that this should not be underestimated. It also showed that in order for exit interviews to be effective, they should be standardised throughout an organisation, supporting the need for a toolkit to be produced.

It is important for exit interviews to 'measure what matters'. Many opinions seemed to relate to the fact that there are a lot of processes designed to collect data from exit interviews but that what is collected is sometimes not necessarily useful or collected and shared appropriately. The full review can be found as an appendix to this report.

Some felt that an exiting professional would continue to be a brand ambassador for the organisation they are leaving and, as such, the exit interview should be seen as an opportunity to understand why the employee is leaving and address any potential issues. This can be seen as an opportunity to alleviate any ill feeling, which could damage an organisation's reputation. In foster care, word of mouth recommendation can be one of the most common methods of foster carer recruitment.

Whilse word of mouth advertising may be beneficial for services when foster carers are leaving for positive reasons, under negative circumstances it may be damaging to a service's reputation. It can be argued that it is in a fostering service's best interests to address specific issues and ensure information is factually accurate to support the individual and the service to move forward.

Around 60 foster carers have participated in this research, sharing emotional and thought-provoking stories. Many of these foster carers told us that they were cynical of their fostering service being willing to learn from foster carers who leave. A common response to whether foster carers felt that exit interviews were a good idea was 'if services don't listen to their carers while they are still

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[3] https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2015/06/04/exit-interview-dos-and-donts/#

fostering, why would they listen when someone was leaving?'. However, foster carers were able to consider the idea of an exit interview toolkit in great depth and there was an overwhelmingly positive response about the development of a toolkit to enable fostering services to conduct exit interviews.

Foster carers could see many challenges with the exit interview process including who would undertake the exit interview, what the format would be, how they would be supported and whether their social workers would want to know the real reasons they were leaving. However, the majority of the foster carers spoke about how they do feel that their views and experiences are a valid and valuable component of practice development, and that they would like the opportunity to share these in order to benefit future foster carer retention.

The two most popular answers, or reasons, people gave for finding an exit interview beneficial were to 'talk through issues' or to get 'things off my chest' and to 'help their fostering service to develop'. These points have helped to shape the toolkit in two very important ways. We have developed the resource to ensure that foster carers get the opportunity to discuss fully any challenges they have faced and to ensure that services can learn from the data they collect from those foster carers who leave their service.

**Current practice in conducting exit interviews for foster carers**

The project hypothesised that fostering services would understand the benefit of conducting exit interviews for foster carers but competing priorities may mean that they were not happening systematically, nor imbedded into the organisation's planning and review cycle.

A survey of fostering services found that few fostering services carry out exit interviews and, of those who do, almost half felt that their service did not use the data they collected to the fullest extent possible. Sixty-seven per cent of foster carers surveyed who were not offered exit interviews state that they would have liked to be offered one or felt that they would if they stop fostering.

There were many reasons given for services not currently carrying out exit interviews:

- Lack of time.
- Thinking that carers will not always be honest.
- Managers doing 'please stay with us' meetings which are not enough and the information is not collated. Interestingly, some foster carers who responded to our foster carer survey, who had been offered 'please stay incentives' were insulted by the service's impression that they could be 'bought'. None stayed with their original service because of what they were offered to do so.
- 'Usually we know why carers are leaving'.
- No agreed format.
- No one independent.
- No one takes responsibility.
- Difficult relationships at the time people stop fostering.
- Stressed carers not engaging.
- 'Our service focuses on recruitment and not retention.'

We hypothesised that the main reasons that services would give for not carrying out exit interviews would be insufficient resources available or that service staff would have to prioritise other activities.

While a lack of time was referenced, a number of other factors were also present relating to attitudes and processes that need to be addressed.

This information was supported by findings from the foster carer survey that less than one third had been offered an exit interview. Only three foster carers felt that an exit interview was not applicable to them.

Less than half of the foster carers who were offered an exit interview attended. The reasons given were, on the whole, related to a lack of trust or respect, that the invitation was not seen as genuine and that it was a 'tick box exercise', or the foster carer simply did not want to extend the leaving process. The reasons for foster carers not attending exit interviews could be indicative of the poor relationships that had developed between the service and the foster carer as they were leaving.

The few foster carers who did attend exit interviews felt listened to and were positive about the interviewer passing information on. However, most were certain that their service would 'absolutely not' act on the information they gained from the foster carer sharing their views. This was quite a standard response across our research activities and indicates that fostering services need to demonstrate their processes and commitments to them before foster carers feel secure in the knowledge that their opinions and experiences will be acted upon.

Exit interview processes when transferring to another fostering service appear to cause a great deal of consternation for foster carers. Some were very upset with the attitudes of their service from the time they decided to transfer to when they had transferred. While a small number of foster carers have had positive experiences, most of those who responded to our survey were disappointed and disillusioned as they transferred.

The challenges services face in meeting the support needs of their foster carers are of course dependent on many factors. Services were unanimous that they try to treat their foster carers as professionals and valued members of the team around the child. For example, West Sussex is currently working hard to raise the understanding of the professional status of foster carers internally and, while acknowledging the challenges of conducting exit interviews, are keen to embrace a process to undertake them.

**The timing and approach to exit interviews**

A key finding from the research is the value of offering two exit interview opportunities, enabling the employee to share their immediate feelings and opinions and also to have another conversation after a period of reflection. This approach was discussed and endorsed within a project focus group of foster carers and has informed the development of the toolkit.

An additional finding from the research was that some organisations conduct regular interviews prior to employees deciding to leave. As well as regular supervision, fostering services already carry out annual reviews for their foster carers, where practice is reviewed, and a discussion held about what is going well, what is working for everyone and also what could benefit from improvement or development. Asking foster carers if they have contemplated stopping or transferring at regular intervals (for example perhaps during the annual review) may enable services to support carers who are struggling more effectively, enabling them to continue fostering for longer. This process would need to be handled sensitively and is an area for further review beyond this project.

Participants shared that they would like to be treated as professionals throughout any exit interview process. They would like for any knowledge or opinions they share to be properly logged, considered and acted on. They would like to be consulted as to where and when the interview takes place. They would like for exit interviews to be treated as if they are as important as other priorities.

Interviews with fostering service staff and foster carers explored how services were already learning from foster carers who were stopping fostering or transferring to another service and aimed to identify any locally developed processes for exit interviews. For example, AFA Fostering have enhanced their practice based on findings from their exit interview processes and have even managed to prevent a foster carer from leaving the service through the process. The service manager conducts exit interviews herself as the service places great value on the exit interview process and learning from exiting carers. The service has learned that digital communication can be overwhelming and so they have lowered the number of emails they send and condense information for those who need to see it. They have also altered their supervising social worker training to respond better to the needs of their foster carers within their local practice guidelines and policies.

Any changes to practice that services make should be strategic and sustainable when evidenced by learning from exit interviews. The research we have carried out indicates that the majority of changes that foster carers would like to see within their services can be made within existing frameworks and are mainly aligned to the culture of the service. In addition to this, foster carers indicated that they understand the challenges that services sometimes face in making changes but would like their service to communicate the reasons for decisions, regardless of the outcome.

## Delivering good practice for exit interviews

Throughout the research, three components of an effective, robust and sustainable exit interview process were raised consistently:

- **A staged approach**

Foster carers explained that their feelings about their fostering experience change over time, and their priorities, needs and emotions can alter depending on what is occurring for them, their families and their children. Foster carers are clear that they would like two opportunities to share their feelings about stopping fostering or transferring service – they understand that their immediate feelings and their opinions after a period of reflection are equally valid. A two-stage approach to exit interviews will enable these initial feelings to be shared but also alternative or additional feedback after a period of reflection, both of which contribute to the learning of the fostering service.

Timing is critical and interviews should be separated by around four to six weeks to ensure that sufficient time has passed to reflect, but not lose sight of the key issues.

- **The importance of independence**

Despite the success some services have seen, participants in our focus groups shared that an independent person would be best placed to conduct the exit interview and to share the opinions, knowledge and feelings of the foster carer with the service they are leaving. It was felt that supervising social workers, or anyone in their line of management, may have a conflict of interest and as such could face challenges in sharing anything they hear.

In addition to this, participants felt that their fostering service would be more likely to listen to, and act on, data which was passed to them from an independent source. In contrast to the focus group foster

carers' opinions, some services said that they already carry out exit interviews successfully and are happy with the outcome, even though they do them themselves. We encourage fostering services to consider that outcomes of exit interviews could be even more positive if carried out by someone independent, even if there is a feeling that their current situation is satisfactory.

Where resource or procedures dictate, or a foster carer requests that the exit interview is carried out by their supervising social worker or someone known to them, the process needs to be clear and transparent for how information will be shared, reviewed and acted upon.

- **Standardisation**

Fostering service staff who have participated in this research have requested a process that they can follow which is simple, straight forward and designed to collect the important data – to 'measure what matters'. Foster carers would like this process to be driven by a professional desire to share and gather information that can improve service delivery and the future of foster care.

The toolkit we have designed allows services to follow the exit interview suggestions and discussion guide and record the themes and reasons why foster carers leave their fostering service in a simple and methodical manner. The final part of the toolkit is a simple and methodical data collection tool for services to use. Standardising the approach enables services to collect, analyse and review the data in a consistent manner, as well as facilitating contribution to any future national initiatives to review and enhance practice.

# Conclusion

This project has enabled us to explore in more detail the reasons and themes as to why foster carers leave their fostering service or stop fostering altogether to start a conversation about exit interviews. The research confirmed that, contrary to our hypothesis, exit interviews are not very prevalent in sectors external to fostering. We also found that fostering services and foster carers alike do see the value of a robust and transparent process.
Foster carers are vital people in the lives of looked after children and good foster care transforms lives. We believe, for these reasons and more, that conducting exit interviews in order to learn from the experiences and opinions of foster carers is a valuable aid to retention and ongoing learning and development.

We have answered many questions that our partner services had at the beginning of the project including how services should carry out exit interviews, who should plan and do the work, what does an effective exit interview process for foster carers look like and how do services collect the data? We have created a process which fostering services can simply pick up and use or seek further input from The Fostering Network to deliver the exit interview process.

The fostering services we worked with during this project all spoke about the high cost of recruiting a new foster carer and so while time, staffing issues, conflicting priorities and funding were all cited as potential barriers to conducting exit interviews, these should be overcome as a priority because of the potential savings which could be made. Only one senior social worker voiced their belief that service managers may not be willing to explore funding for exit interviews, everyone else that shared an opinion believed that their managers would see the long-term benefits of budgeting for exit interviews as a matter of course.

All of the services we spoke to were certain that they could learn from their foster carers in order to improve their practice, but some have been, until now, unable to create a workable solution. Others already have an exit interview protocol for foster carers who leave their service but were enthusiastic and welcoming of the project undertaken as a way to streamline and standardise the practice.

Partner services within the project shared a commitment to learning from foster carers who leave and about how they understood that this could aid the retention of current and future foster carers. Every fostering service we worked with on this project is committed to implementing a protocol to allow this to happen and for the data collected to be utilised and valued within their organisation.

The Exit Interview Toolkit created as a result of this project is available to download at www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/foster-carer-retention-project. We recommend that all fostering services utilise this resource or work with The Fostering Network to embed foster carer exit interviews into local practice.

Furthermore, we would recommend that continuous feedback is part of the dialogue between services and foster carers throughout their journey together so that foster carers know that their opinions matter and they can help shape the design and delivery of the services that benefit them and the children they care for.

## Appendix One

## Research methodology
The project used a range of research techniques to explore exit interview practice and to ensure that the data collected was robust and of value.

### Review of current practice
While anecdotal evidence gathered was beneficial, it was important to collect information about exit interviews from across sectors to underpin the project activity. To do this, we undertook a review of existing information to determine other sector practice and opinion about exit interviews. Sources included Reed, HR Magazine, Forbes and The Financial Times.

### Partners
The project worked with five fostering services across England to understand current practice around exit interviews for foster carers, identify views from fostering service staff and foster carers about the value of exit interviews and the process of conducting them, as well as to test recommendations through the toolkit developed.

These services were:

- AFA Fostering
- Birmingham Children's Trust
- Leicester City Council
- Rotherham Council
- West Sussex County Council

We also engaged with Central Bedfordshire Council and Derby City Council to test the toolkit.

### Focus groups
We conducted 12 focus groups with around 60 foster carers in total from our partner services during the project. During these meetings we were able to discuss the different aspects of the project with them, gather their views and opinions and ensure that we created tools that enable a foster carer to share information about their experience with their fostering service on leaving.

Foster carers with a wide range of experiences, length of service and family composition and location shared the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives, and how caring for looked after children can, and does, impact on them and their families. Foster carers' abilities to continue fostering were discussed, and how the actions of services can impact this.

### Exit interview general population survey

The project hypothesised that exit interviews were a common occurrence in other sectors and that individuals and organisations benefitted from them. We sought to understand the experience and opinion from other sectors as a foundation for our work. A total of 249 individuals responded to this survey.

### Foster carer survey

Following the first round of focus groups, and previous research undertaken by The Fostering Network, we had gathered significant data relating to the themes and reasons why foster carers stop

fostering. We hypothesised that foster carers generally were not offered exit interviews, but that those that were were happy to have taken part. It was also felt that foster carers would be positive about exit interviews so that their services could improve practice for the benefit of future foster carers. A total of 287 individuals responded to this survey.

**Fostering services survey**

We believed that services were generally very interested in the process of exit interviews and how the data collected from them could be utilised for current and future foster carer retention. We believed that services could learn from foster carers who leave and that there was a way that we could support this process.

A total of 135 responses were received to this survey, however the data showed that some foster carers had also completed the survey. It was though possible to extrapolate some useful data, which has been used to inform discussions and the creation of the toolkit.

We called for responses for all surveys via The Fostering Network's e-news communications with services and foster carers and also via social media channels including Facebook and Twitter.

## Appendix Two

## Foster Carer Retention Project: Review of current practice in industry

This review of exit interview practice in industry aimed to:

- identify general attitudes towards exit interviews from sectors other than fostering.
- explore how exit interviews are carried out and report on any accepted recognised examples of best practice to inform the development of the toolkit.

The findings from this review are documented below.

### Defining exit interviews and general attitudes towards them from industry

An exit interview is an interview held with an employee about to leave an organisation, typically in order to discuss the employee's reasons for leaving and their experience of working for the organisation.[4]

In the US, 90 per cent of Fortune 500 companies conduct exit interviews, however only 40 per cent view the practice itself as useful.[5] Research was unable to identify and comparative data for the UK, however this is a useful indication of the coverage and value large companies place upon exit interviews.

Exit interviews can:

- provide an opportunity for the organisation to thank departing employees for their contributions and wish them well in the future.
- be a chance to gain insight into the issues within the organisation, where improvements can be made and how you are perceived as an employer.
- demonstrate positive culture within an organisation and are encouraging to existing employees.
- provide training opportunity for management to develop experience of hearing and handling feedback.[6]

Exit interviews should be designed to, 'measure what matters.' All too often businesses concentrate on practical things during the interview (pay, benefits and working conditions) when actually, employees may feel more strongly about relationships with their managers and colleagues, the future of the organisation and having a personal belief in the organisation's mission and values.[7] Exit interviews might often be 'one last chance to get something constructive out of your co-worker'[8] making it of value to harvest any information of benefit before an individual leaves an organisation.

Whether employees are 'work to live' or 'live to work', they may tend to lay their aspirations at the door of the organisation they chose to work for and, when they leave, whether the organisation has met these aspirations (or not) will 'come into sharp focus'. The departing employee becomes a brand ambassador for the organisation they have worked for and a sensitively handled exit interview can set the scene for whether they are a positive brand ambassador or not.[9]

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[4] TBC

[5] https://www.hracuity.com/blog/importance-of-exit-interviews

[6] https://www.peoplebusiness.co.uk/the-value-of-exit-interviews/

[7] https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/employee-engagement-exit-interviews-time-to-say-goodbye

[8] https://www.reed.co.uk/recruiter-advice/how-to-manage-an-exit-interview/

[9] https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/employee-engagement-exit-interviews-time-to-say-goodbye

Some perceive that, "HR (human resources) does not really want to know why someone is leaving their organisation – that by telling them anything an employee who is leaving just creates paperwork which HR will then have to file and report". The onus is on the individual leaving to "give constructive criticism to strengthen the organisation while expressing frustration or anger without it being taken as sour grapes or bitterness".[10] Others suggest that when an individual leaves, particularly a 'top performer', HR will want to know why and what the organisation could have done to keep the person.[11]

Exit interviews often do not produce the results that an organisation could find useful because employees do not want to be as candid as they would need to be to get the results required to encourage change. Employees may not want to speak ill of their colleagues or they may already be 'emotionally checked out' and be lacking the motivation to help secure a better future for the organisation.[12] Done right however, exit interviews can have a bigger impact than employee engagement surveys.[13]

**The process for conducting exit interviews**

Exit interviews should not be treated as a 'box-ticker' if organisations are to extract useful information from them in order to make improvements. Organisations should also be open to challenge and that being defensive while carrying out an exit interview is not helpful, "real feedback can often come with a not-unhealthy dose of criticisms and that these should be carefully heard, if not fully embraced".[14]

It is the role of the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to speak openly and to 'resist the temptation to over-prompt or second-guess' their answers. The best exit interviews are like confidential conversations, and the more you loosen the reigns and let the other party speak, the more it will benefit your business in the long run'.[15]

An exit interview may be a difficult time for the organisation and the person leaving (it may also be very positive for all concerned). Questions should be made ready in advance and the person carrying out the interview is as prepared as possible. Suitable open-ended questions may include:

- What is your main reason for leaving?
- What are the positives of your new role?
- What could we have done that may have convinced you to stay?
- Would you consider coming back to work with us, if the situation were right?

Having the right people at the meeting is paramount and caution given to inviting a close colleague of the leaving party due to reasons of confidentiality and the fact that there may be a fractured relationship that the interviewer is unaware of.

For the employee leaving an organisation, 'the knowledge they have of the industry, the personal connections they have made and the challenges they have faced doing the job day-in, day-out could be invaluable when it comes to making sure their replacement settles in'.[16]

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[10] https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2015/06/04/exit-interview-dos-and-donts/
[11] https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2017/12/07/do-you-need-to-conduct-exit-interviews-10-hr-pros-weigh-in/
[12] https://hbr.org/2016/04/making-exit-interviews-count
[13] https://www.ft.com/content/cbe970d2-62c7-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2
[14] https://www.reed.co.uk/recruiter-advice/how-to-manage-an-exit-interview/
[15] https://www.reed.co.uk/recruiter-advice/how-to-manage-an-exit-interview/
[16] https://www.businessballs.com/team-management/exit-interviews/

It is imperative that events surrounding an employee's exit are handled sensitively in order to make things smoother for those who remain at the organisation. Individuals leaving are likely to leave behind colleagues who have become friends and by acting in a sympathetic and thoughtful manner, employers can set the stage for future exit interviews - experiences are likely to be shared and positive exit interviews are valuable for organisations for this reason.

Events that occur after the exit interview are also very important. Organisations should act on information it receives and takes the thoughts, concerns and praise of the exiting employee seriously, confirming that the process is meaningful for all concerned. Furthermore, "if you are only asking someone's reasons for leaving as they walk out the door, then it's already too late. Do not lose good members of staff by treating their opinions as an afterthought".[17]

While an organisation may promote exit interviews, or discussions, separate departments may carry them out differently, putting alternative priorities at the top of the agenda. This would make recording and utilising data difficult for the organisation as a whole and leads the way to suggesting that an organisation-wide policy is written and shared (and audited) to prevent this from happening.

Asking the right questions can be important when conducting an exit interview as, "employees are unlikely to give useful feedback unless they are asked the right questions, because they are concerned of speaking frankly for fear of ruining future references. A more drawn out approach could lead to ex-employees being retained as consultants, or coaches during the handover process - this could 'smooth bumpy exits, minimising reputational damage caused by disgruntled employees or those going to competitors".[18]

**Timing of exit interviews**

Organisations may wish to take a 'belt and braces' approach to exit interviews and conduct a paper or online survey, a meeting during the employee's last week and also to plan a date, some four to six weeks later, to potentially appreciate a different perspective as 'the follow-up assessment may reveal a more objective explanation for leaving'. The people who have left may, by now, have experienced a new organisation and may actually realise that 'the grass is not always greener'. The passage of time often results in more open feedback on why an employee has left. This increases the reliability and validity of the information'.[19]

As highlighted above, only capturing information when an employee leaves is a missed opportunity. Providing feedback more regularly is an important aspect of cementing a useful exit interview process. It is not useful to 'save it all up' or to establish an occasion designed to 'let it all out' at the end of a period of employment.

**Conclusion**

Attitudes to exit interviews are largely positive in some of the leading organisations, however significantly fewer see the practice as useful. This could suggest exit interviews are treated as a 'box ticker', something organisations 'should' be doing but not substantiated by a robust process to inform improvements.

When done properly, exit interviews can be more impactful than employee engagement surveys. They should be used to 'measure what matters', harvesting information from an employee before they

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[17] https://www.reed.co.uk/recruiter-advice/how-to-manage-an-exit-interview/

[18] https://www.ft.com/content/cbe970d2-62c7-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2

[19] https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/employee-engagement-exit-interviews-time-to-say-goodbye

leave. However, they should not be done in isolation and employees should have opportunities to feedback at various points within their employment.

Timing is critical to an exit interview. A two-stage process through a combination of face-to-face or through surveys could allow an individual to share their initial thoughts and others after a point of reflection. Crucially they should be conducted by someone who allows the individual to talk freely, candidly and is open to both positive and negative feedback in order for the individual to share all of their thoughts.

This short review is a useful grounding in exit interviews and will inform hypotheses for further research within this project as to how exit interviews can be developed for foster carers.