

Fostering Pioneers Most Significant Change Evaluation



Most Significant Change Evaluation

“It made me feel part of something bigger.”

“We’ve built a small but powerful community.”



The Pioneer role was created to strengthen support for foster carers by building stronger peer networks and encouraging carers to share their experience with one another.

Pioneers take on an additional responsibilities alongside their fostering ones. They support other carers, help create connections between carers, and contribute their experience to conversations about improving fostering services.

Funded by Welsh Government, the aim of the Pioneers is not only to support foster carers themselves, but ultimately to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and young people in foster care. When carers feel confident, supported, and connected, they are better able to provide stable, nurturing homes.

This evaluation explored the difference the Pioneers are making by collecting and reviewing stories from Pioneers themselves.

How the Evaluation Was Carried Out



The evaluation was facilitated by Here2There and used a method called Most Significant Change (MSC).

MSC is a storytelling approach to evaluation. Instead of measuring impact through statistics alone, it focuses on collecting real stories about change from the people involved. These stories help show how programmes affect people's lives and experiences.

The evaluation involved several steps.

1. Collecting Stories

Pioneers were invited to share stories about their experiences and the changes they had seen through the programme. These stories explored:

- how carers became a Pioneer
- what they do in their Pioneer role
- the changes they have seen for themselves and others
- the impact they believe they are having

The stories focused particularly on how the Pioneer role has affected foster carers and the wider fostering community.

2. Reviewing and Analysing the Stories

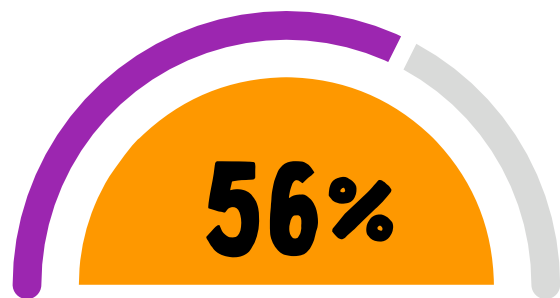
Once the stories were collected, they were reviewed and analysed to identify common themes. This helped the evaluation team understand patterns across the different experiences described by participants.

3. Panel Discussions

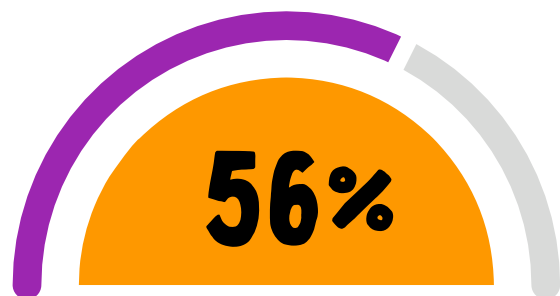
Panels made up of people with different perspectives – including foster carers, professionals, and people with lived experience – then reviewed the stories together. Through discussion, the panels considered which stories best illustrated meaningful change and why. The process involved shortlisting stories and eventually selecting one Most Significant Change story and a Highly Commended story. This panel process is an important part of the MSC method because it encourages reflection and shared learning among participants.

Why is this important?

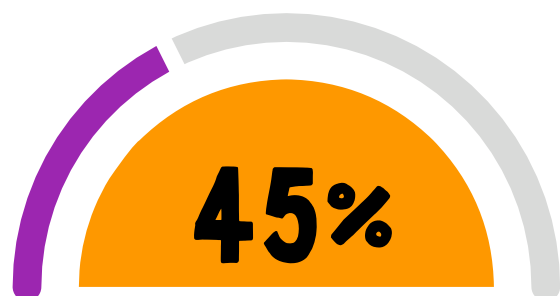
“Being a Foster Carer is rewarding, but it can also be challenging and feel isolating.”



56% of foster carers experience burnout or poor wellbeing



56% have considered resigning from fostering



Only 45% feel able to ask for support without fear of negative consequences

Foster carers often manage complex situations, make difficult decisions, and support children with a wide range of needs..

At the same time, many carers do not always feel able to ask for support, or may feel unsure about where to turn when things become difficult. These pressures can affect confidence, wellbeing, and, in some cases, whether carers continue fostering.

Pioneers were developed in response to this. The role recognises that one of the most valuable forms of support can come from other foster carers — people who have direct lived experience.

By creating opportunities for carers to connect, share experiences, and support one another, the programme aims to reduce isolation, strengthen confidence, and help carers feel more supported in their role.

This evaluation was carried out to understand whether the Pioneers are making a difference, what that difference looks like in practice. and what more can be done to strengthen, support and foster wellbeing.

What the Stories Revealed



Reducing Isolation

Fostering can sometimes be an isolating role. Carers often work from home and may not regularly meet others who share similar experiences. Several stories described how opportunities to connect with other carers have reduced in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Pioneers help to address this by creating more opportunities for carers to connect.

- informal coffee mornings
- peer support conversations
- online groups and messaging networks
- mentoring relationships

These connections help carers feel less alone and more part of a wider fostering community.

Across the stories, several clear themes emerged about the role and impact of the Pioneers.

Stronger Peer Support Between Carers

One of the strongest themes was the importance of carers supporting other carers. Foster carers often face complex situations and emotional challenges. Speaking with someone who understands fostering from personal experience can be extremely valuable.

Participants described how Pioneers provide:

- reassurance during difficult moments
- someone to talk to who understands fostering
- practical advice based on real experience
- informal support through messages, calls or conversations

Carers often said that simply being able to talk to someone who had “been through similar situations” helped them feel more confident.



What the Stories Revealed....



Emotional Reassurance and Confidence

Many stories highlighted how important emotional reassurance is for foster carers. Carers sometimes face difficult situations such as investigations, challenging behaviour from children, or uncertainty about decisions they have made. During these times, having someone to talk to who understands the role can make a significant difference.

Participants often described feeling validated and reassured after speaking with a Pioneer. This support can help carers maintain confidence and continue providing stable care for the children they support.

Practical Advice and Shared Knowledge

Pioneers also play an important role in sharing practical knowledge.

Because they are experienced foster carers themselves, they are often able to offer advice on issues such as:

- navigating fostering processes
- managing challenging behaviours
- accessing support for children
- responding to safeguarding concerns

Carers sometimes feel more comfortable asking informal questions of another carer before approaching professionals. This peer guidance can help carers resolve issues more quickly and confidently.

Early Support for New Carers

Several stories suggested that early peer support is particularly valuable for carers who are new to fostering.

Speaking with an experienced carer early in their journey can help new carers prepare for challenges and feel more confident in their role.

This early support can help prevent problems from escalating and may improve carers' long-term confidence and resilience.

Building a Stronger Fostering Community

Another key theme across the stories was the role of the Pioneers in building a stronger sense of community among foster carers.

Through networks, conversations and shared activities, carers are able to support one another and share experiences.

This sense of community helps carers feel connected to others who understand their role and challenges.

A stronger community can also support foster carer retention, as carers who feel supported and valued may be more likely to continue fostering.

Relationships between carers and their fellow professionals from the team around the child.

The stories also highlighted how relationships between foster carers and fellow professionals from the team around the child can vary. In some cases, carers described positive and collaborative relationships with social workers and local authorities. In others, carers said they sometimes feel cautious about raising concerns in formal settings.

The Pioneer role can help bridge this gap. By offering informal support and helping carers reflect on their experiences, Pioneers can give carers greater confidence to raise issues constructively with professionals.

In some cases, professionals are also recognising the value of carers' lived experience and seeking their advice. This shift towards greater collaboration can help strengthen the fostering system as a whole.

Why This Matters for Children and Young People

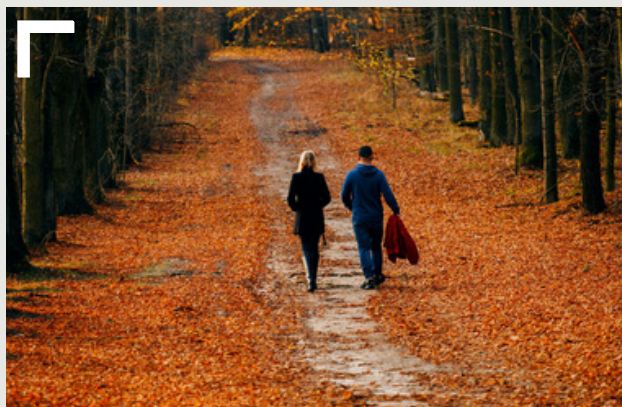
While the Pioneers focus on supporting foster carers, the ultimate goal is to improve outcomes for children and young people who are looked after.

When foster carers feel...

- supported
- confident
- connected to others
- able to access advice and reassurance

...they are better able to provide stable, nurturing homes for the children they care for.

Strong peer support networks help carers manage challenges, remain in fostering for longer, and provide the stability that children and young people need to thrive. By building relationships, strengthening community, and valuing lived experience, the Pioneer programme helps create a more supportive fostering environment and better outcomes for children and young people.



"Walking the Journey Together"

MSC Story No.24- WINNER

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?

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 Foster Care 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 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.



“Walking the Journey Together”

MSC Story No.24- WINNER

**Fostering
Wellbeing
Programme**

**Y Rhaglen
Llesiant
Maethu**

What we heard

Retention

"Sometimes just being there stops someone from walking away."

"Those little things make the difference between staying or leaving."

"I've seen carers keep going because they had that support."

Confidence & Empowerment

"It's given me confidence to keep going."

"You feel recognised — like your experience matters."

"It's changed how I think and how I work."

Connection with Services

"Before this, it felt like 'us and them'."

"Now carers feel more confident to speak up."

"It helps bridge the gap between carers and social workers."

Emotional Support & Reassurance

"After a chat with a Pioneer, I felt supported and validated."

"Sometimes you just need someone to say it's okay to feel like this."

"It's the reassurance that keeps you going."

Community & Belonging

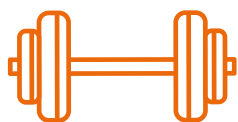
"It made me feel part of something bigger."

"We've built a small but powerful community."

"It's not just fostering anymore — it's a community."



Report Recommendations



Strengthen Peer Support

- Develop and expand peer support networks
- Increase opportunities for carers to connect
- Strengthen early support for new carers



Prioritise Carer Wellbeing

- Recognise peer support as key to wellbeing & retention
- Strengthen support during difficult periods
- Ensure carers feel valued, and are able to ask for help



Strengthen Relationships

- Continue to build trust between carers and professionals
- Support more collaborative, partnership-based working
- Recognise and value carers' lived experience



Invest in the Community

- Create more regular opportunities for carers to come together
- Support local and national networks to grow
- Encourage shared learning across fostering services



Extend Pioneer Impact

- Keep investing in training and development
- Support Pioneers to work confidently within clear boundaries
- Strengthen consistency around the role

Learning from the Evaluation

The stories collected through this evaluation show that the Pioneer programme is making a meaningful difference in the fostering community.

Key areas of impact include:

- stronger peer support networks
- reduced isolation among carers
- greater confidence and reassurance for carers
- practical knowledge sharing
- stronger connections between carers and services
- increased sense of community within fostering



Together, these changes help create a more supportive environment for foster carers. In turn, this supports the ability of carers to provide stable and nurturing homes for the children and young people they care for.

The evaluation also highlights opportunities to further strengthen the programme, such as ensuring clearer understanding of the Pioneer role and supporting consistent approaches across different areas.

Overall, the stories demonstrate how the experience and commitment of foster carers themselves can play a powerful role in strengthening the fostering community and improving outcomes for children and young people.