



Most Significant Change Stories

**The Collection of Stories gathered from
Pioneers for the 2025 – 2026 Evaluation**



MSC Story – Interview #1

“For me, it’s all about connection.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #1)

Interview Date: 12 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite & Donna Thomas

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’s 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.

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.

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"



MSC Story – Interviewee #2

“Being available — that’s what matters.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #2)

Interview Date: 13 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Just to get us started, can you tell us how you came to be involved in the Pioneers Programme?

It probably started about five years ago in Bridgend. Back then, we had something called Level 4 carers sort of senior carers, for lack of a better word. People who were happy to lead and support others when needed. Eventually, that shifted, and the role evolved into “liaison carers.” I was invited to apply, chatted it over with L, and I got the role.

I’ve been doing it ever since. It’s as simple as that. And I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it — everything they’ve thrown at me, really.

Q: Looking back on your involvement in the Pioneers initiative, what would you say has been the most significant change that’s come from it?

Honestly? Not a lot has changed in our LA, at least not yet. But I think that might be shifting now that Amanda’s taken over as team manager. She comes from a different setup over in CT and brings a new perspective. So, there are green shoots hints that change is coming.

That said, in practice, we’re still doing what we did as liaison carers. Nothing’s changed dramatically. The only real difference is that now, with Foster Wales, it’s a bigger picture, it’s national. Before, it was just our LA.

Q: And looking at your role as a liaison carer, how has that worked in practice? How does it connect to what the Pioneers do now?

We’ve always been a bit thin on the ground, if I’m honest. It’s hard to find people willing to put their hands up and say, “Yeah, call me at 2 a.m. if you need to.” But those of us who do, we’re committed.

There are only three of us at the moment. B is great with children with disabilities. G prefers working with older kids. And I cover whatever’s left. We work well as a team.

We used to each be assigned to around 30 carers. But now we’ve pooled it, whoever’s available picks up. If someone needs help, a message goes out and whoever’s free jumps in. That’s working better.

Q: Can you talk about the range of support you offer as a Pioneer?

It's wide-ranging...very much based on what's needed in the moment. Sometimes it's something simple, like a carer being asked for their bank details to access the local leisure centre benefit. A quick message sorts that out: "No, the council pays for it. Don't share your details."

But other times it's more serious. Like recently there was a carer whose annual review recommended deregistration. When I looked into it, there'd been a rush to judgment based on bad information. I spent weeks supporting that carer back and forth on WhatsApp, reviewing the situation. Eventually, the whole thing was reconsidered. The carer will likely stay registered, and the service has taken away learning from the incident.

That's the kind of work we do. It's not just hand-holding it's meaningful intervention that can change outcomes.

"Just having someone pick up the phone or reply to a message can make all the difference."

Q: What feedback have you had from carers or the service about your role?

The feedback's been great. People say we're invaluable because we don't shut down at 5:00 p.m. We're still around in the evenings, on weekends. If someone just needs to vent or check something, they know we're there.

WhatsApp's been a game changer. It's fast, it's safe, and it means people can reach out anytime. We've got a group chat, but people can also message us privately if they want.

And carers have told us directly what a difference it makes. I had one recently after we'd worked together to challenge the deregistration and I sent her a text saying, "Well done, you should be proud." She replied: "I couldn't have done it without you." That's the reward.

"That's what being a Pioneer is about. Being available. Social workers finish at 5 o'clock. But the job doesn't stop. The questions, the panic, the decisions — they happen at 7pm, 9pm, midnight."

Q: What about within the service? Do you feel like your role is recognised?

Definitely. The senior staff trust us. If there's an allegation or an issue, they'll send out a message asking one of us to get in touch and they leave it with us. That confidence means a lot.

And with Amanda coming in, I think we'll see more structure. In her previous team, each Pioneer had a specialism, education, training, whatever. We've always worked generically we cover everything. But I can see us moving toward that model, especially if we recruit more Pioneers.

"They'll say, 'Can you just give them a ring and check they're OK?' — and then they leave it with us."

"We don't log everything or send an incident report — we just talk. And usually that's all someone needs."

Q: What advice would you give to someone thinking of becoming a Pioneer?

Just give it a go. You're not doing it for rewards. You're doing it because you've got the experience and you want to help. A lot of what we do is just being there, for newer carers especially.

We've started supporting people just after they submit their Form F. The questions they have usually come up at night, after the kids are in bed. That's when they realise, "Oh, I should've asked my social worker about XYZ." So they text us, and we can sort most things quickly.

It's been really popular. They appreciate having a point of contact who understands what they're going through.

"Give it a go, not for rewards but to share your experience"

Q: What's been most important to you personally through this experience?

Being available. Simple as that.

Social workers clock off at 5. But stuff happens outside office hours. Sometimes people just need someone to talk to, to have a coffee with and feel heard.

Last weekend a carer called because their child had fallen and had a small head injury. They weren't sure whether to go to A&E. They knew the answer — but they needed a sounding board. We talked it through: yes, go. Then I followed up the next day. That kind of support makes a difference.

We can't fix everything. But we can hold the fort. And that means a lot.

"They knew the answer, really — but what they needed was reassurance. Someone to talk it through with. Someone to say, 'Yeah, you're doing the right thing.'"

Q: You mentioned supporting carers through the adoption process — can you tell us more about that?

Yeah, we've done that a lot. We've adopted ourselves — I think we've done it around ten times. So we know how it works, and we understand the emotional impact.

For carers, adoption can feel like a bereavement. You've raised a baby for six or eight months, sometimes longer, and then hand them over to people you might never see again. That's hard. Really hard.

We talk to carers about how to prepare — memory boxes, photographs, processing the loss. I even did a bereavement course because that's what it feels like: you're losing someone you love. Being there for others going through that is one of the most important things we do.

Q: You've talked about how things vary across local authorities — what are your thoughts on that?

That's one thing I'd change, the inconsistency.

Right now, if I talk to Pioneers in other LAs, they're doing totally different things. There are some overlaps, but no shared blueprint. If Foster Wales is really aiming for a national approach, then we need to be on the same page. We should all know what the Pioneer role means and be doing it in similar ways.

That way, if one area is short on support, another could step in. If we had a national pool of Pioneers, trained and informed in the same way, we could help each other. At the end of the day, it's not about us. It's about the children. If a carer needs support, it shouldn't matter which council they're under.

“Every area's doing something different. If we had a shared model, we could back each other up.”

“At the end of the day, it's not about what council you're under — it's about the children.”

Final Reflection

There's no glamour in what we do. You're not in it for recognition or perks. You're in it because you know what it's like, and you want to make it easier for someone else.

Being a Pioneer, to me, is about presence. About being there. And that's made all the difference not just for them, but for me too.

Representative Story - Being Available After Hours

“Last weekend, a carer called me because their child had fallen and hit their head. It wasn't a major injury, but they weren't sure if they should go to A&E.

They knew the answer, really but what they needed was reassurance. Someone to talk it through with. Someone to say, ‘Yeah, you're doing the right thing.’ So we talked.

I told them, yes, go and get it checked. And then I followed up with them the next day, just to see how everything went.

That's what being a Pioneer is about. Being available. Social workers finish at 5 o'clock. But the job doesn't stop. The questions, the panic, the decisions they happen at 7pm, 9pm, midnight.

Just having someone pick up the phone or reply to a message can make all the difference.”



MSC Story – Interviewee #3

“Holding the Hand of Someone New.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #3)

Interview Date: 13 June 2025

Interviewers: Roger Rowett and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: So, tell us a little bit about you and how you became involved with The Pioneers initiative?

I've been a foster carer for about 18 years now. My husband and I have looked after the full spectrum. We started with newborns, then moved into adoption, and over time ended up working mostly with teenagers, often the more challenging ones. Along the way, I also supported carers through respite and informal mentoring.

When I first heard about The Pioneers, I was hesitant. I'd already done the training before even realising it would lead to becoming a Pioneer, and initially, I said no. At the time, we had some very complex children in our care and couldn't take on more. But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that supporting other carers is what I've always done, becoming a Pioneer just gave a name to what was already there.

We have a small core group in our LA. It's not just about social events here, we already have a fostering association that organises things for families. So our role as Pioneers has focused more on mentoring and peer support. I'd already been running coffee mornings for carers to come together in a space where they could talk freely, without needing to involve social workers. We were always clear; it's not a space to moan or complain, but to listen, share, and help each other grow.

Q: Can you give us a story that shows the most significant change you've experienced since becoming a Pioneer?

One moment really stands out for me. During one of our monthly new carer meetings where prospective carers meet with myself and another Pioneer while the social worker and team manager step out, I met a single carer. We had a good chat and a few weeks later, I was asked if I would mentor her.

Nothing formal, just a few conversations. She was eager, excited, asking great questions. Then something unexpected happened, I had a young girl placed with me for what was supposed to be one night. She ended up staying three months. A very complex young lady.

We needed respite care, and it was suggested this new carer could take her on just for a short break. She agreed. But I knew she was brand new. So I sat down and wrote four full A4 pages detailing everything. What the child's facial expressions meant, her non-verbal cues, her habits, her triggers.

“She was non-verbal and I wanted this carer to feel prepared. So I wrote down everything I could think of — even things like, ‘If she makes this sound, it usually means she's anxious or needs a break.’”

The respite visit went brilliantly. That carer is now linked with this young girl as her long-term respite support. Her feedback to me afterwards meant the world. She said:

“I was scared going in. But because I had all that information, I felt prepared. And I felt I could ask anything.”

That meant everything to me — not only had I supported the child, but I’d helped a brand-new carer step into this world with confidence.

“Kick started a journey together”

Q: *That’s a great story. Have you noticed any changes more broadly since The Pioneers programme was introduced?*

Definitely. Before, a lot of what we did was informal...carers supporting each other here and there. But The Pioneers has formalised it. It’s structured now. When new carers come into the system, they’re linked to people like me from day one. They know who to go to. They know we’re here.

We’ve been able to create proper community connections, especially important after COVID. “Lockdown really impacted relationships. There were carers in my area I didn’t even know, even though they’d been fostering for over a year.”

Now, through The Pioneers and our regular meetups, those connections are forming again.

“Making fostering more appealing”

Q: *You’ve talked a lot about supporting new carers — what’s that like in practice?*

Every month, new carers or people going through assessment meet with us. We answer anything “Is there a pension scheme?” “Do we get paid?” “What’s panel like?” The sort of stuff you don’t want to ask a social worker for fear of seeming like you’re only doing this for the money. I said:

“When I started fostering all those years ago, I didn’t even know we got paid for it.”

But it’s about more than facts. It’s about honesty. I always say to people:

“This isn’t a walk in the park. It’s hard, but the positives far outweigh the negatives. And when it works — it really works.”

Q: *And what about the impact on you personally?*

I think it’s the feeling that I’ve made a difference , to carers and to children.

That one new carer I mentored, she still calls me with questions. “Is it OK if my partner puts up the travel cot even though he doesn’t live here?” she asked me. It was such a small thing, but it mattered to her.

“Nothing is silly,” I told her. “If it helps you support the child better, it’s worth asking.”

And then there’s the teenager we cared for, the one who despised me at first. She saw me as another authority figure. But after weeks of building trust, things changed. On the day she left she was almost sent to residential care I told her:

“Remember this feeling. Your choices make the difference.”

She hugged me and teared up. Later, another carer told me the girl said, “I’m going back to A and A.” She couldn’t we had another placement, but it showed she’d felt safe, respected.

Q: What’s been the biggest shift from your perspective, looking at fostering culture and the service?

Recognition. Not just for me but for the role carers play in keeping the whole system working. And that appreciation filters down to new carers, who now enter fostering knowing they’re part of a wider support network.

It’s also encouraged others to get involved. I’ve seen tech-savvy carers offer to support others with online systems. People now say, “You don’t need to give your life to this, just offer your strength.”

And the training? I’ve done it twice. It’s made a difference. Therapeutic parenting, shared learning, it’s practical and powerful.

Q: So, if you had to sum up the most significant change?

The most significant change for me has been knowing that I can hold someone’s hand as they take their first steps and watch them grow into someone amazing. Someone who’s going to change children’s lives.

It’s been about nurturing confidence. About giving back. And about realising that even when you feel like you’re just doing what comes naturally, you’re making a real impact.



MSC Story – Interviewee #4

“Recognising What I’ve Built Over Time.”

Name (Anonymised): Interviewee #4

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Roger Rowett

Date of Interview: 17 June 2025

Q: Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became involved in the Pioneers Programme.

I've been a part of the fostering family for nearly 23 years, since I was 21. I think I was the youngest person Merthyr had registered at the time. My husband and I started fostering because we weren't sure what starting a family would look like due to health reasons. And honestly, I've never looked back. We've supported a lot of children, 40 in total. I know that number because at Christmas, we put up a tree with baubles for every child who's stayed with us. Last year there were 40 names hanging from the branches. That's our legacy.

I was approached by my LA about becoming a Pioneer. They were looking for experienced foster carers to support others, particularly new or less experienced carers.

“At first, I wasn't sure. But then I thought, well, I've got this experience, and if I can share that to help someone else, why not?”

Q: Had you done anything like this before — supported other carers?

No, not formally. Back when I started, you didn't have any of that. You had your supervising social worker and that was it. No peer support, no buddying system, no one to say, “Am I doing this right?” or “How do I fill this in?” You didn't have someone to call. That's why I think The Pioneers is such a brilliant idea.

Now, foster carers have someone who's walked the same path; someone who knows what it's like. Social workers are great, of course, but it's different when you're talking to someone who's been through it themselves. That lived experience means something.

Q: So, what has your role as a Pioneer looked like so far?

There are three of us here in our LA. We all came on board around the same time, so we're still learning and figuring it out together. We've linked up with Pioneers from other local authorities too, learning from what they're doing. For now, the three of us are doing everything jointly. We've started putting on coffee mornings where it's just foster carers (no professionals) so people can come and chat freely.

One thing I've loved is supporting carers going through panel. I was buddied with a couple recently. They were just starting their journey, and I offered to dip in and out, check in with them, see if they needed anything. I sent a few messages, rang them a couple of times...just simple stuff. I offered to go through their Big Welcome and even helped them prep for panel.

I sit on the fostering panel for other LA, so I could give them insight from that side too (what panel members are looking for, how we frame our questions, what kind of things come up).

That knowledge made a difference. In their panel meeting, one of the questions was, “Who would you go to for support?” And the husband said, “We’d ring C.” That really touched me “She’s been there, she’s done it.” It meant a lot.

Q: Had that kind of peer support happened before the Pioneers Programme?

No, definitely not. I hadn’t supported anyone formally through panel or assessment before. It’s completely new, and I think it’s made a real difference already.

Q: You mentioned coffee mornings — anything else you’ve been involved in as a Pioneer?

It’s early days still, but during Foster Care Fortnight, we had a lovely recognition event.

Foster carers got certificates and gift cards, just a little thank you, but it meant something.

We could chat with people, remind them, “If you ever need to pick up the phone, we’re here.”

“And I always say, “No question is a silly question.””

We also have a WhatsApp group. Social workers will post reminders: “Don’t forget, your Pioneers are here to support you.” People have our phone numbers now, and they know they can use them.

Q: What would you say is the most significant change that’s come about through The Pioneers Programme?

I’d say it’s knowing there’s someone at the end of the phone who understands what you’re going through. I said to someone recently:

“Even if it’s something small, even if it’s just asking how to fill in a recording — you can call me. You’re not alone.”

It’s not that social workers don’t care. They absolutely do. But they have caseloads, they’re in meetings, and they’re not always available. Sometimes, you just need someone who’s been there. Another foster carer will often be quicker to reply and might understand in a different way.

“I always think back to when I started. I wish I’d had someone to call 22 years ago”.

Q: Do you have a specific example of that peer support in action?

It’s still early for me. I haven’t had that late-night phone call yet. But that couple I supported through panel? They already know I’m their person. If they need to call, they will. I’ve laid that foundation. And I’m ready for those moments when they do.

Q: Has being a Pioneer had an impact on you personally?

It really has. Going through the training (Skills to Foster) again, made me stop and reflect. I realised just how much I’ve done. I’ve supported 40 children. I’ve learned a lot. And now I’m passing that on.

Without The Pioneers Programme, I wouldn’t have gone back to do the course. I wouldn’t have taken that time to look back and appreciate what I’ve built. It reminded me of my value, my knowledge. That’s been powerful for me.

Q: Has the service changed in any other way since the programme started?

It’s still new, but things are shifting. We have monthly catch-ups with our coordinator, and sometimes others join. We wouldn’t be having those conversations if not for The Pioneers.

We share ideas like organising a Christmas meal for foster carers, or recognising foster carers' children for their contribution.

"My little boy is five. He's adopted. But he knows we foster. He's part of it too."

It would be lovely for him to get a certificate, just like us. That idea was taken seriously — and that feels good.

Q: Has The Pioneers Programme changed relationships between foster carers and the service?

It's a bit too soon to tell for sure. But having those monthly meetings, feeling like our voices are heard, that's new. I wouldn't say everything has changed overnight, but there's definitely more dialogue now. More collaboration.

Final Reflections

The Pioneers Programme hasn't just supported others, it's helped me realise what I've built over two decades. The children I've cared for, the things I've learned, the knowledge I now share. It all adds up.

What's changed most significantly?

The knowledge that you're not alone anymore. Whether you're new to fostering or 20 years in, there's someone you can call. Someone who gets it. And sometimes, that's all you need.



MSC Story – Interviewee #5

“Being the Person on the Other End of the Phone.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #5)

Interview Date: 17 June 2025

Interviewers: Roger Rowett and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you got involved in the Pioneers Programme?

Right. So, my wife and I have been together for 33 years (we actually only got married last year!). We both came from nursing backgrounds, but I had to leave due to chronic asthma and was pensioned off.

We’ve always been very involved with the Fostering Network (doing training, setting up the new charter, being back and forth with them as needed), so when the opportunity came up to become a Pioneer in our LA, I thought, “Yeah, I’ll do it.”

And to be honest, it was stuff we were doing anyway (being there to support other carers, being the person on the end of the phone). Because let’s face it, people often want to talk or have a bit of a moan, and they don’t always want to do that with a social worker. I always say, “That’s my job! You can rant and moan to me. I’ve probably got the same issues!” As long as it’s not safeguarding or protection, I’m just there to listen.

“We were doing it anyway—being there to support other carers, being the person on the end of the phone. People want to talk or have a bit of a moan, and they don’t always want to do that with a social worker.”

Q: What does that support look like in practice?

It’s being available. A lady rang me just three days ago at half ten at night. She was having a problem. It wasn’t the first time. I think that was the fourth or fifth call she’d made to me about this. And that’s fine. I offered some advice, as I always do. I told her, “Ring your social worker in the morning and tell them how you’re feeling. And I’ll ring duty too and give them a heads-up.” It’s that kind of thing. Reassurance. Listening.

Sometimes people just want a space where they can talk, offload, and not be recorded. That’s why I never take names unless it’s a safeguarding issue. They just want to talk to someone who understands, someone who’s in the same boat.

“A lady rang me at half ten at night, bless her. That’s probably the fifth time she’s called me with a problem. And I don’t mind—because she needs that. I told her, ‘Ring your social worker in the morning and I’ll ring duty too, give them a heads-up.’”

Q: Have you seen any changes since becoming a Pioneer?

“I’d like to think we’re listened to a bit more now. But truthfully, the system is still the system—too many chiefs, not enough Indians.”

That hasn't changed. I've seen that time and again. For example, it took us five years to get therapy started for a young person we were caring for. It finally started two weeks ago.

What being a Pioneer gives me is a bit more knowledge about how the system works. I've been sitting on fostering panels for 25 years, though I had to give that up recently because of our current placement. There just isn't enough time anymore. But I've picked up a lot through that experience, and I try to pass it on.

Q: You've been a Pioneer for quite a while. What have you found most significant?
I've been doing it for about five years now. Took over from someone who retired. And yes, it's great that we have to reapply or rotate the role. Keeps things fresh.

The most significant change, for me, is the presence of someone that carers can call. Fostering can be really isolating. You can't talk to just anyone about what's happening in your home because of confidentiality, and that can wear you down. Especially if there's no one reaching out to you during difficult times.

"It's being the person that carers can call. Fostering can be lonely. When we were under investigation, no one from the service checked in—not even the liaison carer. That was hard. That's the gap I want to fill."

I remember when we were under investigation ourselves. Nobody from the service contacted us, not even our liaison carer. That isolation was incredibly hard. I leaned on the Fostering Network then, and they were brilliant. But that's exactly the gap the Pioneers can fill. I've said many times; when carers are under investigation, Pioneers should be allowed to reach out. Just so they know someone is there, someone who understands, even if they can't fix it.

Q: Can you share a specific example of the change you've made in someone else's journey?
Well, the lady I mentioned earlier (the one who rang at night) she also rang me after a child's CLA review. The social worker had mentioned the child wanted to go scuba diving, and she was worried. "I can't afford that," she said. I told her, "They brought it up, not you. You go back to them and say, 'You've suggested this; are you going to fund it?'"

She didn't realise she could do that. Again, it's not about challenging the system for the sake of it, it's about empowering carers to speak up. To not feel guilty for saying, "I can't do this unless I'm supported." It's about giving people options.

"She rang me after a CLA review. They'd mentioned scuba diving, and she panicked about the cost. I told her, 'You didn't ask for this—they brought it up. You go back and ask if they're going to fund it.' She didn't know she could do that."

Q: How has being a Pioneer impacted you personally?

"I talk too much, always have—but that's part of it. Even if I'm away, I'll answer if I can. It might be a two-minute chat, but that could be the thing that stops someone from giving up that day."

It's been good. I talk too much (always have!) but that's part of the role. People know I'm here. Doesn't matter what it is, they can ring me about rugby if they want. The point is, I'm someone who picks up the phone. And that matters more than most people realise.

Even when I'm away on holiday, I'll answer if I can. It might just be a two-minute chat, but that could be the thing that stops someone from giving up that day. Just having someone to talk to can be enough. You're not a social worker, you're a fellow carer. That's what gives it power.

Q: Do you think the role has changed the fostering culture at all?

Maybe not the system overall, it's slow to change but within the community of carers, yes. People now know there's someone they can turn to. They're not alone.

And training has really come a long way too. I meet Pioneers from other areas now. We swap ideas, learn from each other. It's great. When you talk to people outside your own patch, you realise everyone's got the same struggles. It's comforting in a way and encouraging. You realise you're not just shouting into the wind.

"Maybe not the system—it's slow—but among carers, yes. Now people know there's someone to turn to. They're not alone. And that changes things."

Q: What else would you like to see from the programme?

I've said it before. I think we should be involved earlier in the journey. When someone starts Form F, for example. That process can be daunting. You end up learning things about your partner that you never knew! It's very personal. We can help put people at ease. Help explain it in layman's terms, not just "policy speak."

I also cover kinship carers, because there wasn't anyone else to do it at the time. They need just as much support. Sometimes more, because they didn't choose fostering in the same way. They got dropped into it. And they're under just as much pressure.

Final Reflection

If I had to sum it up, I'd say this: The most significant change is being the person on the end of the phone. That's it. That's what makes the difference.

People don't always need answers, they need someone to hear them. Someone to say, "You're not on your own in this." And for me, that's worth every phone call, every late night, and every time I've said, "Tell them G told you to ask."



MSC Story – Interviewee #6

“Being a Pioneer has been healing.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #6)

Interview Date: 18 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Donna Thomas (H2t)



Q: So just to get us started then, could you just tell us a little bit about how you came to be involved with The Pioneers initiative?

I started fostering in 2020, and in 2021 I received my first placement, a teenage girl. It was an intense and eye-opening experience. That first placement broke down, and it taught me so much about the reality of fostering (what to expect, how things can go wrong even when your heart is in the right place). So, when the opportunity came up to support other foster carers through The Pioneers initiative, I felt I could bring something valuable. I thought, *if I can help someone even a little through my experience, that would be something.*

You go into your first placement you think:

“I’ve got this. I can do it all. But it doesn’t always work out that way.”

That’s why I got involved. I wanted to help other foster carers be more prepared, both emotionally and practically.

I was actually one of the first six pioneers when the programme began. We came from different councils and counties, and I represented another LA. That’s how my Pioneer journey started.

Q: You must have got involved then at a challenging time, with the placement breakdown and COVID?

Yes, it all hit at once from the very beginning. But those challenges gave me a real depth of experience very early on. Later, I had an asylum-seeking girl placed with us, and that experience was incredibly moving. Ultimately, we had to help her move on to a different placement that better suited her needs.

One thing that really stood out during that time was how involved my whole family became. My son noticed that the girl wasn’t happy.

“He asked me, “Mummy, why are we keeping her here if she’s crying?””

That moment made me realise how much children observe, and it gave me a chance to teach my son something important. I told him, *“We need to listen to her voice, and set an example.”* He saw that our job isn’t just to house young people, it’s to hear them and try to make them happy.

Q: As someone who's been involved from the beginning, what reflections do you have about how the programme has evolved?

When we started, it was very clear, we were going to support other foster carers by sharing our stories and creating profiles with useful links. I, for example, had experience with teenagers running away. I wanted to help others understand what that really means

“Expect a policeman at your door,” I used to say. It can be shocking the first time it happens.”

Originally, the six of us worked nationally. Our support wasn't tied to geography, it was about matching experiences. Then more carers joined and the programme became regional, which had its positives too. I got to meet foster carers locally who were like-minded and equally passionate.

But the structure felt like it faded at times. Things would be very active, then suddenly quiet for months. In our region, we pushed for more regular meetings. We're still advocating for that consistency now. A lot of us feel we're trying to promote the programme but don't always get the backing or visibility to really embed our role. I was recently told that someone was working on pioneer profiles and asked for input so that felt like progress.

Q: You mentioned a desire to raise awareness of your skills and the programme. What would that look like for you?

Sometimes carers don't reach out, not because they don't need help, but because they think they should cope alone. I know that feeling well, I used to be like that. So, rather than waiting for people to ask for help, I think we need to offer ready-made solutions. That's where the profiles / stories come in – they would be a really great tool.

I've got a background in teaching, so I used that to support carers on school engagement and making homework more accessible. I'm passionate about mental health too, particularly after seeing how much my first placement struggled. We tried to give her a whole new life (family outings, new routines) but it turned out to be overwhelming for her. I didn't realise it at the time. I wanted to do everything for her, and I've since learned that sometimes less is more.

Q: That's a powerful lesson. Has being part of The Pioneers helped you process some of that?

Yes, hugely. I would say being a Pioneer has been healing. I used to blame myself for that first placement breaking down. But when I shared my story with other pioneers, they helped me understand—

“Running away can be a pattern. It's not you.” Hearing that helped me let go of that guilt.”

It also gave me a voice. I felt like I had a support system “six people standing behind me,” I used to say. We shared stories, and we shared ideas. One thing that came out of our discussions was how uneven the support for carers was across different regions. Some areas were offering free access to leisure centres, reduced council tax, or parking permits.

Our LA wasn't. But after we raised those discrepancies, our local council did eventually introduce the same benefits. That felt like real impact.

Q: Have you seen feedback from carers in your area about that?

Oh yes. When those changes came in, our WhatsApp group was full of "Woohoo!" messages. People were genuinely excited. And I've heard from other carers that more experienced foster carers are starting to get phone calls from other carers asking for support. That shows trust is building.

Confidentiality is a big part of that too. Even among us as pioneers, we protect each other's privacy. That creates a really safe space to share.

Q: Has being a Pioneer changed your relationship with the local authority?

Definitely. I feel we've stepped up from being "just" foster carers. We have a platform now. We've even been discussing the idea of pioneers acting as a mediation panel so that if a carer is struggling, they can come to us, and we can advocate or help the local authority understand the issue from the carer's point of view.

I've often felt that decisions are being made by people who don't know the child the way we do. *"They don't even know the colour of their hair,"* I've said. Yet they make the decisions. That disconnect can be damaging.

"Including foster carers in that process could really change things."

Q: That's a powerful call for structural change. Do you think there's shared momentum among The Pioneers?

Yes. When we went from six to twenty to sixty pioneers, we realised many of us were thinking the same things. For example, one pioneer shared her concerns about male social workers going into teenagers' bedrooms as she wouldn't allow it. And I remembered another pioneer who said the same thing two years ago. These shared stories matter. They show we're not alone.

I would love for us to have a space (a book, or online collection) where pioneers can share their stories. That way, others can learn and maybe even heal from reading them, just like I did.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

Just that, over time, I've seen real improvement, especially in my council. But there's still work to do. The Pioneer role shouldn't be limited to geography. My experience might help someone far away, and vice versa. Tools like profiles, regional meetings, and better visibility of our profiles would help with that.

I've never had anyone from my council ask for my help, but I know there are carers out there who'd benefit. If we can connect those dots better, we can make a bigger impact.



MSC Story – Interviewee #7

“Bridging the Gap.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #7)

Interview Date: 24 June 2025

Interviewers: Roger Rowett and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Can you tell us a bit about how and why you became involved with the Pioneers initiative?

I first got involved in fostering through something called the Mockingbird programme. I was actually the first hub carer in the first Mockingbird group in Wales. That started back in 2019 or 2020. And as far as I'm aware, our LA is still the only local authority in Wales where Mockingbird is running, which really shapes how the Pioneers initiative works here.

I retired from Mockingbird after some time as it's a full-on role, basically on-call six days out of seven. At 72, I felt it was time for someone younger to step into that space. But I wasn't done contributing. When I heard about The Pioneers initiative, I was really interested. I thought, *“Well, I've got all this experience (particularly supporting new carers) and I still want to help. So why not pass that on?”* I know what it's like to be a foster carer, so it made sense.

Q: What does your role as a Pioneer involve in your area?

Because we already have Mockingbird running, I'd say there's been a bit less day-to-day work for Pioneers in our LA than maybe elsewhere. Mockingbird offers an instant support group for carers, so the need for Pioneer support isn't as frequent. But we're still here, ready and willing.

That said, I've ended up contributing in slightly different ways. I help out with publicity events like if there's a marketing campaign, I'll often be the one they call. I've done videos, I'm in a cookery book, and I seem to be all over Facebook! I've also been part of “Skills to Foster” sessions, talking with people thinking about becoming foster carers. I love doing that; talking honestly about what fostering's like, sharing real experiences, and hopefully encouraging the right people to step forward.

“I also help run a monthly mother and toddler group. We make the tea, play with the babies, just make sure everyone feels welcome. It's small, but it matters.”

Q: How does Mockingbird differ from the Pioneers programme in your experience?

Mockingbird is all about mutual support. You've got a hub carer (like I was) who acts as a problem solver, mentor, sometimes even a break for carers. I remember one Sunday morning where I took a young person out for the day to give a couple some space after a tough weekend. That's the kind of hands-on support you give.

During lockdown, it was especially powerful. We had a WhatsApp group, and people shared everything, from meltdowns at home to asking for advice. One carer posted a picture of their

stairs covered in belongings thrown during a tantrum. Another quietly messaged them to say, "Leave it. They'll need something eventually." Sure enough, they did. It's that kind of lived wisdom; things that only another foster carer would understand.

In one case, a young person who moved in with me during lockdown ended up staying for a year. Then she moved on to another family in the Mockingbird group. That continuity of care, that's the strength of Mockingbird. It's not one person offering support—it's a network. Sometimes up to nine families.

So yes, in some ways, Mockingbird overlaps with what Pioneers offer, but it's more structured and embedded. That does affect how much the Pioneers are called upon in our area.

Q: Do you think this overlap has impacted the effectiveness of the Pioneers initiative locally?

Absolutely. A lot of carers who might otherwise come to us are already part of a Mockingbird group and getting what they need from there. Sometimes I'll support someone briefly (give them ideas, ask if they've spoken to school, that sort of thing) but then they settle into Mockingbird, and they don't need me anymore.

"We try to fill other gaps. If someone's got a poorly baby, we'll step in. But we don't get the volume of requests I hear about in other areas".

Q: Do you feel The Pioneers programme is being underused?

Yes, and that's frustrating. It's not for lack of trying. We've done events, coffee mornings, offered to chat with prospective carers. But attendance can be patchy. Even when things are supposed to be mandatory, not everyone turns up. People are busy, or maybe they don't feel the need.

Some might also worry about confidentiality. There's a fear that if they speak honestly about challenges, it might get back to their social worker. I've had that experience myself (getting a warning for letting a 13 and 10-year-old go to the park alone). You're just trying to let them be kids, give them some independence, and it gets interpreted as a risk.

"So, there's a trust gap we're trying to bridge. People need to know we're not there to report them; we're there to support them".

Q: What made you transition from Mockingbird to Pioneers?

Honestly? My age. At 72, I realised that the pace and physical demands of being a Mockingbird hub carer were just too much. The kids range from toddlers to teenagers. Running around after little ones isn't easy. But I still wanted to contribute, and being a Pioneer allows that without the same physical or time demands.

And, on a personal level, fostering fills a big gap in my life. I'm a widow. My own kids live far away (one abroad, the other on an island). I don't have grandchildren nearby.

"Fostering gives me that connection to young people. It gives me purpose".

Q: Have you had any standout experiences as a Pioneer?

There haven't been huge transformative moments, if I'm honest. That's part of the challenge; we're not used as much as we could be. I've only been contacted directly once or twice. But that's not because the need isn't there—it's about awareness and culture. People need time to adjust, to trust. I know other authorities use their Pioneers more. Here, it's still growing.

Q: What changes would you like to see in the future?

I think the local authority does a good job promoting the support that's available. But we need more people to take that first step and reach out. Once that happens, it spreads through word of mouth. People realise it's safe, it's helpful.

"I think pairing new carers with a named Pioneer they've already met, maybe through "Skills to Foster" could help. Build that trust early".

I also hope we can find better ways for Mockingbird and Pioneers to work together. They're not in competition, but they do pull from the same group. We need to coordinate more, maybe create clearer pathways for support.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Just that if anyone has ideas to help us connect better with those who might need us, I'm all ears. I want to help. I started fostering at 67, and I've loved every minute. But it's not easy. No one should have to do it alone.

"Whether through Mockingbird, The Pioneers, or both; we should be making sure every carer know they've got someone in their corner".



MSC Story – Interviewee #8

“Building Trust Through Compassionate Support.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #8)

Interview Date: 26 June 2025

Interviewers: Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about you and how you became involved with The Pioneers project?

I've been a foster carer with my local authority since 2001, along with my husband. Over the years, we've done most types of fostering, and when the Pioneers project was first launched, our Local Authority was lucky enough to win the bid to pilot it. I thought, *“This is a chance to give back.”* From day one, it felt right. The social workers had mentioned the opportunity in supervision, encouraging foster carers to apply. It felt like the perfect fit; I'm naturally someone who likes to encourage and empower others, and this was a way to extend that to my fellow carers.

Q: What was it like in the beginning?

Back when it started, it was all very new and niche. No one quite knew what a Pioneer should do. The role was very scripted at first - tight boundaries and lots of limitations. But fostering itself is never black and white. Initially, we were often still seen as “just foster carers.” But over time, that perception began to shift. I think we've made real progress;

“now we're recognised as professionals, and our voices matter”.

Q: Have you noticed specific changes since becoming a Pioneer?

Absolutely. I'm a very proactive Pioneer. I've been there since the start. These days, we're being asked to do more, included more, and valued more. I've been invited to speak at major training events (one time to 600 local authority staff). That experience felt like a real turning point. I had complete freedom to say what I felt needed to be said. I spoke about collaboration, mutual respect, and the importance of helping foster carers understand and explain care plans to young people. It wasn't about challenging decisions; it was about clarity and partnership. The feedback was incredible. 2 years later, I am still meeting people who tell me that they attended the event and most recently, a staff member told me “it was my first day in the job as a requirement officer and what you said has stuck with me “

“One manager even told me it was a “game changer.”

Q: Can you share a specific story that highlights the impact you've had?

Yes, this one stands out. I was asked to help with a 12-week transition for two children returning home to their birth mum. The carer they were with couldn't support the move, he didn't agree with the plan. I was brought in as a Pioneer because of my strong relationship-building skills. The mum practically lived with us for a month. She watched me with the children, asked questions, and then began taking the lead. We created a safe environment with no judgment. We used safe words and had honest conversations. After the children returned home, I continued to support her (visiting, checking in). And when a crisis hit at Christmas (her family member was rushed to hospital) she called me. Out-of-hours duty hadn't responded, so I stayed overnight to look after the children. On the Monday, duty called me to ask if I could help. I said, "I'm already there."

That one night said everything. It was about trust. She knew she could call me. And I knew the boundaries well enough to act confidently and safely. We're still in touch now via monthly check-ins, occasional meetups.

"I've always said, you don't just walk away. The role doesn't end when the child goes home."

Q: What does being a Pioneer mean to you personally?

When we started fostering, we were inspired by another couple, by their kindness and passion. I always wanted to be that kind of carer. Being a Pioneer lets me do that. It's a privilege. I've got over 20 years of experience, and I can use it to support and inspire the next generation.

"It's not just about answering questions; it's about helping people feel seen, safe, and empowered."

Q: What would you like to see from the programme in future?

I'd love to see every local authority have what we have in our LA. We've built something special. I've spoken nationally, at conferences, spoke on National Welsh radio with head of Foster Wales and even for a conference in Scotland. I support other local authorities as well, helping them get their Pioneer programmes going. Regionally, I work with recruitment teams, attend info sessions, and mentor new carers. When someone's approved, I go out with a welcome gift and keep in touch (first placement, first training, first coffee morning).

"It makes a big difference to have someone there who understands".

Q: Any final reflections?

I always say this is the best job in the world, but it's the hardest. You can't do it alone. The more connected we are (Pioneers, social workers, carers) the better the outcomes for our young people. I'm proud of what we've built, and I want to help others build it too.

"It's all about lifting each other up".



MSC Story – Interviewee #9

“Finding Connection and Building Foundations.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #9)

Interview Date: 27 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite (H2t)

Q: Do you want to talk about how you got involved with the fostering network and The Pioneers programme?

I've been a foster carer with our LA for the last four years, and honestly, when I started, I felt like I was thrown straight into the deep end. There was no one to really talk to about what it was like being a foster carer...not really. I mean, yes, you have your social workers, but they're not living the same reality as we are. It's different when you're the one doing the caring day-to-day.

What really drew me to The Pioneers programme was the idea of peer support. When Miss Rees came to talk to us about the initiative, I was immediately interested. I spoke with my best friend, who's a kinship foster carer, and we both felt it was something we could have really benefitted from when we started.

“We didn't have anyone to turn to who truly understood the experience. So we thought, why not become that person for someone else?”

There's something about having someone who's walked the same path, who can really say, “I get it.” Like after a contact visit when the child comes back unsettled, only another foster carer can really understand how that feels, and how to manage it. You can't have those conversations with your friends or family. But with another foster carer, it's like, finally, someone gets it.

Q: So what has your involvement looked like since January?

I'm still very new to the role we're still in the early stages of shaping what The Pioneers looks like in Denbighshire. Right now, we're trying to figure out how to bring foster carers together in a way that actually works for everyone. You've got people with different schedules, different types of placements (some who work, others who are kinship carers or looking after older children). So, finding something that fits everyone is a bit of a challenge.

We've started brainstorming (maybe we need to offer evening meetups or weekend events instead of always defaulting to weekday mornings).

“It's about making it inclusive, thinking about the different needs and circumstances foster carers are in.”

For example, we always see the same 10 faces at events, but there are more than 40 foster carers in our LA. We want to reach the others, too. It's not about becoming best friends with everyone. It's just about making sure people feel seen, heard, and supported.

Q: Have you been able to connect with other Pioneers for ideas?

Yes! Actually, I had a really funny and lovely surprise. I was on a Fostering Network training call when I recognised someone in the crowd and it was someone who I used to go clubbing with in Cardiff years ago! I had no idea he was part of The Pioneers. Reconnecting with him was amazing, and he's been brilliant at giving us insight into how things have worked down South. We've also had support from Miss Rees, who's been sharing what's worked in other areas.

So, even though we're just getting started in Denbighshire, we're not doing it blindly.

"We're listening and learning from others who are further along in the journey".

Q: Has being part of The Pioneers changed the way you engage with the local authority?

Definitely. Before this, things like fostering support weren't really prioritised. We had the odd Christmas event or a development day (stuff that felt a bit surface level). But with The Pioneers, there's now an actual platform. There's something tangible, a structure, a model. And I feel like the council recognises that, finally. They're taking it more seriously, and the dialogue feels more positive now.

"It's opened up conversations that weren't happening before. It's created space to talk about what we need, not just as individuals, but as a community of carers".

Q: Has there been one moment that stands out to you, where you felt something shift?

Not yet. Like I said, we're still in the early days. But I think when we finally get a proper event together (when we manage to get people in a room, connecting, talking) that's when I'll feel like something's really happening. I'll know then that we've turned a corner.

Right now, we've had some setbacks. There was an audit recently and everything kind of got pushed back while the social workers scrambled. But I know we'll get there. I'm hopeful.

Q: How would you like to see The Pioneers develop in the future?

One big thing would be creating more regional and national connections. Like, it's great that I have my contact, but what if we had a wider network where all the Pioneers across Wales could connect and share ideas? That would be so powerful.

I'd also love to see more "blueprints", simple guides that show how other counties have launched and developed their Pioneer programmes. Something we could learn from. We've kind of had to figure it out as we go along, and while that's OK, it would be helpful to know what's already worked elsewhere. That would give us confidence and a bit more direction.

Q: What would a successful Pioneers programme look like in your area?

For me, it's when we manage to get people in a room and they actually talk.

"When we create that safe space where people feel like they're not alone. That's everything".

You know, when you're a new foster carer, it can feel really lonely. Not because it's awful, just because it's unfamiliar, and there's so much you don't know. You're constantly asking, "Am I doing this right? Do I need to fill this form in? How do you handle that behaviour?" And sometimes, only another foster carer can answer those questions in a way that truly makes sense.

It's not just about getting the information—it's about someone saying, "You're not going mad," or "Yeah, I've been there too." Or even, "It didn't work out for me either, but it's not your fault." That kind of support is invaluable for our well-being. It gives you the strength to keep going, knowing you're not the only one.

Q: Anything else you want to share?

I just think The Pioneers is such a good initiative, and I really hope it grows here in Denbighshire. I want to see us all connected—not just within our county, but across Wales. We're all doing the same work under the same umbrella, and it would be amazing to see those divisions break down.

"We can learn so much from each other. Every experience adds something".

And if we can build something that gives every new carer what I didn't have—that support, that understanding—then we'll really have made a difference.



MSC Story – Interviewee #10

“Being the Person on the Other End of the Phone.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #10)

Interview Date: 1 July 2025

Interviewers: Roger Rowett and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: How did you become involved in the Pioneers programme?

We've been fostering for nearly five years now - my husband and I. We were approved in November 2019 and had our first children placed with us in January 2021. Two sisters. They were only supposed to be with us short-term at first, but now they're with us for the long haul.

They were very traumatised when they arrived, and the first two years were incredibly difficult—building trust, establishing routine, just helping them feel safe.

About six months into having them, I made the decision to retire from my job. Before fostering, I ran a specialist resource base for children with complex learning needs and autism in a high school. It was a big change, but COVID was in full swing, and everything just pointed toward us needing to reprioritise. I needed to be there fully, for the girls.

Q: What drew you to the role of a Pioneer?

I've always been involved; I attend the coffee mornings, I stay up to date with the courses. When I heard about the Pioneers programme, what caught my attention was that you didn't need years and years of fostering experience.

“They were looking for people who could bring something from their previous professional life, and with my background in education and additional learning needs, I thought, “Yes, I can contribute something valuable.”

So many children in care have unmet or undiagnosed needs and schools and carers often don't know how to navigate the system. I've been doing that work for a decade. I know the forms, I know the departments. I realised I could help not just the children we foster, but other carers and schools too.

Q: What has changed since you became a Pioneer?

Honestly, from a wider service perspective, very little. It's early days here in [local authority]. But personally, for me, the biggest change has been access. I now have much more access to the social work team and the wider fostering network. I've been part of promotional events at the [Named] Centre and other events, Pride events....anywhere we can raise awareness. And it helps having a foster carer on the stand.

“People want to talk to someone who's actually living it, not just promoting it.”

I've also taken on specific roles. For example, I did a trauma-informed parenting course so I could support kinship carers, as we didn't have any kinship representatives in the pioneer team. We've each taken on different focuses: one does single carers, another runs the men's group, another supports families transitioning to adoption. I focus on education and additional needs. We all support newly approved foster carers. Between us, we try to cover a broad spectrum.

Q: What has been the most significant change for you personally?

It's that closer relationship with the fostering team. And it's also the opportunity to contribute to shaping things; like how we promote fostering in the area.

We've had input into what recruitment looks like, the kinds of stories and messages that might resonate.

But it hasn't been without challenges. The launch in [local authority] didn't go well. It felt overly formal, overly corporate. There were referral processes, job titles, payments - it came across as competitive or hierarchical. I sat at the back of that room and honestly wanted to cry. That's not what being a Pioneer is about. We're not here to take over anyone's job. We're just here to help.

Q: Can you share an example of when you supported someone as a Pioneer?

One family came to mind: They're struggling and close to a placement breakdown. Their child has autism, and because of my background, I was asked if I could support them through the summer holidays. Just a few hours a week, to offer respite and a familiar, understanding face.

I said yes, of course. But even that, such a small gesture, had to go through a long-winded referral process. It took so long and felt so bureaucratic. I just kept thinking: "Isn't this the point of having Pioneers?"

Q: What do you think needs to change to make the programme more effective?

The formal process is a real barrier. Carers don't want to fill in forms or have forms filled out for them. They want someone to talk to at a coffee morning, to get advice quickly and informally. I didn't become a Pioneer for the £15 an hour. I'd do it for nothing.

We need to simplify things. Less paperwork, more connection.

Another issue is the name; "Pioneer." It's rubbed some people the wrong way. It sounds like we think we're better or more important. At a safeguarding course, someone actually recoiled when I mentioned it. I've suggested names like "Fostering Friends" something more approachable. The intention is good, but the language matters.

Q: Are foster carers clear about what the Pioneers programme is meant to do?

Not really. I think that's part of the problem. At the launch, a lot of carers reacted badly. Some said, "We don't need them; we've got our own groups." And that's hard to hear when all you want is to help. The rollout just didn't land well, and now we're working against that initial impression.

I think more peer-to-peer clarity would help. We've suggested a directory, something that shows who's available for what. Someone good with hair care for Afro-Caribbean children, someone who knows about dietary needs, someone who can help fill out forms or DLA or school ALN forms. Simple things that make a big difference. That's what we bring; lived experience.

Q: What's the potential of the programme moving forward?

I think there's real potential. We've started connecting with other local authorities. We're learning from each other. But we're still early in the journey.

For me, the goal is simple: make carers feel less alone.

I remember when our girls first came to us. One of them had severely matted hair. I had no idea what to do. I would have loved someone to call, someone to guide me. And now, when other carers face similar challenges, I can help.

That's the most significant change for me; not a big policy shift or a restructure, but a small moment of connection. A shared experience. A piece of advice that makes someone feel just a little bit more confident.



MSC Story – Interviewee #11

“From Connection to Confidence.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #11)

Interview Date: 1 July 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite (H2t)

Q: Could you just tell me a little bit about you and how you came to get involved in pioneers?

I love fostering. It's something I'm really passionate about. I go to the support group regularly, so I suppose I've become quite well known. I wouldn't say I'm a busybody, but I am interested in other people, though not in a nosy way! It was actually my supervising social worker who first asked if I'd be interested in The Pioneers. I thought, why not?

I'd been buddied up with someone myself when I had a little boy who was going to be adopted. That had been a new experience for me, and emotionally, it was really difficult.

So I thought, maybe I could give something back and support someone else who might be going through something similar.

I did the masterclasses, really enjoyed those, and then got involved.

Q: How long have you been involved with The Pioneers?

I think it's been about 18 months now.

Q: Have you got a particular story that you think shows how The Pioneers is working?

Yes. I think the one that really stood out to me happened recently. In November, I was asked by my supervising social worker to attend a local Skills to Foster course. It was a bit tricky to juggle with the children's sports and everything, but I managed it. Stuart from The Fostering Network asked me to share some of my experiences, which I was happy to do.

Then a couple of new foster carers recognised me from that course and from the newsletter, where my name and picture are featured each month. The first Tuesday of every month, a little blurb goes out, and that helped them connect the dots. They'd received a phone call about a possible first placement for respite and didn't think it was a good fit, but they weren't sure what to do.

So they rang me.

I was able to sit down with them, have a cup of tea, and talk it through. I didn't give them advice exactly (I'm not a social worker) but I was a sounding board. I helped them ask the right questions.

The placement didn't go ahead, but more importantly, they didn't walk away from fostering. After all their training, that could have been the moment that put them off. But we talked, and

they stayed. And now, they're fostering. That was the moment I realised what kind of impact The Pioneers can have.

Q: What's your experience of how The Pioneers is working with the local authority and the service?

I think [local authority] are doing everything they can. [Social worker] is working really hard. She has meetings, asks what we want and need and it's not just her giving instructions. She knows she can't foster herself, so it's got to be a dialogue.

We've got monthly coffee mornings hosted by two of the pioneers. They're open to anyone who wants to attend. But like anything, it's always the same people who show up or read the newsletter. You can't make people engage, but I do think the efforts are there.

Q: Is there anything that you think pioneers could get more involved with that they aren't currently?

Maybe we could be involved a bit earlier in the process, before people even get too far into fostering.

Like, when someone first approaches the authority, that could be a good time to bring up The Pioneers. Not everyone gets that introduction, and I don't think all supervising social workers promote it well. I've said that before, and I'll keep saying it.

Q: Do you feel supported as a pioneer?

Yes, 100%. [Social Worker] is amazing, and my social worker is supportive too. Sarah from The Fostering Network has also been really good. There are one-to-one meetings and check-ins. Sometimes people don't show up, but that's life because we're all busy. I've had a lot going on too.

But I've always felt supported.

Q: Do you feel well connected to other pioneers, regionally or nationally?

Honestly, not really. There isn't a seamless system. It's very defined. I'm in south Wales, and I'm not going to buddy up with someone in Anglesey. That's just the geography of it. Even [another authority] is only ten minutes from me, but there's still a disconnect. We're very North-South as a country, and that's just how it is.

Q: Do pioneers in your area get a chance to talk to each other?

Yes, we do. We've had meetups with Sarah, and there's a Christmas event. We've got regular coffee mornings and we keep in touch.

Q: Have you seen any wider change or shift since The Pioneers got involved in your area?

I think for the newer carers, there is a shift. It's being promoted more now. But people who wouldn't ask for advice still don't. We're not here to replace social workers, I can't be that, but sometimes just being a sounding board can make all the difference.

Every pioneer has a different experience and brings something unique to the table.

Q: You mentioned being buddied yourself during an adoption. Could you say more about that?

Yeah. When my little boy was being adopted, I had no idea what to expect. The plan I was given didn't look right, and I didn't know what to do. My buddy had been through it before, and just being able to talk it through helped so much. Nothing really prepares you for that kind of grief. It's a loss, and it hits hard.

But having someone to talk to made it bearable. It helped me understand I wasn't alone.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

[Social Worker's] been doing something lovely in the newsletter each month, she highlights a different pioneer with a photo and a short story or quote. It's helping raise our profile. I think that's a brilliant thing.

There's so much value in what pioneers have to offer, and we all bring different strengths; like supporting neurodiverse children, or navigating school systems. We need to find a better way to share that.

It's a lonely job sometimes. But if you know there's someone you can call, even just once in a while; it makes a difference.

That's what this is all about, really. Making sure no one feels alone.



MSC Story – Interviewee #12

“Being heard”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #12)

Interview Date: 3 July 2025

Interviewers: Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: What's your experience been like as a Pioneer?

Honestly, I don't think I've done a great deal in the official role of a Pioneer. But what I have noticed is that becoming a Pioneer has shifted how the local authority sees and hears foster carers. The title seems to carry some weight; it opens doors. I've just come from a meeting with the fostering team manager, and I'm pretty sure that wouldn't have happened if I wasn't a Pioneer.

It's like once you've got the Pioneer badge, they listen to you differently. You're seen as someone with experience and insight. That's been the biggest change for me.

Before, decisions might have just been sent out in an email. Now I'm invited to contribute, to give my thoughts on things like the fostering allowance and skills payments. It feels like being included in the conversation, rather than being on the receiving end of decisions.

Q: What changes have you seen, particularly from the service or with other carers?

There's been some mentoring, though I haven't done any formally myself yet. I was asked, but the family declined in the end. Still, the fact that it was offered, that's a step.

I really think if Pioneers could be brought in at the very start, when someone is first curious about fostering, it would make the whole journey smoother. You know, making that transition from interest to mentorship less intimidating.

I was lucky when I started: I already had a lot of support around me because of my background. But not everyone has that. Some people are coming from careers where they're used to knowing exactly what they're doing. Starting out in fostering can feel really uncertain, and you might not want to ask questions. Having a Pioneer there from the start could make such a difference.

Q: Do you feel like you have a space to share your ideas as a Pioneer?

Yes, to some extent. The recruitment officer here is lovely. We've got meetings booked to share ideas. They're trying to give us a bit of autonomy, like “here are the ideas, now go and make them happen.” Which is great in theory.

But what's been difficult is actually getting Pioneers together to do that.

We've got ten Pioneers here, with a good mix (respite carers, kinship carers, experienced and long-term carers). But organising regular meetings? It's been tough.

People are busy. I tried doing it through our WhatsApp group, asking for ideas but it's hard to get engagement. I think that's a big challenge.

Q: What do you think might be the barrier to the programme really taking off in your area?

I think part of it is how the role of Pioneer was introduced. To reach the top tier of the skills payment here (level five) you had to do the trauma diploma and also be a Pioneer.

That's a great idea in theory, but it meant some people signed up just for the payment, without necessarily wanting to engage with the extra work that comes with being a Pioneer.

So we ended up with some people in the role who weren't really movers and shakers: just ticking a box.

Q: Can you think of a specific moment or story that captures the impact of being a Pioneer?

It's not a big dramatic story, but for me, it's about being heard. That's the biggest shift. I've had the chance to speak directly to the fostering manager and I'm due to represent our area at a government meeting soon.

I wouldn't have had those opportunities before. And that matters because if the people at the top don't hear from us on the ground, they can't make the right changes.

So being able to speak into that space, to represent what carers need—that's powerful.

Q: Do you get to engage with other Pioneers across Wales?

We've had a couple of events, like a Family Day at Greenwood and the Fostering Network conference. It was great to see other Pioneers, but they weren't spaces where we could really sit down and talk. You're there with your kids, or there's a packed schedule. So, not really much time to connect.

I'd love more unstructured opportunities (maybe online) to talk to other Pioneers across the country.

Q: What would you like to see from the programme going forward?

I think before a new county launches the Pioneer programme, it needs to have everything set up; structure, support, and rewards. We've been doing this for over a year and a half, and only now are we having meetings about how to reward people's time and effort. That should have been in place from the start.

The reward system could be monetary, or maybe something like extra respite if you put in a certain number of hours. It needs to be meaningful to each carer and that might look different for everyone.

Q: Any other final reflections?

The Fostering Network is doing a great job. Their ideas are solid. But execution relies on a strong partnership with local authorities. And I think there's a big question around whether this programme could or should include agency carers. There's so much experience there, and it seems like a missed opportunity if they're left out.



MSC Story – Interviewee #13

“An Open Heart is Better Than a Big Bedroom.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #2)

Interview Date: 13 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Could you tell us a little bit about you and how you became involved in The Pioneers programme?

I came into fostering around 15 years ago through kinship care (what's now called family and friends care). My niece and nephew came to live with us when they were 12 and 15. My sister was going through a rough time, and the children stayed for about five years. I was working full-time in a demanding senior role in finance and banking, so when they moved on, we paused fostering. Later, after becoming seriously ill and leaving work, I looked at our empty house and thought, “We were actually good at this.” That's when our fostering journey really started.

But honestly, fostering is incredibly isolating. Your friends don't understand the behaviours, and they fall away.

So when the Pioneer role popped into my inbox, I was intrigued. I thought maybe I could use my skills (training, pastoral care, management) to give something back.

At first, I won't lie: it was a self-centred move. I needed something to stimulate me, to reconnect me to the world. But it's turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Q: What changes have you seen since becoming a Pioneer?

There have been both positives and negatives. Starting with the concerns: there's definitely a lack of joined-up thinking. Some supervising social workers don't support our role, possibly because they think we're unqualified or might step on their toes. I get that, to a point. But carers (especially those in crisis) often find it easier to talk to someone who's lived it. There's no judgment, just understanding.

I've had some extremely successful experiences supporting carers. I remember working with one carer in particular: we'd exchange emails and messages late at night, often until midnight, just trying to get through difficult periods. That kind of support, when the social worker is off the clock, really matters.

There's still a lot of work to do in raising awareness of what we offer. I think it would help if we were invited to speak at meetings with supervising social workers to clarify boundaries, expectations, and how we can complement each other. We're not there to take over, just to support.

Q: What's been the most significant change?

Recruitment. Without a doubt. I thought I'd hate it, but I absolutely love it. Mel and I do all the outreach (market stalls, coffee mornings, community events) and the difference it makes is huge. We're not just faceless reps; we're foster carers.

When people realise we live this every day, it changes everything.

The public responds so positively, especially those with care experience themselves. Some people open up with incredible stories (sad, happy, complicated). Elderly people come to talk about their experiences in care. It's beautiful and heartbreaking and necessary. And sometimes, you can tell that a simple conversation really meant something to someone. That's the power of presence.

Q: And what about your other Pioneer roles?

I love being part of the training, especially Skills to Foster. It's a chance to speak to prospective carers honestly. Many come in with an idealised picture, like kids running down hills to hug them. I gently remind them those open arms might land a punch. I

t's about preparing them for reality, with kindness.

I've even spoken to groups about allegations (how it feels, how to cope). I try to be real and supportive. Being on the frontline, sharing lived experience, really adds something to the process.

Q: What's changed in terms of connection or isolation?

Before, there was a strong divide; social workers on one side, carers on the other. It felt cliquy. Only the same carers would turn up to events. It was disheartening. Now, even though there are only a few of us Pioneers in [local authority], we're changing that.

Hosting events, being visible, rallying people: it helps break down barriers.

This summer will be the first where we're properly involved from the start, leading summer events, encouraging others to attend. We're showing that carers can take the lead, not just show up.

Q: What other challenges have you faced?

One frustration is being unable to support kinship carers through my Pioneer role because of funding structures. I've lived the kinship experience and it's one of the hardest roles. The emotional ties, the family politics; it's brutal. But because kinship comes from a different budget, I've been told I can't support them officially.

I still do it unofficially, of course, because they need it. Many of the kinship carers I support have kids who attend therapy with mine, so I see them regularly.

I just can't log that support as a Pioneer. That needs to change. We shouldn't have a two-tier support system just because of how the funding's set up.

Q: Do you feel your voice is heard?

Honestly? No. Not enough. I come from senior roles where my input mattered. I'm used to bringing solutions, not just problems. But I've had moments especially around retention,

where my suggestions weren't welcome. I even offered to share my CV, to co-train with the retention officer. But because I'm self-employed, they say I can't sign on in the same way.

I get it, to a point. But it's frustrating. We need more creative thinking. I've said, "Put us on zero-hours contracts if that helps." I'm not trying to take anyone's job, I just want to help.

But sometimes the system feels more focused on barriers than solutions.

Q: So what's the future of The Pioneers in your view?

The potential is enormous. From recruitment to retention, to training, to crisis support—we're already making a difference.

But we need more support from the system. More belief in what we bring. More willingness to collaborate. If the social workers and local authorities can see the value (and I believe they will, eventually) we'll go far

And honestly, fostering needs us. We don't just need more foster carers, we need the *right* ones. As I always say, "An open heart is better than a big bedroom." That should be our slogan.



MSC Story – Interviewee #14

“Building Bridges: Supporting New Carers and Challenging the System from Within”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #2)

Interview Date: 13 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got involved with the Pioneers initiative?

I've been a foster carer for nearly four years now, and before that, I spent 16 years climbing the ranks in a corporate recruitment agency (from admin to Director of Social Care). I ran that business with integrity, focusing on quality and people. When COVID hit, I took voluntary redundancy and made a huge life change: I decided to become a foster carer.

I've always believed that if we support children properly, we raise better adults, better parents, better members of society. I wanted to contribute directly to that.

My first placement was a sibling group of three. It was meant to be long-term, but the eldest eventually went back to their birth family. I still care for the two younger siblings, and it's been a massive learning curve. I'm capable, motivated, and resilient, but even I've found fostering isolating and overwhelming at times.

There's no manual, and you often end up "winging it," especially when challenges arise outside of office hours.

Q: What made you want to get involved in the Pioneer programme?

Seeing the Pioneer job description felt like a sign! It was exactly what I'd been looking for. There were two main reasons I applied. First, I wanted to help improve how [local authority] Council runs its fostering services. Compared to my corporate experience, they're inefficient and ineffective in ways that honestly drive me "insane."

I felt I could bring problem-solving skills and a fresh perspective.

Second, I wanted to be the support for new carers that I didn't have. As a single carer, walking into your first "cuppa and catch up" can be nerve-wracking. Everyone seems to know each other; you feel like the outsider. I wanted to change that, to be that friendly, familiar face to say, "You've got this." Not everyone has the family or professional background I do, and they need someone to reach out to.

Q: Have you been able to make any changes through the Pioneer initiative?

Yes, slowly but surely. From the start, communication from [local authority] was a bit of a mess. We didn't even know we were selected until we showed up to a brunch. But once we began networking with Pioneers from other local authorities, we got ideas we could take back and implement here.

One simple but powerful change was introducing “walk and talk” sessions.

Some children struggle in enclosed spaces, so this gave carers a more relaxed way to connect. We also started assigning Pioneers to carers who are close to panel. I’ve been paired with a few now, and I can see what a difference it makes.

New carers are full of questions but don’t always feel safe asking them. They worry it’ll reflect badly on their assessment. I help ease those fears. One carer I supported was so close to quitting as she thought being gay, being non-British, having tattoos, and being single were all disqualifiers.

I reassured her, shared my own experiences, and now she’s approved and thriving.

Q: Have you seen any organisational changes as a result?

There’s still a long way to go. [Local authority] has issues (high staff turnover, a lack of understanding between social workers and carers, and a serious “them and us” culture). Social workers often make decisions without consulting us. They don’t seem to realise we’re the ones with the day-to-day insight into the children’s lives.

At meetings with managers and social workers, I’ve had to speak up, to really humanise what we do and explain we’re not trying to take over their roles. I tell them:

“We’re not here to step on your toes. We’re here to help you support foster carers.”

After I shared my story and why I became a carer, you could feel the room relax. They began to understand what we’re bringing to the table.

We’ve been advocating for better presentations of who the Pioneers are; not just saying we’re experienced carers, but showing what that means. Between the five of us in [local authority], we bring lived experience of sibling groups, adoption, medical needs, education systems, and more. We’re asking the council to highlight that in their materials, to help social workers and carers understand how we can support them.

Q: Do you feel like the local authority supports your work as a Pioneer?

It’s complicated. We have a named contact, a social worker, who chairs our quarterly meetings. She’s very knowledgeable and good at her job, but the introduction of the pioneers hasn’t seemed to have taken off. Presentations have been process-focused and quite formal. What we’re doing as Pioneers is the opposite of that and we need to soften the delivery.

We’re bringing the soft skills, the empathy, the connection.

And that mismatch sometimes slows things down.

Still, we have a strong team. We challenge constructively, and we’re building relationships with people like the head of training and the comms lead. They’re on board. I do feel like we’re being heard, even if there’s still resistance in some corners.

Q: What change has been most meaningful for you personally?

Without a doubt, it's being able to support new carers from the very beginning.

Having someone like me there when they're waiting for panel, when they're filled with doubt and fear, that's huge. I know how that feels. I've been there. And just being able to say, "You're not alone. You're doing great," can make all the difference.

One of the carers I supported told me directly, "If it wasn't for you, I would have walked away." That's powerful. That's impact.

Q: What would you like to see next for the Pioneer programme?

I want to see more buy-in from social workers. They need to understand we're not a threat, we're a resource. We can help with recruitment, retention, and support.

Happy carers stay longer, speak positively, and bring in others. That's how we grow the service sustainably.

And we need better visibility. Let carers know we're here. Let social workers know what our strengths are so they can match us with carers who need our particular experience. The system is too formal and too siloed. If we can bridge that, we can really make a difference.

Final thoughts

I know I'm "a pain in the bum" sometimes, as I've been told. But I bring energy, positivity, and determination. The Pioneer programme gives me a platform to use my voice for good. We signed up to change lives, and that doesn't stop with the kids, it includes the carers, the workers, and the system itself.

We're only just getting started. But we're on the right path.



MSC Story – Interviewee #15

“Finding My Voice and Giving Others Theirs.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #2)

Interview Date: 13 June 2025

Interviewers: Kat Applewhite and Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: How did you get involved in the Pioneers programme?

I got involved in Pioneers by a bit of a natural progression. I'd already completed the fostering well-being masterclasses, the last ones done in-person in the [local authority] back in late 2019 or early 2020. I've always had a background in adult education and learning facilitation, so I suppose speaking up and getting involved just comes naturally to me.

During the masterclasses, I chatted a bit with [Social Worker] about doing more, and then, of course, COVID hit. After lockdowns began easing in 2021, I offered to restart our then-defunct support groups for foster carers in the Vale. I'd already started doing that (unofficially) and when conversations began happening between Foster Wales and the local authority about Pioneers, someone just said, “[interviewee 15] is already doing all this,” and so I became one.

For a while, I wasn't even called a Pioneer. I didn't really identify with the label at the time as it didn't sit quite right with me, so I just called myself a Foster Carer Support or something similar.

But in practice, I was mentoring, running groups, and filling a gap that had really widened during the pandemic.

Q: Is supporting others something that's always come naturally to you?

Yes. Definitely. And it wasn't just about me stepping up, it was more that there was no one else. There used to be these “Level 4 carers” who supported others. They got paid handsomely for it, too. But by the time COVID hit, the last one of them was stepping back, and the system of support for other carers had all but vanished.

There was this massive gap. Carers didn't know where to go. The formal structures weren't in place anymore, and people were struggling.

I've never been afraid to speak up, especially when it's in the best interests of carers or children.

I think a lot of carers worry that if they raise concerns, it could jeopardise their placement or standing with the local authority. I didn't share those fears. I wasn't scared to advocate for others. And I was doing that anyway, before the title.

Q: Has being a Pioneer changed anything for you personally?

Absolutely.

Being a Pioneer legitimised my voice. Before, people might've seen me as just being opinionated or awkward. Now, it's recognised as advocacy.

It's depersonalised things. I'm not just "Interviewee 15 being difficult." Now I have a formal role and a platform. I run support groups, I formally take notes, and I feed them back to the service. I've got a formal place in monthly forums where foster carers and management come together. I even attend Skills to Foster training sessions in an official capacity now.

And on a personal level, this has been the most significant change for me the feeling of acceptance and being valued. I was always the one who'd speak up, challenge things, ask the uncomfortable questions. I used to feel like I was on the outside.

Now other carers say, "You're our advocate." It's built stronger relationships with other carers, and made me realise I needed support, too.

I used to think I didn't need anyone. But being in this role has shown me how important mutual support really is. By giving support, I've started to receive it, and that's been massive for me.

Q: Do you feel like your voice, and that of carers more generally, is more recognised now?

Yes, definitely. And not just mine. Because I'm visible now (whether it's at training, forums, or support groups) other carers feel more comfortable coming to me. I don't think everyone feels ready to speak up for themselves, but they're happy for me to be their voice. That feels like progress.

I also think the training I do is received differently now. I'm a trainer for the Fostering Network too, so I deliver sessions to other carers. But now that they see me as one of them, as someone who's already advocating on their behalf, the dynamic has shifted.

It's not about me being a "know-it-all", they know I'm here to help.

The learning lands differently because of that mutual respect.

Q: What kind of impact has this had more widely on the service?

There's been a noticeable shift in responsiveness. For years it was just me and [another pioneer] holding the fort as pioneers in the [local authority], but now there are more of us and we've been able to push things further. Things like summer activity planning, the recognition event—these things now happen with carers' voices involved. It's not always perfect, but there's more responsiveness now.

One of the biggest shifts we made early on was attending all the children's services team meetings. We wanted to bridge that divide with the foster carers on one side, social workers on the other. It helped build understanding. We said,

"If you have little niggles, bring them to us. Let's sort it before it turns into something bigger." I think that's made a difference. Communication has improved between carers and social workers.

Q: What would you like to see more of in the future?

One big thing for me is having pioneers or carers involved in the recruitment and training of social workers. It should be standard that carers sit on panels, whether they're pioneers or not.

And I'd love to see carers going into social work courses at universities to give students lived experience early on. It could change perspectives before they even start.

Locally, we used to have a slot where we'd spend time in the office, just two hours every week. That visibility was important. Marketing staff would pop in, recruitment events would get planned, and social workers would come by to chat.

It created opportunities for co-production. Just being there in the building helped to normalise carer involvement.

Q: And what about recognition? Do you feel your role is valued?

We've had to fight for it. [Another pioneer] and I pushed hard to be paid a weekly retainer, and we eventually got it. But now, as more pioneers come on board, there's talk of removing it for fairness. That's frustrating because the work is real.

I know we're not in it for the money, but when we go above and beyond, it should be recognised.

Every local authority uses their pioneers differently, and some are more open to shared learning than others. That's why the national element is crucial. If it stayed local only, a lot of what we've achieved wouldn't have happened. Having a national conversation, being part of the Fostering Network, it's what makes all this sustainable. It ensures pioneers get support and training, and that local progress feeds into something bigger.



MSC Story – Interviewee #16

“Confidence, Connection and Contribution: Growing into the Role.”

Interviewee: Anonymised (Interviewee #16)

Interview Date: 15th July 2025

Interviewers: Donna Thomas (H2t)

Q: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you became involved in the Pioneers programme?

I started fostering 15 years ago with my mum, and when she retired, my wife stepped into the role with me. So it's always been a shared family journey. At one point, we had two long-term placements, but when one of them moved on, we were left with our current long-term placement (a child with very challenging behaviour and autism). We've always maintained a two-child household, but at that point, I found myself thinking, “Do I want to take another child on, or do I want a different challenge?”

At the same time, we'd also adopted our daughter, and while she was still settling, I didn't feel it was the right time to bring another child into the home. That's when the Pioneers programme came along. It sounded like the perfect way to stay engaged with fostering, contribute meaningfully, and take on a new kind of challenge.

We were invited to a meeting where someone who was setting up the programme and a group from a neighbouring local authority that had an established Pioneer team. They were focused heavily on events for children, which was great for them, but in our area, we already had someone doing that really well. So as soon as they left the room, the three of us were all like, “OK, we're not doing that. Let's do something different.”

We weren't dismissing what they did: far from it. But we already had that covered, and....

we were passionate from the start about creating something unique to our local needs.

Q: What kind of changes have you seen since the programme started; good or bad?

For me personally, the biggest change has been around training. Before, I found a lot of our local authority training quite repetitive. But with the Pioneers, I've been able to request and access more tailored training. That's had a huge impact on my confidence across the board.

Recruitment has also seen real change. I remember the year before last we had zero applicants. Then, suddenly, we had seven come through. That might sound like a small number, but going from none to seven is a big shift. More importantly, we're not just getting them through the door, we're seeing them through panel, and we're matching them with existing carers, which has always been a real passion of mine.

Because of our adoption experience, I was particularly motivated to help new foster carers feel confident from the start.

When we began fostering, I had zero confidence. I'd go into training rooms and feel like I didn't belong. So one of our goals has been making sure new carers don't feel that way.

One of the things we do is ensure that if someone is attending their first training or coffee morning, a Pioneer goes with them. That way, they have a buddy right from the beginning.

Q: That idea of a Pioneer buddy is quite unique; where did that come from?

It came from conversations with another Pioneer. We both realised we had felt that same sense of imposter syndrome when we started. You'd walk into a room and hear someone say, "Oh, I've had 57 children," and I'd think, "I'm 25 and I've barely started. What am I doing here?"

We wanted to change that experience for new carers. Everyone deserves to walk into a room and feel like they belong. Having a Pioneer buddy means they're not navigating those early steps alone.

Even little things like having someone to chat with at the coffee break, can make a big difference.

It also helps with networking: we can introduce new carers to others who've had similar experiences, or who've dealt with the same schools or challenges.

Q: Have there been any challenges or things that haven't gone so well?

Yeah, I'd say the momentum has dipped a bit since we started. Not for me personally, i'm still as involved as ever but there was a real initial buzz that's faded slightly. We were so focused on recruitment, and now that we're kind of stuck in that phase, it feels like things have slowed down.

I'm someone who likes to see progress, so it's a bit frustrating to be waiting for the next phase, like matching and mentoring, to really get going.

Q: What would you say is the most significant change for you?

Confidence. Without a doubt. I've always been good at advocating for others (especially the children we foster) but advocating for myself was a different story.

Through the Pioneers programme, I've gained a wider knowledge base, more comprehensive training, and built relationships across different local authorities.

I no longer walk into rooms feeling like the lowest in the pecking order.

Now, I feel like I've got something valuable to say and people listen.

Q: What's changed in your life or your work as a result of that confidence?

I'm more active. I volunteer for more, take on new challenges, and speak up more often. A year ago, I wouldn't have agreed to do this interview. I don't usually like one-to-one conversations or being put on the spot.

But now, I feel like I have something useful to offer.

I've even taken part in recruitment events, talking to people who are sceptical or misinformed about fostering. I like being able to change people's minds about it.

Q: What helped build that confidence: what were the key ingredients?

Honestly, the "Pioneer" label makes a difference. It gives you credibility. It shifts how professionals see you.

You go from just being a foster carer to being someone who works alongside the local authority. That shift opens doors.

My relationship with my social worker is a good example. A few years ago, I offered to provide evidence for something and she said, "It's not for you—it's for the professionals." That stung. It made me feel like my lived experience didn't matter. But since I became a Pioneer, she treats me very differently. Now she asks for my input. She'll say, "You've done this training—could that benefit someone else?" I feel genuinely valued now.

She even uses me as an example in training because of how extensive my training record is. I attend everything I can, even if I'm not sure it'll be relevant right away. I just want to be prepared and informed—for the kids I care for now, and those I might care for in the future.

Q: Have you started mentoring yet? Have you received feedback from those you've supported?

Not yet. We're just at the matching stage now. But we've been really clear from the beginning that we want those matches to be meaningful. Many of us have very unique family set-ups, so we want to match with people who'll benefit from our specific experiences. *Just like we carefully match children with foster families, we believe Pioneer mentoring should be personalised too.*

Q: Any final thoughts or reflections?

I'm really glad I said yes to this.

The Pioneers programme has given me purpose, growth, and confidence I didn't know I needed.

It's helped me feel like I'm part of something bigger—not just someone caring for children, but someone shaping the system. It's reminded me that we foster carers have so much more to offer, and it feels good to be recognised for that.



MSC Story – Interviewee #17

“It’s like a Community.”

Interviewee: Interviewee #17
Interview Date: 20 October 2025
Interviewer: Donna Thomas (H2t)



Q: How did you become involved in the Pioneers Programme?

It all started years ago when I first contacted the local authority about fostering. I’m a registered social worker and used to be a supervising social worker with Barnardo’s, so I already knew quite a bit about fostering. When I left that job, I threw my net out and thought, *Right, what is it that I know? What do I enjoy?*

That’s when fostering came back into my mind. I met with the head of service, and I remember talking about the Mockingbird model (foster carers supporting foster carers. He asked if that was something I’d like to lead on. I laughed and said, “Well, I’m not a foster carer yet!”

The Pioneers is similar to that. It’s carers supporting carers; only now it’s recognised and recorded. I suppose I was already doing it before I became a Pioneer. I was helping others anyway.

Q: Can you share an example of where you’ve made a difference as a Pioneer?

One that stands out is when I supported another foster carer who had a young asylum seeker. I’d had two asylum seekers myself, and because my brother-in-law is from Syria, I had a good understanding of their journey, their culture, and the language.

This carer rang me one weekend (she was new and on her own) and she was in a bit of a tizz. Her young person had said he was going to harm himself, wouldn’t eat, wouldn’t leave his room. She didn’t know what to do or whether she could even go shopping.

I helped her break things down, talked through safeguarding, and reminded her of the out-of-hours team. Once she’d done that, she felt calmer. I also shared practical things; the translation apps I used, where to get halal food, what to cook, even explained that shouting can be normal in their culture. She later told me it really helped.

That’s what being a Pioneer is for me: being there when someone needs to talk, helping them find the next step.

Q: What kind of everyday support do you give other carers?

We've got a group chat with lots of different foster carers. Sometimes someone will post, "This has happened: I don't know what to do." I'll message them and say, "You can go back to your supervising social worker, or you can ring the Fostering Network helpline, they're open until such-and-such a time."

It's simple things, really. Signposting. Reassurance. Reminding people that help's there. Sometimes I'll share mindfulness apps or ideas to manage stress. Because fostering can be stressful, especially when you're dealing with trauma or behaviour. It just helps to have someone who understands.

Q: Have you seen an impact on other carers or the wider fostering community?

Definitely. I had another carer who didn't know her asylum-seeking young person should have a guardian, so I helped her with that too. It's often small bits of knowledge that make a big difference.

And even before being a Pioneer, I liked connecting people. One young girl I looked after had mental health issues, and I introduced her to my sister, who's in her 70s and loves animals. The girl started walking her dogs, cleaning windows, helping round the house — and two-and-a-half years later, she still goes there. It gave her purpose and routine, and my sister gained a friend.

It's those little human connections that matter.

Q: How has being a Pioneer influenced you personally?

I've been fostering for 5 years now, and I've benefited from being a Pioneer myself. My co-Pioneers put on training (like online safety sessions) and I go along because I'm always learning.

It's also made me more aware of recruitment. For example, there's a lady who works as a lollipop lady and in Home Bargains. I see her every week with one of my young people, and I'll drop in little stories about fostering. I joke that I'm "grooming her for fostering," but really I'm just planting seeds. If I see someone who's caring and has the right heart, I can't help but encourage them.

Q: What's your particular focus or niche as a Pioneer?

I'd say asylum seekers. Not many carers want to take them on because of language barriers, cultural differences, and because they're often teenage boys. But I've had really positive experiences.

One young man, still keeps in touch. He's passed his driving test now and calls us his "*Wales family*." At Eid, we send him money; it's their version of Christmas. That connection means a lot to me.

Q: Looking back, what's been the most significant change since becoming a Pioneer?

When I first started fostering, I would have loved to have had a Pioneer. I didn't even have a social worker for a while and used to get different answers from different professionals.

Now, with the Pioneers, it feels like a *community*. That's the biggest change. We can pick up the phone, talk things through, and know someone will understand.

We don't do it for thanks, but it's nice to be appreciated. It makes you feel part of something bigger and that's what keeps me going.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me is that feeling of community; foster carers supporting each other, sharing what we know, being there at the end of the phone. It's knowing none of us have to do this on our own anymore.



MSC Story – Interviewee #18

“The Glue That Holds It Together”

Interviewee: Interviewee #18
Interview Date: 21 October 2025
Interviewer: Kat Applewhite

Q: How did you get into fostering and the Pioneer role?

I've been a foster carer for 20 years now, which feels a bit surreal to say out loud. I always knew, even when I was younger, that I wanted to foster one day. I think it came from my own childhood experiences — I understood how important it was for a child to have someone in their corner.

I remember being 18, buying our first house, and ringing up the local authority to ask if I could be assessed as a foster carer. They told me I had to be 21. So, I waited — and literally four weeks after my 21st birthday, I rang back and said, “I’m old enough now, can we start?” That’s how determined I was.

Luckily, my husband felt exactly the same. His background meant he understood what fostering could mean to a child, so we were always aligned. Our own children have grown up in it — our eldest was two when we started, so it’s always been part of their lives.

Before becoming a Pioneer, I was what they used to call a “liaison carer.” It was very similar to what we do now — supporting other carers, being someone they could come to for advice or help. I did that for years before it became formalised as the Pioneer role. I think my manager at the time saw I was already doing the work and said, “There’s a name for what you do now!”

Q: What changed when it became the Pioneer role?

The biggest change was recognition. The liaison role was brilliant in its own way, but not everyone understood what it was. You were sort of this extra cog in the system, quietly doing important work, but not always seen.

When the Pioneers launched, everything changed. Suddenly, people — social workers, managers, even judges — knew who we were and what we did. We became the link, the glue holding everything together between carers and the local authority.

It gave us visibility and credibility. Carers started to see us as a trusted voice, and professionals began to use us in a more structured way. We’re now seen as part of the team around the child, not just a helping hand. That recognition has empowered carers to feel more professional and more confident in their roles.

Q: Can you share an example of where you've made a difference?

There have been many, but one that stands out is when I supported a carer who was struggling to speak up in meetings. Years ago, there was this unspoken fear — if you raised concerns or challenged something, it might go against you. That fear made people stay quiet even when they needed help.

This carer was really nervous about attending a meeting about a placement that wasn't going well. She was convinced that if she said the wrong thing, it would reflect badly on her. I offered to go with her, to be a bit of moral support. We talked beforehand about what she wanted to say and how to get her point across calmly and confidently.

In the meeting, she found her voice. She spoke honestly about what was happening, and it changed the conversation completely. The team realised how much she was juggling and put extra support in place. That placement could easily have broken down, but it didn't — and I truly believe it's because she was supported to speak up.

Moments like that remind me why this role matters so much. It's about empowering carers to use their voices and helping the system listen.

Q: What do you think is the most important thing the Pioneers bring?

Communication — without a doubt. We're the link between carers and professionals, helping to keep the information flowing. Before, things could get lost or misunderstood. Now, carers know they can come to us, and we can help signpost or feed things back in the right way.

It's also about reassurance. Sometimes people just need to hear, "You're not doing anything wrong — it's just a tough situation." Being able to say, "I've been there too," makes a huge difference. It builds trust and helps carers feel less isolated.

We've also helped strengthen relationships within the service. The fostering team now actively involve us — they'll ring and say, "Can you give this carer a call? They're having a hard time." We don't need to know all the details; we just reach out. That small contact can make all the difference.

Q: How has being a Pioneer affected you personally?

It's made me feel valued in a way I hadn't before. I think as carers, we sometimes get so caught up in the day-to-day that we forget how much knowledge and experience we have. The Pioneer role has shown me that lived experience is expertise.

It's also made me more confident. I used to stay in the background a bit more, but now I'm happy to speak at meetings or training events, to share ideas or give feedback. It's taught me that our voices matter — not just for the children we care for, but for shaping the fostering community too.

And personally, it's given me friendships. We Pioneers have built such a close bond. We're always there for each other — even if it's just a message on a Friday night saying, "How's everyone doing?" It's that sense of community that keeps me going.

Q: What do you think would have happened without the Pioneers?

Honestly, I think we would have lost a lot more carers. There were times before this role when carers felt unheard, unsupported, and unsure where to turn. That's when people give up — when they feel like no one's listening.

Having Pioneers in place means those carers have someone to call. We can intervene early, help them feel seen and supported, and often stop things from escalating. It's preventative support — it keeps placements stable and carers motivated.

I also think it's helped change the culture. There's a lot more openness now. People aren't as afraid to be honest about struggling. They know there's no judgment — just understanding.

Q: What keeps you motivated to keep doing this work?

The children, first and foremost. Seeing them thrive makes everything worth it. But also, the carers — especially the new ones finding their feet. When someone you've helped tells you that they're feeling stronger, that they've got through a tough patch, that's what keeps me going.

I believe so strongly in fostering as a community effort. It's not just one family or one professional — it's everyone working together. The Pioneers have shown what can happen when people collaborate instead of working in silos. It's teamwork in the truest sense.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been the recognition of the foster carers' voice. For so long, we were there but not always heard. The Pioneers have changed that — we've become the glue that holds the system together.

We connect carers, professionals, and the wider service, helping everyone understand each other better. It's made fostering feel less lonely and more like a shared mission. Knowing that we've helped build that sense of belonging — that's what makes me proud to be a Pioneer.



MSC Story – Interviewee #19

“A little Bit More Connected.”

Interviewee: Interviewee #19

Interview Date: 21 October 2025

Interviewer: Kat Applewhite

Q: Tell me a bit about your fostering journey.

I've been fostering for about 11 years now, although it feels like it's always been part of our lives. I'd wanted to foster for years before we actually did it — I think I'd seen enough of the world to know there were children out there who just needed a chance, a bit of stability, and someone to believe in them.

We moved from Bristol to Wales partly because we wanted more space, and it just felt like the right time to do something that mattered. I remember our first placement like it was yesterday — all nerves and excitement. Since then, we've cared for around ten children, some short-term, some long-term.

And one of those children we ended up adopting, even though that was never the plan. It just sort of happened naturally. You spend enough time with a child, watch them grow and change, and before you know it, they're family. That's what fostering does — it brings people into your life you never expected to love quite so much.

Q: How did you become involved with the Pioneers?

It happened a bit by accident, really. I saw an email about one of the training courses and thought, *That sounds interesting, I'll give it a go*. I didn't actually realise what the Pioneer Programme was at first. But once I got involved, I could see how valuable it was.

I'd always believed carers needed to support each other more. We go through so many shared experiences that other people just can't quite understand. When I joined the Pioneers, it gave me that opportunity — to be part of something that connected carers and made us all feel less alone.

It also gave me a better understanding of how the fostering system works. Sometimes as carers, you only see your little bit of the picture, but being part of the Pioneers lets you see how everything links together — from the recruitment team to social workers to the wider community.

Q: What has being a Pioneer changed for you?

It's given me a sense of belonging. Before, fostering could feel quite solitary — you'd go to meetings or training, but it was all quite formal. Now, through the Pioneers, I've met so many other carers, and we've built real friendships. We've got group chats, we meet for coffee, and there's a proper sense of being in it together.

It's also made me more confident in my role. We get extra information and training through the Pioneers, which really helps. For example, I learned how to put together my foster carer profile properly — before that, I didn't even know what half of it was meant to include! Those little things make a big difference to how professional we feel and how we present ourselves.

And it's given me a way to give back. I might not always have all the answers, but sometimes just listening to another carer who's having a rough time makes them feel better. I've been there myself, so I know how much it helps when someone understands.

Q: How do you see your role as a Pioneer within the wider team?

I think we're the bridge. Carers often find it easier to talk to another carer than to a social worker. There's no judgment, no formality — just honesty. We can pass on feedback in a way that's constructive, and we can help the team understand what carers are going through.

I've had times where I've spoken to social workers about something a carer's struggling with, and because it's come through a Pioneer, it's been taken seriously straight away. There's a lot more trust and respect now, both ways.

I also think we help stop things from getting worse. If someone's struggling, we can step in early — maybe have a chat, share some advice, or just remind them they're doing a good job. Sometimes that's all it takes to stop a placement from breaking down.

Q: What's been one of your most positive experiences as a Pioneer?

For me, it's the moments when you see that what you're doing actually helps. There was one carer who was quite new and really unsure of themselves. They were worried about getting things wrong, and you could see their confidence slipping. I made a point of checking in with them — just simple things, a message or a quick chat after a meeting.

After a while, they said, "You've no idea how much it's helped, just knowing someone's there." That meant a lot to me. It reminded me that the smallest bit of support can make a massive difference.

Another moment that stands out was one of our group lunches. There was laughter, people sharing stories, swapping advice — and you could see how much lighter everyone felt. It was that feeling of community in action. You can't buy that; you build it.

Q: What challenges do you think carers are facing right now?

There are definitely more complex cases coming through. The needs of children seem to be higher than they used to be, and that can be tough. It means carers need more support, not less.

Communication is another challenge. Sometimes carers don't know what's going on with a placement, or they get updates too late. It can be frustrating, but I do think things are improving. The Pioneers have helped with that — we can feed things back to the team and get answers more quickly.

I'd like to see even more awareness about what the Pioneers do. I still meet carers who say, "I've heard of the Pioneers, but I'm not really sure what they are." We need to keep promoting the role and making sure everyone knows we're here to help.

Q: How has the Pioneer Programme affected you personally?

It's made me feel more connected — to the fostering team, to other carers, to the whole process. Before, I sometimes felt like I was just ticking along, doing my bit at home. Now I feel like I'm part of something bigger, something that's actually shaping the future of fostering.

It's also helped me build confidence in myself. I'm not someone who naturally puts themselves forward, but being a Pioneer has shown me that I do have something valuable to offer. That's been a big change for me personally.

And on a human level, it's just been nice to meet people who "get it." We can talk openly about the tough days and the good ones, and that honesty makes such a difference.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been feeling part of a community. Fostering can be a lonely job at times, but the Pioneers have changed that. We've built friendships, shared knowledge, and created a space where carers feel supported and valued.

It's made me feel a little bit more connected — to the people around me and to the purpose behind what we do. Knowing that we're all in it together makes the hard days easier and the good days even better. That sense of belonging — that's what being a Pioneer is all about.



MSC Story – Interviewee #20

“We’re One Team — and It’s Starting to Work”

Interviewee: #20

Interview Date: 27 October 2025

Interviewer: Donna Thomas



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.

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.

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*.



MSC Story – Interviewee #21

Giving It a Framework”

Interviewee: Interviewee #21
Interview Date: 28 October 2025
Interviewer: Donna Thomas

Q: Tell me a bit about yourself and how you became involved as a Pioneer.

My husband and I have been fostering for around 17 years now, living on a farm in Mid Wales. We’ve cared for roughly 85 children in that time — everything from babies to teenagers, short term and long term. Fostering is just part of who we are now. We’ve always had an open home, and we love seeing children find stability and confidence.

Before the Pioneer role came along, I was already organising local support groups and social events for foster carers. It started informally — a few of us meeting up for coffee or lunch, sharing experiences, swapping ideas, and sometimes just having a good moan together. Those conversations often turned into advice and support, and people would say, “You should do this properly.”

So, when I heard about the Pioneer Programme, I thought, *This is exactly what we’ve been doing — but now it has a name and structure.* It gave a framework to what many of us were already doing naturally — helping each other through the ups and downs of fostering.

Q: What was it like when you first became a Pioneer?

It felt exciting but also a bit uncertain at first. We were all figuring it out together. I think what struck me early on was that this wasn’t just about helping other carers — it was about improving the whole system.

The Pioneer role has helped to bridge that gap. Now, there’s a clearer structure for communication, and carers know where to go for advice or just a listening ear. We’re starting to create something that feels like a real network, rather than a group of people working separately.

It also helped me personally to realise that the things I was doing — listening, mentoring, organising — actually mattered. Sometimes as carers we underestimate our own skills, but being part of the Pioneers made me see that what I was doing had real value.

Q: What kinds of things do you do as a Pioneer?

A big part of it is peer support. Sometimes that's practical — helping a carer who's struggling to manage behaviour, or talking through a tricky meeting. Other times it's emotional support — just being someone who understands.

I also work closely with the fostering team. We run local meet-ups, share updates, and encourage people to attend training. I've been involved in setting up masterclasses for carers, which have gone down really well. They give carers new tools and confidence to manage complex situations.

Because of the geography, we're working towards having more Pioneers spread across North, Mid, and South in our area. My hope is that no carer ever feels too far away from support. The goal is to build a sustainable model where carers support each other locally but are still part of a bigger network.

Q: How has the Pioneer role changed things for foster carers in your area?

It's made a big difference. Before, many carers felt quite isolated. You'd go weeks or months without seeing anyone else who really understood what you were going through. Now, there's much more communication — both formal and informal.

It's also given carers more confidence to speak up. We've had situations where someone felt unsure about something or was struggling with a placement, and now they'll reach out and ask for help before things reach breaking point. That's such a positive change.

The fostering team has also really embraced the Pioneers. They see us as partners now, not just as carers working separately. That's helped build mutual respect and trust, and it means we're all working towards the same goal — the best outcomes for the children.

Q: What's been one of your most meaningful experiences as a Pioneer?

I think it's the small, everyday wins that mean the most. I remember one carer who was on the verge of giving up. She'd had a tough placement and just felt like she wasn't cut out for it anymore. We talked for a long time — about what she was finding hardest, what she'd achieved, and what support might help.

After that conversation, she decided to stick with it. Months later, she told me things had turned around, and she was glad she hadn't walked away. That really touched me, because I've been there too — those moments when you wonder if you can keep going. It reminded me why this role matters so much.

Another lovely moment was seeing a group of carers who barely knew each other become close friends through the meet-ups. They now support each other outside the formal group — babysitting, checking in, swapping tips. That sense of community is exactly what we're trying to build.

Q: What do you think makes a good Pioneer?

I think empathy is key. You don't need to have all the answers, but you do need to be able to listen and understand. Sometimes just being there is enough.

Experience helps too — having been through the highs and lows of fostering means you can offer practical advice without judgment. And you need to be approachable. I always say, “If someone feels comfortable picking up the phone to you, that's half the battle.”

A good Pioneer also builds bridges — between carers, social workers, and the wider team. We're all part of the same picture, and the Pioneer role helps to bring those pieces together.

Q: What changes have you seen in yourself through this work?

It's given me more confidence and purpose. I've always believed in the power of community, but now I've seen it in action. I've learned to speak up more and to advocate for both carers and children.

It's also made me more reflective about my own practice — how I handle situations, how I communicate, how I can be part of positive change. I think being a Pioneer keeps you learning all the time.

And honestly, it's just lovely to feel valued. Sometimes in fostering, the focus is all on the children — which is right — but it's nice to know that carers are being recognised and supported too.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been seeing our informal support turned into something structured, recognised, and valued. Before, we were all doing bits of this in our own way; now, it's part of something bigger.

It's given us a framework to share knowledge, support one another, and build lasting connections. I'm proud of how far we've come, and I really believe we're just at the beginning of something that will keep growing.

When foster carers feel supported, children benefit — and that's what it's all about.



MSC Story – Interviewee #22

“We Need to Keep Our Carers.”

Interviewee: Interviewee #22
Interview Date: 28 October 2025
Interviewer: Roger Rowett



Q: How did you become involved in the Pioneers Programme?

I've been fostering for around 17 years now. I started when my own children were still young, and over the years, I've cared for children of all ages — from newborns to teenagers. It's been my life's work, really.

I became involved in the Pioneers Programme after another foster carer told me about it. I've always been one of those people who likes to help others, so it felt like a natural fit. I wanted to use my experience to make things easier for other carers — to support them the way I would have liked to be supported when I started.

It wasn't a big, formal thing at first. It began with just being someone people could call for advice or reassurance, and that grew into being part of something much bigger. Now, the Pioneers are recognised, and that makes a real difference.

Q: What does being a Pioneer mean to you personally?

For me, it's about being there for other carers. Sometimes that means a proper chat over coffee, and other times it's just being the person at the end of the phone when someone's having a wobble. We've all been there — nights where you're questioning if you're doing it right or feeling like you're the only one dealing with certain behaviours.

It's also about sharing knowledge. Between us, we've got so many years of experience — things we've learned the hard way. Being a Pioneer means passing that on so other carers don't feel so alone or overwhelmed.

It's made me more aware of how much carers need to be valued and supported. If we lose carers, it's not just a number; it's a family, a safe home, a relationship that's been built. We can't afford to lose good carers, and that's something I'm passionate about.

Q: How do you support other foster carers in your area?

A lot of it is about being approachable and available. We've got a network of carers who meet regularly, and we use group chats to stay connected. Someone might post, “Has

anyone dealt with this before?” or “What did you do when...?” and straight away, there’s a response. That kind of support is invaluable.

I also do one-to-one support if someone is struggling. I remember one carer who was new and really doubting herself. She’d had a difficult review meeting and felt like she wasn’t being listened to. We met up, talked through what had happened, and I helped her prepare what she wanted to say at the next meeting. She came out feeling much more confident. Sometimes it’s just about helping people find their voice.

I’ve also helped with practical things like respite and training — linking carers up with others who can cover or support. It’s the small gestures that make the biggest difference. When people know someone’s got their back, they’re more likely to stay in fostering.

Q: What have you noticed changing through the Pioneers?

It’s brought more structure and visibility to what we do. Before, it was all quite informal — carers helping carers quietly in the background. Now, people know who the Pioneers are and what we’re here for.

I think it’s helped to bridge that gap between foster carers and the fostering team. We’ve become that link — the glue, really — between carers and professionals. If a carer’s struggling to communicate something or feels unheard, we can step in and help make sure they’re listened to.

There’s also been a real shift in how foster carers are seen. We’re not just “babysitters” or “placements”; we’re professionals, part of the child’s team. The Pioneers have helped bring that respect into the conversation, and that’s empowering.

Q: What about recruitment — is that something you’ve been involved in?

Yes, definitely. I’ve been out with the recruitment team, putting up banners, attending events, and just chatting to people who are thinking about fostering. I think it helps when they can talk to someone who’s actually doing it — we can give honest answers about what it’s really like.

A lot of people have this idea of fostering that’s very different from reality. When we talk openly about both the challenges and the rewards, it helps them make an informed choice. I’ve met people at events who’ve gone on to start the process, which feels brilliant.

We’ve also talked about how to retain carers — because it’s not just about bringing new people in. It’s about keeping the ones we’ve got. That’s something I care about deeply. If someone’s struggling, we can help before it gets to the point where they think about giving up.

Q: What's been one of your most memorable experiences as a Pioneer?

One that sticks with me was supporting a carer who was close to giving up. She'd had a difficult placement — lots of challenging behaviour — and she just felt like she couldn't do it anymore. I went round for a cup of tea, and we talked for hours.

I didn't give her any magic answers — just listened, reassured her that what she was feeling was normal, and reminded her of all the positives she'd achieved with the child. She messaged me a few weeks later to say things had improved, and that she was glad she hadn't given up.

That's what being a Pioneer is about — being that bit of encouragement that keeps someone going when they're at their lowest. Sometimes that one conversation can make all the difference.

Q: What challenges are you seeing in fostering at the moment?

There's definitely been more pressure on carers recently. Children are coming into care with increasingly complex needs, and the system is stretched. That can take a toll on carers' wellbeing.

We also need to keep communication strong. Sometimes information doesn't flow as it should between social workers and carers, and that can cause unnecessary stress. Having the Pioneers involved has helped improve that — we can pick up on things quickly and help find solutions.

Another challenge is making sure new carers feel properly supported in those early months. That's often when they need someone the most, and that's where we come in.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been realising the power of peer support. Being a Pioneer isn't about being an expert — it's about being real, being available, and showing others that they're not alone.

Fostering can be tough, but it's also incredibly rewarding. The Pioneers have helped us build a stronger community, where carers look out for each other and share what they've learned. If we can keep more carers by supporting and valuing them, that's a win for everyone — especially the children who need stability most.



MSC Story – Interviewee #23

“We Need a Bit More Structure”

Interviewee: Interviewee #23
Interview Date: 29 October 2025
Interviewer: Roger Rowett

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

I've been fostering for 25 years now — hard to believe it's been that long. It all started when our own children were growing up and leaving home. My husband had to give up work because of his health, and we were at that stage of life where we thought, *what next?*

I saw an advert about fostering and thought, *we could do that*. We made enquiries, but we didn't hear anything for almost two years. I assumed they didn't need any more carers. Then, out of the blue, we got a phone call asking if we were still interested.

We were! And that's how it began. Our first placement was two little girls — three and five years old — sisters. It was really hard going. They told us, “You couldn't start with anyone better,” but it was incredibly tough. We learned a lot from that experience — mainly that we needed to ask more questions!

Back then, we hadn't even been to panel yet, so when that came around, I was ready to say, “No, I can't do this.” But one of the assessors persuaded us to keep going, to give it another try — and here we are, 25 years later, having cared for more than 80 children.

We've had some long-term placements too — one boy who's been with us since he was five weeks old. He turns 18 this December. We've also got a two-year-old with us at the moment, who'll be leaving soon for adoption. It never gets easier saying goodbye. You'd think after all these years it might, but it doesn't.

Q: How did you become involved with the Pioneers Programme?

We've been part of the Pioneers for about 18 months now. It was actually my daughter-in-law who encouraged me to do it — she works for social services and said, “You're already doing this, you might as well make it official!”

She was right — I'd always been supporting other carers informally. So I signed up, thinking it wouldn't be much extra, and it's been good, although if I'm honest, it's been a bit slow to get off the ground.

There's a small core group of us who attend the training and meetings, but quite a few others don't engage much, we really need a revamp — to ask, “Who actually wants to do this properly?”

It's frustrating at times because there's so much potential, but without structure or leadership from the fostering team, things stall. We started the year with a plan — meetings, activities, ideas — but nothing really came of it. I think we need someone from the team to take a lead and help pull it all together.

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

My main focus has been mentoring new carers. With 25 years of experience, there's a lot I can share — about placements, behaviour, the system — and I really believe experienced carers have a duty to pass that on.

I've supported a few new carers before they even went to panel. We've met up, chatted about what to expect, and I've given them my contact details so they can get in touch if they're worried or unsure. Some have phoned or texted with questions — and I love that. It's what peer support is all about.

We've also got a monthly local carers' group — it's very informal, we meet in a café over coffee or breakfast. It's mainly foster carers, but sometimes kinship carers join us too. We share stories, ideas, frustrations — it's a safe space where everyone understands.

What's frustrating, though, is that new carers aren't being told about us. We've asked the department to pass on our details so people know they can join the group, but that doesn't seem to be happening. It's such a missed opportunity — this group could be a real source of support if more people knew it existed.

Q: Have you been involved in any other Pioneer activities?

Yes — we've helped out with recruitment events. Sometimes we go with the fostering team to local venues — supermarkets, colleges, even the hospital — to talk to people about fostering. It's not always easy to get engagement because people are busy, but we're trying new ideas like hosting evening sessions in hotels or community venues.

I've also been thinking about schools — I really believe we're missing a trick there. My long-term foster son had a rough time in his first secondary school because of stigma. He was treated differently, targeted even, just for being a looked-after child.

We ended up moving him, and at the new school he thrived — the teachers had a completely different attitude. That made me realise how important it is for teachers to understand fostering. I raised it with the Board of Governors, suggesting new teachers should get basic training on how to support looked-after children.

There's so much more that could be done in schools — not just to help children in care, but also to raise awareness and maybe even recruit future foster carers. I once sat at a parents' evening and thought, "There are hundreds of potential carers in this room — and we've not even said a word about it."

Q: What has changed for you since becoming a Pioneer?

For me personally, it's made me think more strategically — about what needs to change and how we can make things better. It's also made me realise how much carers have to offer if they're given the right platform.

I've seen the difference that mentoring can make. One couple I supported were nervous about starting — the husband, especially, was unsure if he could handle it. We talked a lot, and he even spent time chatting with my husband about it. A few weeks later, we bumped into them in a supermarket — he was out with their new placement, managing brilliantly. He said, "You were right — it's different once you start."

That meant a lot. Without that bit of reassurance early on, he might have walked away. So even though progress has been slow overall, those small, individual wins really matter.

Q: What do you think needs to happen next?

I think the Pioneers need more structure and leadership. There are around 14 of us in the group, but only four who are actively involved. It needs a relaunch — someone to say, "If you want to be a Pioneer, that means committing to the role."

We also need better communication and coordination from the local authority. For example, if we knew who was going to panel, we could reach out early and offer support. That kind of simple connection could make a huge difference to recruitment and retention.

I'd like to see the mentoring programme properly embedded — part of the process, not just something we do off our own backs. We've got the experience; we just need the structure to share it properly.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been realising that even after 25 years, I'm still learning and still have something to give. The Pioneer role has reminded me that small acts of support — a chat, a text, a bit of reassurance — can make all the difference to someone starting out.

It's also shown me the gaps that still need closing — communication, structure, leadership — but I'm hopeful. If we can harness the potential of the Pioneers properly, we can create a stronger, more connected fostering community.

Fostering has changed my life, and through the Pioneers, I hope to help change others' lives too.



MSC Story – Interviewee #24

“Walking the Journey Together”

Interviewee: Interviewee #24
Interview Date: 29 October 2025
Interviewer: Roger Rowett



Q: How did you begin fostering and what has your journey been like?

We became foster carers 22 years ago, starting with short-term placements. Our very first placement was a little boy who went back to his grandparents, which was lovely and positive. After that, we did a lot of respite care — mostly for babies — and even though we weren't officially registered for babies, I remember one little one who was born withdrawing from drugs. She came to us at eight days old, and six weeks later, she was meant to go to family. That never happened, and we ended up adopting her when she was about 20 months old.

From then on, we carried on mainly doing respite care, because we knew from experience that carers often need a break — and when that happens, it's better for the children to stay local, keep their school, and stay close to friends. We decided to offer respite only for local children so they could remain within their community.

Over the years, we've cared for lots of children in this way. One young man started coming to us for respite when he was about eight. Later, when his placement ended, he just rang and said he didn't know where to go. I told him, “Just come home.” He's now 27 and still comes home to us. He's very much part of our family.

Because we adopted our daughter, I also learned how little post-adoption support there was back then. I sought out my own help — I found a psychotherapist in London who specialised in fostered and adopted children, trained by Dan Hughes in therapeutic parenting. It changed everything for me. It was, as I always say, *a total game changer*.

Through her, I learned so much about trauma, attachment, and recovery — and when lockdown came, we moved our sessions to Zoom, which we still do monthly. She's still my go-to when I need to talk things through about our current respite child, who's had a lot of sexual trauma. That learning has transformed my fostering journey.

And honestly, I can't help but share it. It's just who I am — I love to pass on what I've learned, what works, what doesn't. I share resources, talk about trauma-informed approaches, and encourage others to try new ways of working with children. That's probably how I naturally became a Pioneer.

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

It's actually a funny story — I was on the verge of stepping away from fostering. We were changing social workers, and I wasn't sure the new one would understand us. I told my husband, "Maybe it's time to stop."

I emailed to say we were thinking about finishing, and then the head of the fostering team phoned and said, "I need to come and see you." He told me he wasn't there to change my mind — but he was! He said, "I still want you, even if you don't take any new placements. I want you as a Pioneer."

So that's how it started. I didn't actually take a break — I was back fostering soon after — but it was the beginning of a new chapter.

Since then, I've mentored and supported other carers, especially new ones. I worked with a couple in Blaenau Ffestiniog who were just starting out, helping them through those early days. When one of them became ill, I even went over and looked after their foster children so she could go to hospital. That's what being a Pioneer means to me — it's walking alongside people, being practical and supportive.

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

A bit of everything, really. I've done mentoring, training, recruitment, and promotion. I've been involved in recruitment courses, speaking at events, doing videos and interviews for the fostering service, and helping at Fostering Fortnight. I've also spoken in churches about the responsibility of the community to foster and adopt — that's a big passion of mine.

I've been interviewed on radio, worked with Maethu Cymru and the National Fostering Network, and even co-presented at conferences with my foster son. Sharing our story together has been one of the highlights of my journey — it's real, it's lived experience, and it gives people hope.

Locally, I'm part of a close-knit network of foster carers. We support each other practically and emotionally. If someone's struggling, we'll step in — have their foster child for tea, give them a night off, or just listen. We've built a small but powerful community where support happens naturally.

Q: What has changed for you through being part of the Pioneers?

The biggest change has been recognition — for us as carers and for the value of peer support. We're now seen as people social workers can refer new carers to, people who can be trusted to guide, listen, and encourage.

The training through the Pioneers has also been brilliant — some of the best I've ever had. It challenges me to think differently and reflect on my practice. I've even gone on to take extra courses about language and communication after one of the Pioneer conferences. It really made me think about how we speak about children — avoiding labels, being conscious of our words. That's changed how I talk to children, how I write reports, and even how I speak at meetings.

The Pioneer network has also made me feel part of something bigger — a movement of carers learning from each other, challenging the system, and creating better outcomes for children. It's given me energy and renewed my sense of purpose.

Q: What do you see as your biggest impact?

I think my biggest impact has been supporting other carers to keep going — stopping placements from breaking down by being there before things reach crisis. Just being someone who listens, who says, “It’s okay to feel like this,” makes such a difference.

Sometimes the support is emotional — listening, validating, reminding carers they’re doing a good job. Sometimes it’s practical — offering to have a child for a meal or an overnight stay to give someone a break. Those little things can make the difference between a carer staying or walking away.

And then there’s the wider impact — the promotional work, the speaking, the videos, the national conferences. I don’t always know what difference it makes, but I believe that sharing lived experience matters. It might encourage someone, somewhere, to take that first step into fostering — or to keep going when things get tough.

Q: What does the Pioneer role mean to you personally?

It means being part of something hopeful. It’s about *walking the journey together* — carers supporting carers, building trust, and sharing what works.

It’s also about challenging and inspiring others — showing that even after 22 years, I’m still learning, still growing, and still passionate about making things better.

We don’t always see the results, but we plant the seeds. And every now and again, someone gets in touch, or you see a child flourish, or a placement succeed, and you think, *Yes, that’s why we do this.*

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been feeling recognised and connected — part of a professional network that values experience, learning, and compassion.

Through the Pioneers, I’ve learned that support can be simple but powerful: a conversation, a cup of tea, a bit of encouragement, or a night off. These are the things that keep carers going, that keep families together, and that give children stability.

For me, that’s what being a Pioneer is all about — walking the journey together, sharing hope, and making fostering a community effort, not a solo one.



MSC Story – Interviewee #25

“Building a Community That Cares”

Interviewee: Interviewee #25
Interview Date: 22 October 2025
Interviewer: Roger Rowett

Q: How did you become a foster carer?

I started as a kinship foster carer about nine years ago, and then later became a general foster carer. It all began when I was 28. My husband and I had just got married, bought our first home, and thought life was settling down, and then three children were suddenly placed on our doorstep.

We weren't prepared at all. We'd lived in London, didn't really know the children, and suddenly had a 4-year-old, a 6-year-old, and a 10-year-old living with us. The younger two were still in nappies, and the 10-year-old absolutely hated me at first. It was chaos — complete carnage.

I remember having panic attacks in those early days. Thankfully, my work gave me three months' adoption leave, which saved me. We had no money, no idea what we were doing, and no support system. We just had to figure it out as we went.

But somehow, we made it through. And now, years later, it's incredible to look back and see how far they've come; one's studying pharmacy at Cardiff University, another's doing his GCSEs, and the youngest is 13 and hitting those teenage years with all the drama that brings! It hasn't been easy, but seeing them grow and thrive keeps you going, even on the bad days.

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

It was thanks to someone called Dawn Smith, who worked with us through placement support when I was struggling with my youngest niece. She's now the recruitment and retention officer for Foster Wales in Bridgend — she's amazing, honestly, she bullied me into it!

She said, “You'd be perfect for this role,” because of my experience and because I'm not afraid to speak up or get things done. At the time, there was no one stepping forward as a kinship Pioneer, and she persuaded me to give it a go. I thought, *Well, if I'm rubbish at it, I'll just stop, but if I'm half decent, I'll keep going.*

Two years later, I'm still here — and it's one of the best things I've done.

Q: What kinds of things have you been doing as a Pioneer?

I'm very proactive . I can't sit still when I see something that needs fixing. One of the first things I did was set up kinship coffee mornings, and they've grown massively. I also run a WhatsApp group and post regularly on our kinship foster carers' Facebook page to keep people updated.

A big part of my role is building relationships and trust. I'm not one of those people who rings everyone on a list once a month asking, "Are you okay?" That doesn't work. You have to earn people's trust so that when things get tough, they know they can come to you.

When carers contact me, it's often because they're at breaking point. I listen, help them put things in perspective, and then link in with social services or whoever else can help. I stay in touch until they're back on their feet.

I've also helped to set up a charity (Fostering Together Bridgend) to make sure there's always funding for events and activities for children in care. We organise things like Halloween parties, Christmas events, and social days for carers and families. Local companies donate gifts, and my husband even ran the Cardiff Half Marathon with our eldest niece to raise money. It's all about creating that sense of community, where everyone feels part of something positive.

Q: What was fostering like before the Pioneers Programme?

When I first started, there was a lot of fear among kinship carers. People were scared to ask for help because they thought it might mean the children would be taken away. There was support available, but it didn't feel safe to ask for it.

We also had liaison carers before the Pioneers, but honestly, it didn't work for me. I found the calls intrusive, he'd ring at bedtime or just to vent themselves, not to listen. It didn't feel supportive.

So when I took on the Pioneer role, I promised myself I'd do it differently. I wouldn't bombard people, I'd build relationships. People need to feel they can talk honestly without fear of judgment. That's what trust looks like.

Q: What changes have you noticed since becoming a Pioneer?

There's a much stronger sense of community now. People know each other, they come to events, they reach out for help sooner, and there's a genuine network of support.

When we started the charity, that brought people together even more. We now have carers, social workers, fostering staff, and even reunification workers all attending the same events. It's not about "us and them" anymore: it's everyone pulling in the same direction.

And that makes a difference. When carers know who to contact, when they feel confident to ask for help, they're less likely to hit crisis point. They're more likely to stay in fostering.

I've also seen change in myself. Before this, I wouldn't have described myself as a leader, but now I can see I've built something real. I've helped shape a community that supports itself.

Q: Can you share an example of when you've supported another carer?

There are a few that come to mind. One carer was really reluctant to ask for help at first, she wouldn't come to coffee mornings or phone anyone. Now she calls me regularly. Sometimes it's just to vent, but other times we problem-solve together.

Another carer is looking after two grandchildren with complex needs, one of whom is disabled. She's been stuck in a housing situation where adaptations weren't being made quickly enough. Social services had done everything they could, made a plan to help get things moving and offered support and a shoulder to cry on? That's that's what being a Pioneer is.

Q: What has been the most significant change for you?

For me, it's definitely the charity and the sense of community that's grown around it. When funding was cut, we could have just accepted it - but I wasn't having that. I pushed to start a charity so we could protect the children's experiences, make sure the Christmas parties went ahead, and keep those joyful moments alive.

It's not just about the events. It's about belonging. The more we come together — carers, children, professionals, the more connected and confident everyone feels. And that means people ask for help sooner and stay in fostering longer.

The charity might have started because of necessity, but it's become the heart of what we do. It's a symbol of what can happen when carers take the lead and work together.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been seeing fostering become a community effort, not an isolated one. The Pioneers have given carers the confidence to connect, share, and ask for help, without fear.

Through the charity, the coffee mornings, and the everyday conversations, I've seen carers lift each other up, social workers engage more openly, and families start to feel part of something bigger.

It's about creating a community that cares: one where everyone belongs, everyone contributes, and no one feels alone.



MSC Story – Interviewee #26

“One Team Around the Child”

Interviewee: Interviewee #26

Interview Date: 3 November 2025

Interviewer: Donna Thomas

Q: Can you tell me a little about your fostering journey and how it all began?

We started fostering about 13 years ago. At the time, both of us were in very demanding corporate jobs (I was a bank manager) and we'd reached a point where life just felt like we were existing rather than really living.

I've got two grown-up children of my own, and one day we were sitting around the table talking about childhood memories, and it struck me: there are so many children out there who never get that kind of childhood. I remember saying, *“We should be doing something more with this.”*

That was really the turning point. We wanted life to feel more meaningful, so one of us had to get off the corporate roundabout. Fostering just seemed to fit, it used the same skills I had from managing people, setting goals, supporting growth, and helping others to achieve.

So, we started fostering, and from the very beginning, it was an absolute eye-opener; learning about trauma, behaviour, and the emotional side of it all. We've always specialised in emergency placements, and we've never once had a planned placement in 13 years. We actually love that side of it; welcoming children at short notice, helping them feel at ease, and being that safe place when everything else feels uncertain.

Some children stay for five minutes, others for three years. We've always believed you don't really know if a placement works until you live with each other for a bit. Every child is different, some love being in rural North Wales, others find it hard to adjust. It's about working that out together.

And last year, we adopted a baby boy we'd cared for from just 12 hours old. We'd always said, “One day there'll be one we can't let go,” and he was the one. He's changed our family dynamic completely (we've now adjusted our fostering range to ages 5–18 to fit around him). At the moment, we also have two teenagers with us, both completely different, but amazing in their own ways.

Q: How did you become involved with the Pioneers Programme?

When we moved from Cheshire to Denbighshire, it was partly because we were right on the county border, and travelling for school runs was getting too difficult. When we transferred, someone mentioned the Pioneers Programme, saying I'd be great for it because of my experience and background in training.

I'd been really interested in Mockingbird in my previous authority, but it hadn't yet been introduced. So when I heard about the Pioneers, I jumped at it. I thought, *"This is something I can get my teeth into."*

The whole idea of Foster Wales also appealed to me, being able to foster for Wales as a whole, not just a single county. I'd always thought it was a shame when you've got empty bedrooms in one area while children elsewhere are waiting for homes. A national, unified approach makes much more sense, and I wanted to be part of that bigger vision.

I've also got a background in training and development, and I love it, so when they mentioned mentoring, supporting carers, and delivering training, I knew it was the right fit. I genuinely believe foster carers have stories and experience that can change things, but they often don't realise the power of their own voice. Encouraging others to get involved is really important to me.

Q: What do you hope to achieve in your role as a Pioneer?

Right now, I think communication is the biggest thing we need to get right. Across the country, you hear the same message: foster carers don't always feel valued. They sometimes feel like private babysitters, or that their voices don't matter.

For me, communication and partnership are key. When I first started fostering, we were told very clearly that part of our role is to challenge decisions; not to be difficult, but to advocate for the child. That's something I still feel very strongly about. If something's not working, we should be able to come together (carers, social workers, professionals) and find a better way forward.

I'd love to see Pioneers fill that gap between training and placement. When new carers finish training, there's this lull. They're excited, ready, waiting, - but no child has arrived yet. That's a wasted opportunity. I think Pioneers could step in there, connecting new carers with others, sharing experiences, and helping them prepare. That connection could make all the difference.

I also think there's a brilliant opportunity for social work students to spend time with foster carers during their placements. Why not spend a few days living the reality of it? It would give them such valuable insight, the "nuts and bolts" of what caring really looks like.

Q: What are your priorities as a new Pioneer?

At the moment, I'm the only Pioneer in our LA, so there's a lot of potential to build from scratch. I've already started connecting with Pioneers in other authorities, and it's been really inspiring hearing about what they're doing (from coffee mornings to training sessions to community events).

What stands out to me is that they're all focusing on what they're passionate about. That's what makes it work. For me, that passion is around life story work and adoption.

Having gone through the adoption process myself, I've realised how inconsistent life story work can be. I feel strongly that foster carers have such valuable knowledge about the child's early days and experiences (they should be part of that process, not left out of it).

I've also seen how traumatic life story work can be if it's not handled sensitively. Our adopted son has a beautifully written life story book, but I'm still too nervous to show it to him because of how raw it is. So for me, improving how that work is done — and how it's delivered — feels like a really important goal.

I'm also passionate about ensuring that we really are “one team around the child.” Everyone — the foster carer, social worker, IRO, therapist — should have an equal voice. It's about professional respect, shared learning, and always keeping the child at the centre.

Q: What has been your biggest learning or change through the Pioneers so far?

It's early days, but for me, it's about rediscovering that sense of possibility — the feeling that we can shape something new. After so many years fostering, it's easy to just keep your head down and get on with the day-to-day. But the Pioneers remind me that carers can influence things: we can lead change, not just react to it.

I've loved meeting others who feel the same. Everyone I've spoken to has such passion and drive, they're doing it because they care deeply, not because they have to. That's really motivating.

The most significant change for me is realising that I still have so much to give, and that my experience can help others. The Pioneer network has reignited that spark and reminded me that, even after all these years, we can still keep improving, for the carers, for the children, and for the system as a whole.

Final Reflection

For me, the most significant change is seeing the potential of foster carers as equals — as part of a professional network working together for children's wellbeing.

It's about communication, collaboration, and compassion — making sure every voice is heard, every idea is valued, and every child benefits.

I'm passionate about making the Pioneers visible— not just coffee mornings, but real discussion, training, and change. Because when we truly work as one team around the child, that's when we get it right.



MSC Story – Interviewee #27

“Just Someone to Talk To”

Interviewee: Interviewee #27

Interview Date: 5 November 2025

Interviewer: Donna Thomas

Q: Can you tell me a little about your fostering journey and how you became involved with the Pioneers?

I've been fostering for just over five years now. I'm a kinship foster carer, not a general one. When I first started, I was a single mum of three, and then I took on my four nieces — so suddenly I became a single mum of seven.

Becoming a Pioneer is quite new for me. I've only been doing it for about six months. It all happened by accident really — I was at a coffee morning, and one of the social workers said they were setting up a Pioneer group. We had someone from The Fostering Network come and give a talk about it. Before I knew it, the social worker turned around and said, “*Emma will do it!*” and that was that. I didn't really know what it involved at the time, but I said yes.

Even though I sort of got volunteered, I'm glad I did. I'm looking forward to getting more hands-on and doing more once things get going properly.

Q: What has been happening so far in your role as a Pioneer?

There's not been a lot yet, if I'm honest. I've had two training sessions, but because there's so much training in fostering anyway, it's hard to keep track of which is which.

I've volunteered to help with new carers who are just starting the process — to be there if they need someone to talk to. Sometimes it just helps to speak to another carer who understands what you're going through.

There are four of us who've been asked to be Pioneers in Denbighshire, but we're all doing slightly different things. Some are focusing on recruitment, while I'm more interested in supporting people at the start of their journey — when they're still finding their feet.

Q: How do you think the Pioneers could help foster carers in the future?

Because I'm a kinship carer, I had a very different start to fostering. I began during COVID, and I had my nieces placed with me before I'd even finished the assessment process. I didn't realise how intrusive it would all feel at first — not just for me, but for my own children too.

Looking back, I think it would have helped so much to have someone who'd been through it — someone to say, *"This is going to be really hard at times, but you'll get through it."* It wouldn't have put me off, but it would have prepared me better.

It can be tough because there's so much you can't talk about. Everything is confidential, so you can't share details with your family or friends. Even my mum and my eldest daughter — I couldn't really talk to them about what was happening. Sometimes you just need someone who understands, who can say, *"Yeah, I've been there too."* That's what I'd like the Pioneers to be — someone to talk to when it's doing your head in.

Q: What would you like to see happen next with the Pioneers Programme?

I'd like to see more contact and more structure, really. I haven't heard much since before the summer holidays, so I'm not sure what's happening next. I've spoken to my social worker and told her that I want to do more to help, whether that's through volunteering or helping to organise things for the children.

My own children are kinship children, and I think that's an area that needs more focus. There are support groups for foster children generally, but not for kinship children. It's something I've noticed with my own family — my kids have friends at school, but their friends don't really understand what it's like to be in their situation.

I don't want my children to feel different, but I do want them to have a space where they can talk openly with other children who've gone through similar things. It would help them feel understood. I'd love to see something like that developed through the Pioneers — a support group for kinship children, not just carers.

Q: What are your hopes moving forward?

I'm still finding my way as a Pioneer, but I really want to be able to make a difference for people who are just starting out — especially for kinship carers who might not have planned to foster but find themselves doing it out of love for family.

For me, the most important thing is having someone to talk to — someone who understands the reality of it. That kind of support can make a big difference when you're feeling isolated or overwhelmed.

If I can be that person for someone else — if I can make them feel a bit less alone — then that's what being a Pioneer is about for me.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been becoming part of something that could make things easier for others in the future. Even though the Pioneer role is still new and not fully established in our area, I can already see how valuable it could be — giving carers and kinship families someone to talk to who really understands.

It's not about big projects or events — sometimes it's just about being there for each other. That's what I hope to bring to the role as it develops.



MSC Story – Interviewee #28

“Happy Carers Are Productive Carers”

Interviewee: Interviewee #28

Interview Date: 18 November 2025

Interviewer: Kat Applewhite

Q: Can you tell me about how you became involved with the Pioneers?

I started as a Pioneer with another carer, we did it together. We were already running a support group, and we thought it made sense to formalise it and become points of contact for new and existing carers.

The idea was simple really: to create a sense of community, a better feeling of connection and support, so people didn't feel alone. Carers often just need to offload, share successes or stresses, and they don't always want to ring a social worker for that. We wanted to be those people; someone to support, to celebrate, and to listen.

Since COVID, everything's gone more online. While that's convenient, it's also become quite impersonal. You don't get the same connection through a screen as you do face-to-face. That's why we started as Pioneers, to rebuild those links and make sure people know they're not on their own when that first placement walks through the door.

Q: What sort of things have you been doing in your Pioneer role?

We're still in our infancy as a group, but we've achieved quite a bit. We've been involved in Skills to Foster training, giving new carers our phone numbers so they've got someone real they can talk to. When carers are approved, I often go into the office on the day to meet them, introduce myself, and invite them into our WhatsApp group.

Sometimes it's just a text: “*Are you free?*” I've had new carers call when they're overwhelmed, and just talking things through makes all the difference. One new carer told me she would have stopped fostering if it hadn't been for me being there to listen. That's when you realise that even small gestures really matter.

That little group we have now formed is growing and it helps people share experiences and arrange meet-ups. We are also nurturing a buddy system. But you can't just “allocate” people buddies; people connect naturally. So we try to create the opportunity for those small pockets of friendship to develop, where people can find their own support networks.

We've also organised summer events and informal get-togethers (coffee mornings, small trips out) just ways to help people meet naturally and feel part of something.

Q: What challenges have you faced as a Pioneer?

Honestly, the biggest challenge is communication and access. Because of GDPR and how the system is set up, we can't contact all carers directly, only those who've chosen to opt in. It's frustrating, because we know there are carers out there who'd really benefit from a bit of friendship or support, but they don't even know we exist.

We're not employees, so we don't have council email addresses, and that makes it feel like you're working with one hand tied behind your back. You want to help everyone, but you can't reach them all.

We do have fortnightly meetings with the marketing and recruitment officer, which helps. The problem is that decisions take forever to move up the chain. People at the ground level are really enthusiastic, but once it goes higher, things get lost in hierarchy. It's not that senior managers don't care, but the Pioneers just aren't seen as a priority yet.

Sometimes it feels like we're firefighting without the tools. I've got so many ideas — like more group events or support spaces — but without access or even a small budget, we can't always make them happen.

Q: Can you share an example of where being a Pioneer has really made a difference?

One story that really sticks with me is about a new carer; a single lady with her first placement, a teenager who was really struggling. She was managing a lot on her own and would message me at all hours, just to talk. I always tell people, *"You can contact me anytime."*

One night she was walking around B&Q at seven o'clock, completely overwhelmed, and she called me. We talked it through, and afterwards she said that call made all the difference she didn't feel so alone. Later, she joined our group and found another carer she clicked with. That connection grew naturally, and now they support each other.

Moments like that make everything worthwhile. It's not about fixing problems. It's about listening, validating, and helping people see that how they feel is normal.

Q: You mentioned you've also suggested some new ways of working?

Yes. I suggested setting up a pool of carers who could help when babies were left in hospital, so instead of staff ringing around in a panic, there'd be a small group ready to step in. We trialled it recently and within an hour we'd covered a whole weekend.

It worked brilliantly, and I think it showed how we can work smarter, not harder. It also created fairness as everyone in the pool had volunteered, so no one could say *"Oh, they always get called first."* That's what community is about; fairness, support connection, and mutual respect.

I'd love to see that extended: maybe to cover carers who need a break, like single carers looking after teenagers not in school. Just a few hours of support can make the difference between carrying on and giving up.

Q: What keeps you motivated in this work?

I've always believed that happy carers are productive carers. It's like in any workplace, when people feel valued, they go the extra mile. That doesn't mean money; it's about feeling seen and appreciated.

When I worked in the corporate world, I used to say thank you to my team at the end of every day. No one ever left without hearing it. I think fostering should be the same. Sometimes, you need the biggest thank you on the hardest days.

What motivates me now is the community. Seeing carers lift each other up, share advice, and find the confidence to carry on. Everyone brings something, whether you've fostered six months or sixteen years, you've got skills and experience that matter.

Q: And finally, what's been the most significant change for you as a Pioneer?

The biggest change for me is seeing how powerful community can be, even in small ways. I've realised that fostering is a team effort, and that we, as carers, are stronger together.

It's not always easy. There are days when I feel like a "whack-a-mole" that when you advocate for yourself or others with some managers, it can be met with resistance or frustration. I raise something, it gets pushed back down. But I keep going, because I know what we're doing matters and it isn't all managers.

I'd love to see the Pioneer role given more recognition and support from higher up because the difference it makes is real. We've stopped carers from leaving helped children and young people to get the best care, built friendships, and brought back some morale after a hard few years.

For me, it's simple: if carers feel valued and connected, they stay. That's what Pioneers are here for, to hold that community together.

Final Reflection

The most significant change for me has been understanding the *impact of connection*. When people feel supported, when they have someone to talk to who "gets it," everything feels more manageable.

We might not have the resources or the access we need yet, but we've built something that matters, a community that listens, shares, and looks after its own and I hope we can continue to build on this

Happy carers are productive carers and when we feel valued, the whole fostering system works better for everyone.