

**"Being a Pioneer has
been healing"**

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.

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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.

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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.

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