

"For me, it's all about connection."

Q: Looking back over your involvement with the Pioneers initiative, what would you say has been the most significant change for you?

"For me it's relationships, community and connections... that's what I kept coming back to." I was thinking about this before we started and it's hard to pinpoint just one change. But what I kept coming back to, over and over again, was: relationships, community, and connections. As a foster carer, that's what it's all about for me. And as a Pioneer, it's just given me more opportunities to do what I believe in. I don't think I do anything above and beyond what other foster carers do but it enabled me to work more alongside them. If I have the opportunity to share knowledge, I'll take it. That's what I'm here for.

"I don't see myself doing anything above and beyond any other foster carers – just working alongside."

Since COVID, I've found those connections are really lacking. Before the pandemic, I got a lot of connection through training, coffee mornings, events. I've been fostering for over 10 years, and those early interactions with other carers (hearing their stories, learning from them), shaped me. But that's changed. It's quieter now. People are more isolated.

"The biggest change is trying to make those connections happen in any which way I can." So, for me, the most significant change has been trying to rebuild that sense of community, for myself and others. I'm doing that through things like a coffee morning we run called "Coffee, Learn, Share." It's a space where carers can talk, reflect, and share. What we've noticed is that people struggle with learning and development engagement. So, these sessions aren't just about ticking training boxes, they're about talking to someone who gets it. Someone who's faced similar challenges. A 20-minute chat can shift how you deal with a young person's behaviour or approach a difficult school situation.

Q: What kinds of things are you finding useful or powerful to share with others?

I work a lot with children who have neurodiversity so I naturally connect with other carers who are dealing with behavioural challenges or trying to get proper educational support. Sometimes the things I share are small, but powerful. Like telling a new carer, "You can say no to that." That it's OK to push back if something doesn't sit right for your family.

I don't tell people what to do I don't set the rules. But I can share what's worked for me. That might be signposting to virtual schools or helping someone navigate medical assessments or education plans. I can't be in every meeting, and I don't want to be. But if I can say, "Talk to this person," or "Here's what helped me," that's enough and it can make a real difference too.

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Q: Do you feel that being a Pioneer has helped heighten your sense of empowerment around this work – in relationships, community building, connecting others?

Absolutely. Being a Pioneer has opened up new spaces for me, and for others.

The Foster Network offers additional training and events, and as a Pioneer, I'm invited to more things. I've used that opportunity to create safe spaces (like our coffee mornings) where there are no social workers present. Because let's be honest, sometimes carers won't open up if they think what they say could be misinterpreted or taken down as a concern.

In those spaces, people can vent. They can say what they feel, work it out, process it. And I don't take it personally because I get it. I've probably said the same things in frustration. But they need a place where they can be human and not worry about being judged for their tone or how they say something.

"We've got so many different personalities, and we need different people for the range of children we have."

We have carers from all walks of life. Different backgrounds, different educational levels and that's a beautiful thing. Because our children are from all walks of life too. But sometimes the way people speak isn't "professional" and that can be used against them. I'm there to remind them: your voice matters. You're doing this job every day. You deserve to be heard. I can help bridge that gap between the carers concerns, needs and challenges and advocating for this with services. Pioneers has given me that platform.

"Talking to another carer – hearing those stories, how someone else does it – that's learning."

Q: What impact have you seen the Pioneers Programme have on the service itself?

The biggest change I've seen is honesty.

When carers talk to other carers (particularly Pioneers) they're more open. They say how they really feel. And we listen. I tell them, "I'm one of you." I do the same job you do. And I think that makes people feel more comfortable.

Before this, it felt more "us and them." Carers were doing their best in their own corners. Through Pioneers there's now more confidence to speak up and to do it professionally. I've seen carers go back to their supervising social workers and raise issues, because they felt supported and validated after a chat with me or another Pioneer.

"It's not always easy – 'can I be part of your community?' – but we need that feeling."

It's not that our voices suddenly carry more weight, it's that people feel heard. And when they do take something forward, and a change is made or they feel listened to, that's empowering. That keeps them going.

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Q: Do you have a particular standout moment from your time as a Pioneer?

"Sometimes I just need validation. And what better validation than someone that's doing it alongside me?"

I don't know if it's a standout "moment," but something that's stayed with me is when social workers ask me for advice.

Like, they'll come to me at events and say, "What would you do here?" or "Who did you speak to about that diagnosis?" And that means a lot. Because when I first started, I assumed social workers knew everything. But they don't and that's OK.

It shows that we're learning from each other. That we're working together and becoming a team. And that gives me confidence that what I'm doing matters. That it's useful.

Q: How has this affected you personally?

There have been times I've wanted to step back. I've got a lot on with four boys at home who have some complex needs. The days are full of meetings, doctor's appointments, sleepless nights.

But when a social worker comes up and asks me a question. When I see the ripple effect of a conversation I had with another carer.... that's validation. That tells me I need to keep going. Because I'm not just doing this for me and my boys. I'm doing it for all the other carers, all the other children.

"I need people to say, 'You're doing a good job' – because I've had moments of like, 'What am I doing? Why am I doing this?'"

"When someone validates me that's doing the same sort of job – it's second to none."

Even when I don't have the answers, I can say, "Let's ask someone who does." That's what matters to me.

Q: Is there a message you would give to someone just starting out on the Pioneers Programme?

"Stick with it you will find it".

When you first start, you might think, "What do I bring to this? What's my role?" I've had those thoughts too (imposter syndrome), wondering if I'm doing enough, or if I'm supposed to be making phone calls or visiting people's houses. But the truth is, we all bring something different.

There's a reason you were asked. There's a reason you said yes. So, give it time. Your contribution will show itself and it'll matter.

"You've got something, and you will be valued"

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about before we wrap up?

I think I've covered most of it. But really, what keeps coming up for me is validation. I need it. We all do. Sometimes things go wrong, and I think, "What am I doing? What have I done?" But when someone says, "You're doing OK" and they mean it, because they're doing the same job, that keeps me going.

That's why this work matters. That's why I keep showing up. Because someone else might need to hear that too.

"I needed this support, so I keep doing this for them"

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