Fostering services in England

Performance benchmark report 2015/16
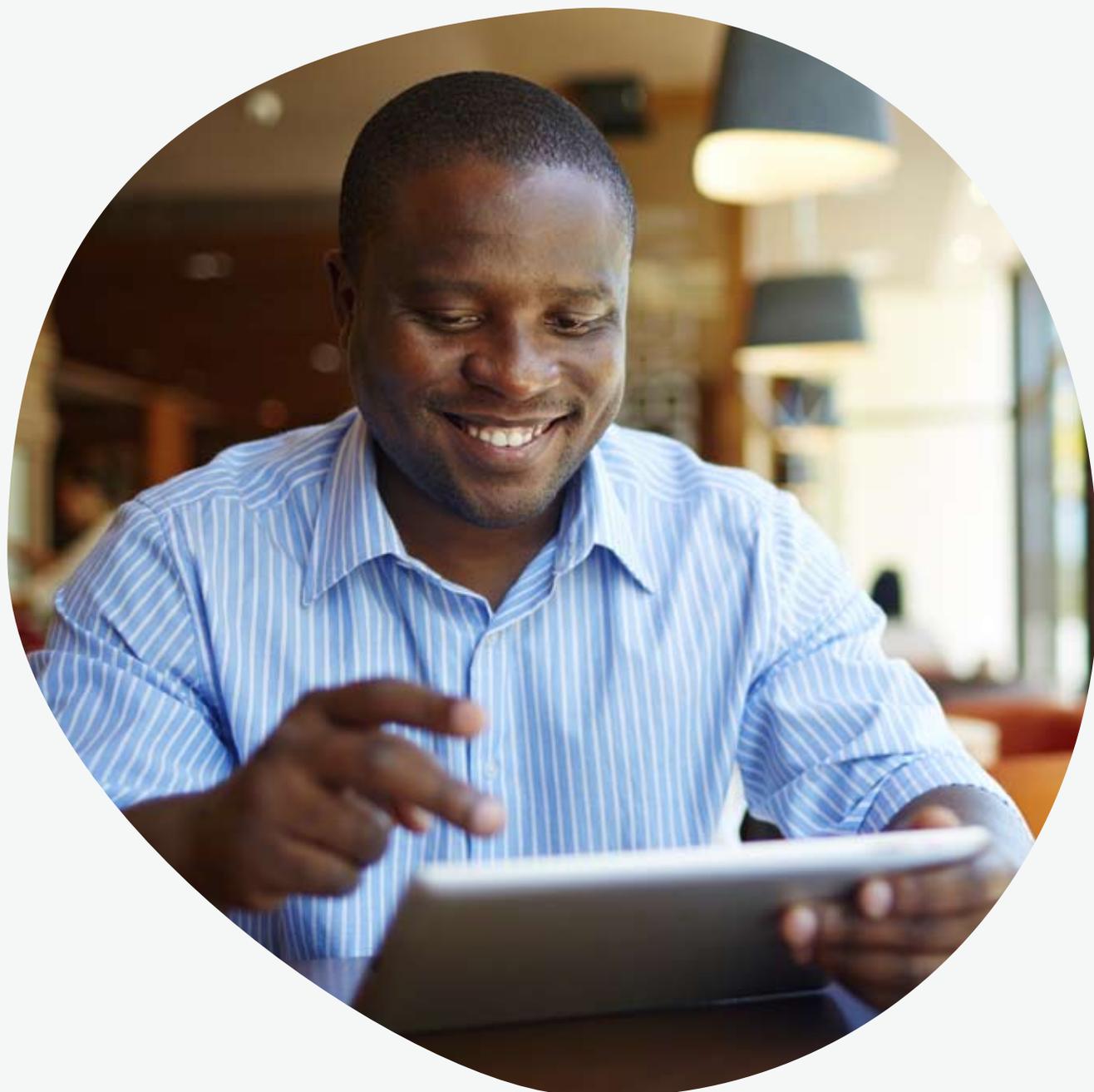
The Fostering Network

CONTENTS

For further information contact:
James Foyle
e james.foyle@fostering.net

Summary of key findings

The findings from the Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark 2014/15 show:

- **10 per cent** of enquiries proceed to approved foster carers.

- The journey to approval takes an average **241** days.

- **38 per cent** of enquiries are generated through the web, the most prevalent enquiry source.

- **69 per cent** of children in foster care are placed with local authority foster carers.

- **18 per cent** of local authority fostering placements appear to be under utilised.

- **12 per cent** of foster carers left their service in the past year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Could you foster? Could you commit the time, emotion and support that looked after children in foster care need? There are approximately 55,000 fostering families in England who do, 24/7, yet fostering services in England require 7,600 more in 2016 to help meet the demands of children coming into care.

The challenge is continuously evolving. Many more unaccompanied asylum seeking children are likely to enter the UK in the coming months, a number of whom in need of a form of foster care. Fostering services will of course adapt, targeting recruitment at specific communities, upskilling the existing workforce against the need identified and working in partnership to meet local need.

Processing these and other enquiries, identifying those who may have the requisite skills and qualities and optimising the process through to panel for those suitable is the aim for all fostering services. Benchmarking these processes against national averages will aid and improve local activity.

First collated in 2013, the benchmark uniquely combines data collected through Ofsted and CIPFA with the addition of pertinent fostering performance statistics, giving participating fostering services an exclusive snapshot on performance in key areas, including enquiry sources, journey to approval and utilisation of placement capacity.

Twenty one English local authority fostering services and two independent fostering providers participated in this year's survey, contributing to the findings in the following report. The third of its kind, previous reports are available to view in the recruitment section of The Fostering Network's website. The Fostering Network requires your continued commitment and participation to maintain a reliable level of data going forward. Contact The Fostering Network to enquire or register interest on behalf of your fostering service by emailing james.foyle@fostering.net

CONVERSION RATE

Fostering services approved 10 per cent of initial enquiries received during 2014/15. This is a marginal reduction on the 11 per cent reported in 2013/14.

Foster carer approvals as a percentage of enquiries
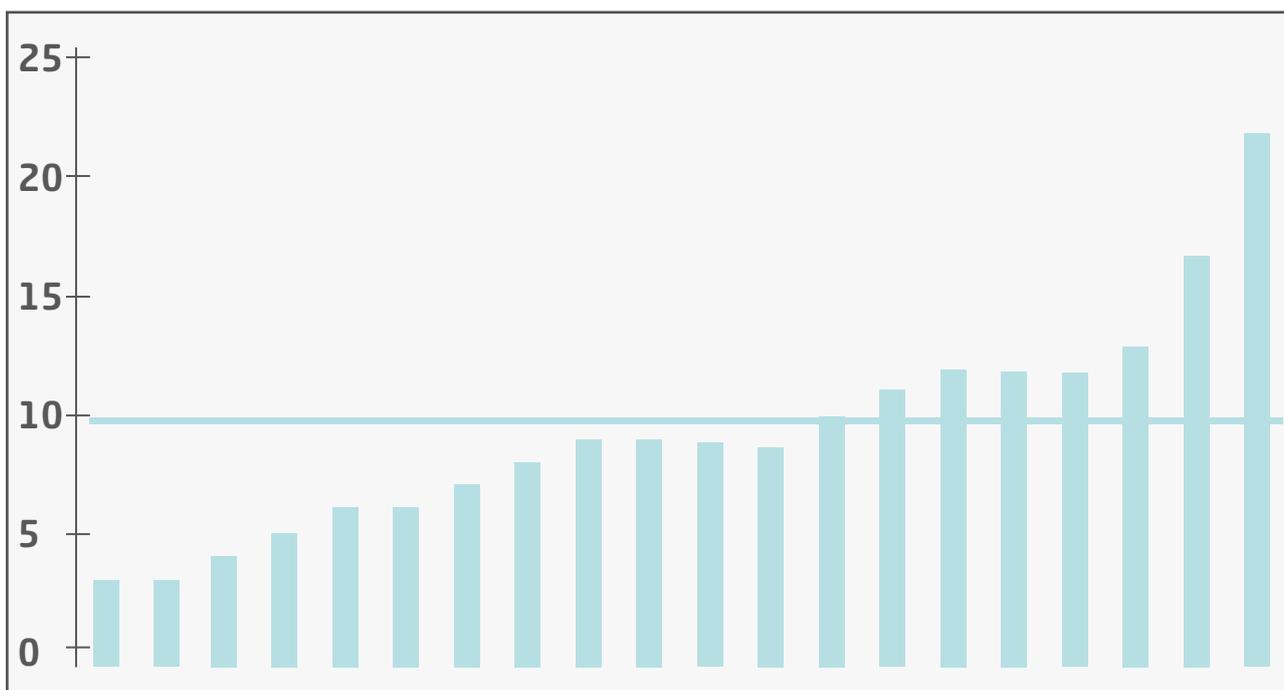
As reported previously, a number of enquiries are lost at the initial visit stage, with just 26 per cent progressing from an enquiry to an initial visit, compared to 31 per cent last year.

Ensuring initial enquiries are recorded directly and defined as 'an individual/couple registering their interest in fostering by providing basic contact information including, name, age and address' or equivalent is a necessary step. Drilling down this information on a local level will assist services to determine the primary reasons why an individual or couple have not progressed their enquiry and adjust marketing and communications where necessary.

The Fostering Network has been commissioned to carry out mystery shopping exercises[I] with a number of fostering services. What has become apparent through this is the importance of having a consistent response to those making enquiries. It is also important for individuals answering calls to strike a balance between practice knowledge and engaging the caller who may not have a detailed knowledge of fostering through basic customer service principles.

[I] Please email james.foyle@fostering.net for more information about The Fostering Network's mystery shopping offer

% of Initial enquiries	
Approvals	10
Stage 2	7
Training	13
Stage 1	9
Applications	17
Initial visits	26

Of the enquirers who progressed to an initial visit, an average of 38 per cent became approved as foster carers, ranging from 10 to 66 per cent across those surveyed. Given the pressures on resources, it is imperative to maximise the value of social work time. If nine out of 10 initial visits ultimately prove unsuccessful, evaluating the reasons behind this will improve a service's performance and resource allocation.

Moving through the process, 58 per cent of formal applicants become approved foster carers, with 76 per cent of those who are trained going on to approval. However, a few services appear to lose around two thirds of applicants at the training stage. The Skills to Foster pre-approval training is designed to provide prospective foster carers with a basic understanding of the fostering task, but it is clearly important that they have realistic expectations from the outset. Training delivery is also a significant factor. Taking and acting on feedback provided by attendees on all aspects of the session including trainer delivery, structure and use of materials, will again help to optimise the process[2].

Finally, 67 per cent of those who enter Stage 2 of the assessment become approved as foster carers. Stage 2 is the detailed part of the assessment, and the point at which applicants can access the IRM should they wish to challenge the decision not to put them forward to panel. Two thirds of services responding recorded 100 per cent of Stage 2 assessments progressing to approval. A few however reported fewer than 50 per cent progressing from Stage 2. Clearly any manner of issues may arise from the detailed assessment phase, but to lose over half of applicants is unfortunate at best. Further work could establish whether there are any correlations between assessments performed by in-house assessors progressing, and those performed by external assessors for those services that outsource, or the order in which processes occur to optimise local performance.


---

[2] The Fostering Network offer The Skills to Foster, Train the Trainers: https://www.fostering.net/training-and-events/in-house-training/skills-foster-train-trainers

JOURNEY TO APPROVAL

It took approximately 241 days on average between an initial enquiry and a foster carer reaching panel in 2014/15, a significant improvement (12 per cent) on the 273 days reported previously.

Average number of days between initial enquiry and panel
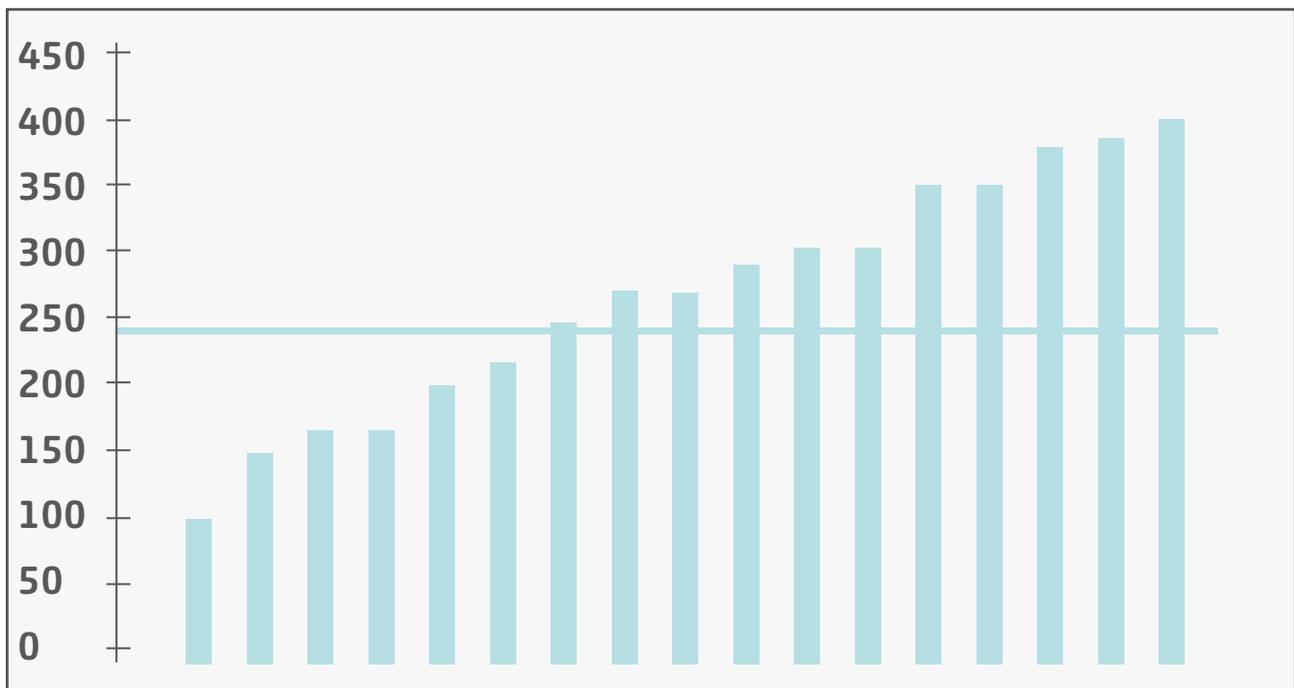
Services structure the foster carer recruitment function in a variety of different ways, often according to the size of the organisation. Some have created Stage 1 and Stage 2 teams, to mirror the Department for Education's revised guidance, while smaller organisations are reliant on individual's performing the whole process.

The assessment phase understandably takes a significant proportion of the time, an average of 148 days or 61 per cent of the overall journey. Twenty two per cent of the total, equating to an average of 52 days, can be attributed to the time taken between an initial visit and starting training. Applicants may of course wish to defer training until they can secure time off work or child care cover, for example. But where there is appetite to attend quickly, and not sufficient numbers to run a course locally, services should explore the potential to run training with neighbouring services to maintain momentum within the process.

ENQUIRY SOURCES

The web was once again the most prevalent source for enquiries generated, up five per cent to 38 per cent.

While services seek to log details through online forms, it is important not to neglect displaying alternative means of contact, including information sessions but more importantly, telephone numbers – specifically the direct line to a duty officer.

Many people who are considering fostering for the first time will have a number of questions, and are likely to want to discuss these when they are fresh in their mind. Relationships are a significant part of fostering. Foster carers regularly cite 'impressed by the first impression' as the reason why they chose to foster with their service. Ensuring the first contact, be it over the phone, face-to-face or digital, is of a consistently high standard will have a significant impact on recruitment and set the tone for retention.

PLACEMENT PROVIDER SPLIT

Sixty nine per cent of fostered children are placed with local authority foster carers, returning to the figure reported in 2012/2013, and up four per cent from 2013/2014.

Placement provider split

- Local Authority
- Independent Fostering Provider
- Residential Care
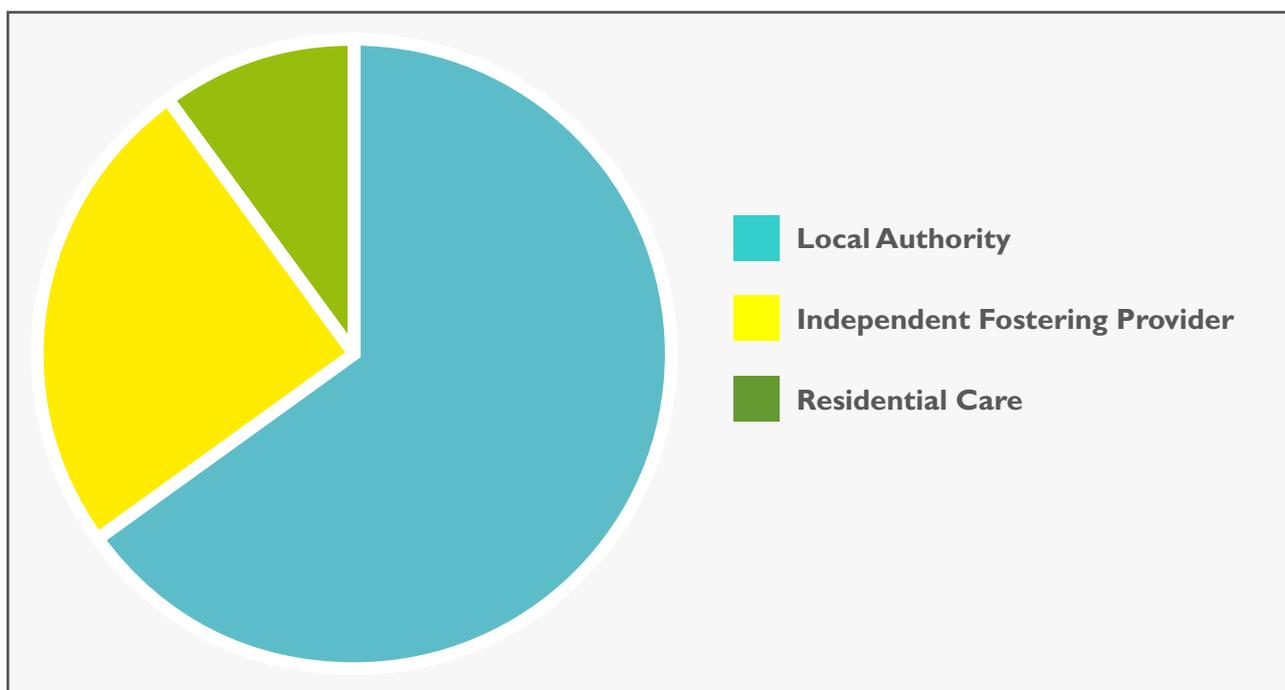
Many local authorities continue to strive to retain as many fostered children as possible with in-house foster carers, frequently on the basis that it is perceived as financially better for the authority. Ideally the best interest of the child will be the driving decision maker, and in turn, the needs of the foster carer.

Fostering services across the UK offer a variety of training, support and incentives to attract and retain foster carers. For some of the most complex children, access to this support – more often than not a supervising social worker – will be critical to the success of a placement and the outcomes for the child.

The Fostering Network produces recruitment targets each year. Over, 9,000 new foster families are needed across the UK at the time of writing. This is a headline figure, a call for people who may have been considering fostering to take action. We know it is not an absolute figure, and we expect services to know the local target and the rationale behind it. Recruiting responsibly is critical to the future sustainability of foster care.

This year's survey response has demonstrated a significant decrease in the number of vacant placements as we drilled down to find out the reasons behind them. A number of places are recorded as vacant despite them being unavailable due to the needs of a child currently in placement, reserved for a child known to be coming back into care, or another reason that will affectively 'block' the potential placement. Discounting these unavailable places results in an average of 18 per cent of placement capacity underutilised. This figure was 31 per cent in 2014, prior to the change in reporting.

The Fostering Network's recruitment target includes a percentage to allow for placement choice – one foster carer for one child is not a healthy ratio. Yet 18 per cent is still a relatively high number, particularly for individuals reliant on fostering income who may not have any of their places utilised. If foster carers are unable or unwilling to retrain to meet the local demand for fostering, and their skillset no longer matches that required, a decision has to be taken on their ongoing status as foster carers.

DEREGISTRATION RATES

Twelve per cent has consistently been the average for the proportion of foster carers leaving their service annually for the previous five years.

Retirement is the most common reason why foster carers leave their service (29 per cent). A fifth left due to a change in household circumstances, and another fifth became adopters or special guardians. While the latter should be celebrated if it is in the best interest of the child and the carer, it does place an additional strain on recruitment and should be projected as part of each service's needs analysis.

Foster carers spend on average 7.8 years with their fostering service before leaving, ranging from just three to 27 and a half years.

Average number of years fostering
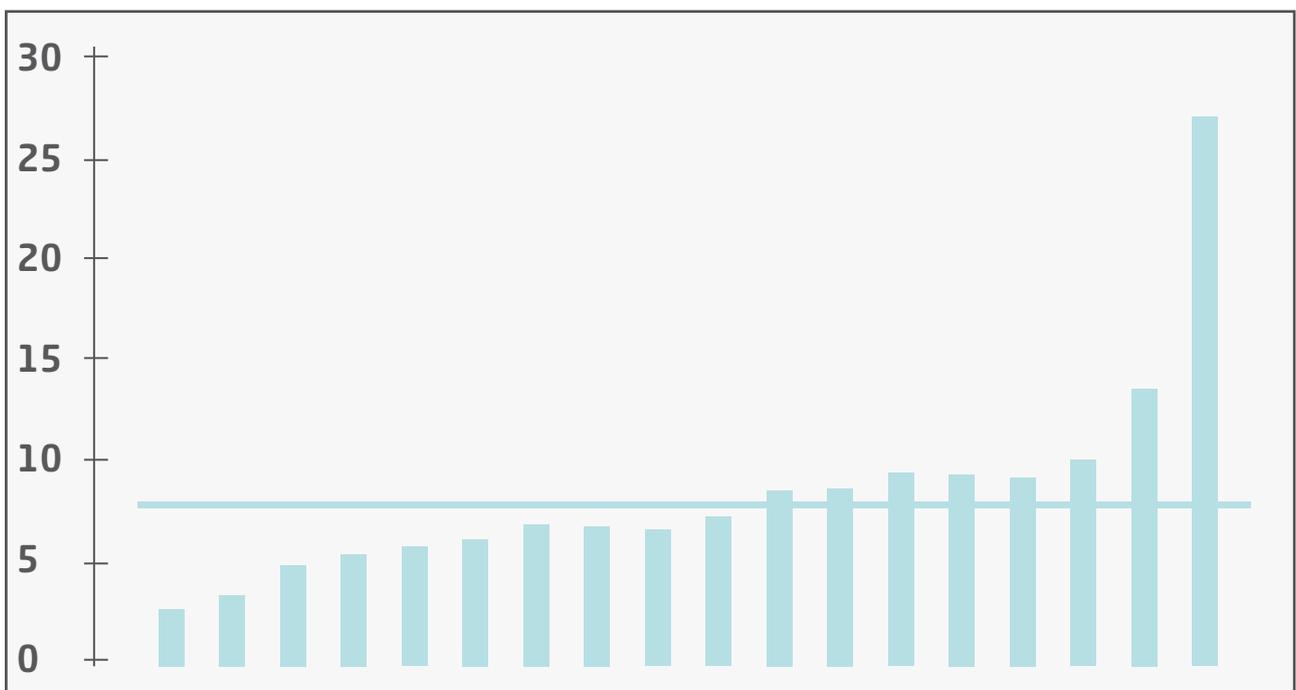
As discussed in the previous report, exit interviews can provide invaluable information on the support offer and identify common issues to be resolved. Just a quarter of services which participated in this year's benchmark conducted exit interviews, representing just five per cent of the total number of foster carers who left services.

AGE PROFILE

Children and young people come into care at various points within their childhood. The age profile of fostered children in the care of participating services shows:

- 8 per cent aged 0-1 year.

- 12 per cent aged 2 to 5 years.

- 36 per cent aged 6 to 12 years.

- 44 per cent aged 13 to 17 years.

With a significant majority of teenaged young people in foster care, and services struggling to find prospective foster carers able and willing to care for older children, greater understanding of the existing workforce can help target similar individuals for these children.

The benchmark also collected data on the age profile of foster carers, finding:

- Two per cent are aged 18 to 29 years.

- Nine per cent are aged 30 to 39 years.

- 30 per cent are aged 40 to 49 years.

- 38 per cent are aged 50 to 59 years.

- 17 per cent are aged 60 to 69 years.

- 3 per cent are aged 70 years and over.

Use this data as the basis to drill down further locally to see if there are any correlations in the ages of foster carers who foster older children, their professional experience, their values and other relevant parameters. This insight will help services structure recruitment campaigns to attract more people with the potential to meet local foster care needs.

CONCLUSION

The fostering service benchmark survey in England has again shed invaluable light on the performance of fostering services in the recruitment and retention of their fostering population.

While conversion and deregistration rates remain consistent with the data reported in previous years, fostering services appear to have made significant gains in the time taken to approve a foster carer.

The new figure of 241 days, the equivalent of approximately 7.8 months, is just within the Department for Education's guidance to approve foster carers with eight months. While the time taken is sometimes criticised as too long when the demand for new foster carers is high, The Fostering Network maintains that the Government standard still represents an appropriate duration, given the vast commitment that families are making in order to foster. But where there is opportunity to process map the journey, identify inefficiencies and optimise it locally, this should be taken. For processes that are reliant on third party information, such as the DBS or health checks, investing in local relationships to enhance this process at a strategic level has the potential to benefit fostering.

Ever increasing numbers of households have access to the internet (86 per cent in Britain), with around 78 per cent of adults accessing the internet every day, or almost every day[3]. This has most likely contributed to the web being the most prevalent channel for enquiry generation in recent years. Some services may experience a relatively high quality in application from online channels, yet the higher volume and ease of completing an enquiry form may have a negative impact on conversion rates. The Fostering Network recommends services undertake further local analysis on conversion by channel, to identify which are ultimately the most fruitful and therefore the channels to be invested in.

Drilling down information can be beneficial, as the results on capacity utilisation have demonstrated. Where previously around a third of placements were reported as underutilised, identifying the reasons behind vacancies has shown far fewer are actually vacant. While this points to greater efficiency, there may well be individuals without any placements, possibly for a number of months. With word of mouth a powerful recruitment tool, a disengaged and dissatisfied foster carer may also have a negative impact on a services recruitment activity. Treating foster carers as part of the workforce, communicating and engaging with them will have a positive impact on the whole service.

The Fostering Network is seeking to continue the fostering service benchmark, expanding to more services in 2016/17 to provide a robust dataset to benefit fostered children and their foster carers. To be part of the fostering service benchmark community, please email **james.foyle@fostering.net**

[3] www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccess-householdsandindividuals/2015-08-06

The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

find us on facebook
facebook.com/thefosteringnetwork

follow us on twitter
@fosteringnet

follow us on instagram
@fosteringnet