

"We're One Team – and It's Starting to Work"

Q: How long have you been fostering and what led you into it?

We've been fostering for about eight and a half years now, we started in 2017. It wasn't something I'd always planned to do, but it just felt like the right time. We had space, time, and wanted to do something meaningful as a family.

Over the years, we've looked after children of different ages and situations – mainly long term and repite. It's been the most rewarding thing, but also the hardest thing I've ever done. You learn that fostering isn't just about caring for a child; it's about working as part of a team, navigating systems, and sometimes standing up for what's right for the child.

Those early years were all about finding our feet – understanding how things worked, building relationships, and learning through experience.

Q: How did you first get involved with the Pioneers Programme?

I joined the Pioneers around two years ago. At first, I didn't really know what to expect, but I saw it as a chance to make a difference and to use what I'd learned to help shape things for carers coming after me. In our LA, we were quite new to the whole Pioneer concept at the time, and there wasn't a clear structure. I think that's been one of the biggest challenges, but also one of the biggest opportunities.

The turning point for me came when I supported a group going through Skills to Foster. They were nervous, unsure, and had loads of questions. I started a little WhatsApp group for them so they could stay in touch, share worries, and get support once approved. They've since gone on to become brilliant carers. That's when I realised that peer support doesn't have to be complicated; it's just about making sure no one feels alone.

Q: What kind of things have you been involved in as a Pioneer?

Quite a few, actually. I've done mentoring, helped run training sessions, supported new carers before and after approval, and worked on a few specific projects.

One that really stands out was mentoring a new carer who faced an allegation within the first 10 days of their first placement. That was heartbreaking, because I'd been through something similar myself and I know how isolating it can be. I checked in regularly, reassured them, and helped them get through the process. Thankfully, they were cleared and are still fostering today. That felt like a real success.

But the biggest change (the thing I'm most proud of) is how we've built something new here, a carers-only forum where carers meet, talk, and agree on the issues they want to raise with management. It started because people were frustrated – there was a lack of trust and communication between carers and the fostering team. Everyone said they wanted to see change, but it needed to come from us.

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Q: Tell me more about the carers' forum – how did that come about?

It started very naturally. A few of us felt there needed to be a safe, independent space (just carers, no staff) where people could speak freely and find common ground.

So, with the Fostering team manager and new Service Manager's support, we organised a carers-only meeting. About 25 turned up, which was amazing. We kept it solution-focused, not just a moaning session. Everyone was respectful and honest, and we came away with six key themes that kept coming up over and over again:

1. The allegations process – carers felt vulnerable and unsupported.
2. Trust and communication – people weren't sure their voices were being heard.
3. Inconsistency in decisions – different answers from different workers.
4. The professional status of carers – being treated as equal partners.
5. Recognition and incentives – simple appreciation and feedback.
6. Building a sense of community and belonging.

We shared those with the Fostering team manager and Service Manager, who were incredibly open and asked us to come up with an action plan. We met again as carers to prioritise ideas – things that could make an immediate difference.

Q: What kind of actions came out of that?

A lot. Some quick wins were implemented straight away. For example, fixing the way messages were sent to carers so that urgent updates didn't get lost. We now get both text and email alerts, which sounds simple but has made such a difference. Also, agreed changes to payment schedules and funding for a children's Christmas party.

We are in the process of creating working groups for carers who wanted to get more involved. The group will be leading on things like:

- A revised new newsletter to improve communication.
- An updated handbook for carers, written by carers.
- An "allegation buddy system", so no one has to face that alone again.

We also agreed a no-names policy (if someone raises an issue, we don't mention names, because this is about trust and improvement, not blame). That's been key to keeping the dialogue open.

And for the first time ever, we now have regular joint meetings with the Fostering team manager and the Service Manager and other senior staff, where we go through the action plan and update on progress. The best moment for me was when the Director of Social Services asked if he could come and talk to our carers' group, not the other way around. That felt like a real shift in power and respect.

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Q: What's been the most significant change for you through all this?

For me, it's about trust and partnership. I feel like the relationship between carers and the local authority has genuinely started to change. It's not perfect (we're still finding our way) but there's a real sense that our voices matter now. We recognise that it will take time and are happy to move forward with baby steps.

The new Service Manager has been a big part of that too; along with the Fostering team manager, she's encouraged openness, feedback, and joint working. Her message has always been, "We are one team – we are not a service without our carers." That's something I really believe in.

Before, it often felt like carers were on the outside looking in. Now, we're at the table, not just being told what's happening, but helping shape it.

Q: What would you say is the biggest lesson or takeaway from your journey as a Pioneer?

That change doesn't have to come from above. Sometimes it starts with a few people sitting down and saying, "What can we do differently?"

When we first met as carers, we were nervous. Would anyone come? Would it make a difference? But once people saw that things were actually changing, more and more are buying into the idea.

I think that's the most powerful thing: Seeing people who had become disillusioned starting to believe again that their voices matter. We've gone from frustration and fear to collaboration and trust.

And personally, it's given me a sense of purpose again. I feel proud to be part of something that's genuinely making fostering better for everyone; carers, children, and the whole team.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been seeing trust starting to be rebuilt between carers and the fostering service. What started as frustration and low morale is becoming partnership, communication, and progress.

Through the Pioneers, and through the carers-only forum, we've shown that when carers lead change, good things happen. We've built a space where people feel safe, heard, and respected – and we're proving that we really can be one team around the child.

There's still more to do, but now it feels like we're doing it together.

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