

Fostering Pioneers Most Significant Change Evaluation



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Author: Here2 there.me Limited

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Prepared by Here2there.me Limited

Executive Summary

ThePioneers form part of the wider Fostering Wellbeing programme, a national, relationship-centred approach designed to strengthen connection, learning, and collaboration across the fostering system. This Programme is led by The Fostering Network and funded by Welsh Government.

Grounded in relational practice, social pedagogy, and trauma-informed approaches, the programme recognises that strong, trusting relationships are the foundation for effective support and improved outcomes for children and young people.

The need for this approach is underscored by evidence highlighting significant challenges within fostering. More than half (56%) of foster carers have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing as a result of fostering, and fewer than half (45%) feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing without fear of negative consequences. Alongside this, over half (56%) of foster carers have considered resigning, often linked to burnout, lack of support, and feeling undervalued within the system¹

These findings point to the importance of approaches that strengthen connection, improve access to support, and build a greater sense of value and belonging within the fostering community. This initiative responds directly to these challenges by facilitating a practical, peer-led mechanism to strengthen relationships, build confidence, and embed a more connected and supportive fostering community. It is grounded in the recognition that foster carers possess a wealth of lived experience that can support other carers and contribute to improvements in fostering practice.

This evaluation, facilitated by Here2There, used the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology to explore how the Pioneers are contributing to change within fostering communities. MSC is a participatory evaluation approach that gathers and analyses stories of change from participants. Rather than focusing on predefined indicators, it highlights the experiences that stakeholders themselves consider most meaningful.

Stories of change were collected from participants involved in the programme and reviewed through a structured panel process involving foster carers, professionals and individuals with lived experience. Through a process of discussion and scoring, panels shortlisted stories that best illustrated meaningful change, with a final panel selecting a Most Significant Change story and a Highly Commended story. Across the stories and panel discussions, several key themes emerged. These included the strengthening of peer support networks among foster carers, reductions in isolation, increased confidence and leadership among carers, and improved relationships between foster carers and fostering services. The Pioneer role was widely recognised as helping to build a stronger sense of community and mutual support within fostering.

Overall, the evaluation suggests that the Pioneers are contributing to meaningful cultural and relational changes within fostering services. By valuing foster carers' lived experience and creating opportunities for peer leadership, the programme is helping to strengthen collaboration, support and learning across the fostering community.

These changes support foster carers to provide consistent, confident care, which in turn contributes to better experiences and outcomes for children and young people in foster care.

¹ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/media/lrznjgni/final-sotn-spotlight-on-wales.pdf>

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction to the Pioneers	4
2. Here2There and the Evaluation Approach	5
3. Structure of This Report	6
4. Methodology and Process	6
4.1 Capturing the Stories	6
4.2 Thematic Analysis	7
4.3 Shortlisting Stories for Panel Review	7
4.4 Shortlisting Panels	8
4.5 Panel Process	8
4.6 Final Panel	9
5. Limitations of the Evaluation	10
6. The MSC Story	10
7. Thematic Overview of Pioneer Stories	14
7.2 Key Cross-Story Themes	14
7.3 Key Themes and Implications	17
7.4 Word Cloud	19
7.5 Requests and Recommendations from the Stories	20
8. Most Significant Change Panel Discussions	22
8.1 Key Themes Emerging Across the Panels	22
Strengthening Peer Support and Community Among Foster Carers	22
The Value of Lived Experience and Peer Leadership	23
Recognition and Encouragement for Foster Carers	23
Addressing Isolation in the Fostering Role	24
Building Trust and Partnership Within the Fostering System	24
Supporting Foster Carer Learning and Development	24
8.2 Insights from Young People with Care Experience	25
8.3 Different Perspectives on What Constitutes “Significant Change”	25
8.4 Overall Reflections Across the Panels	25
8.5 Panel Conclusion	26
9. Recommendations and Future Considerations	27
9.1 Strategic Considerations	27
9.2 Operational and Implementation Considerations	28
9.3 Looking Forward	29
9.4 Conclusion	30

1. Introduction to the Pioneers

The Pioneers sits within the wider Fostering Network's, "Fostering Wellbeing" programme, which aims to strengthen the fostering system through connection, shared learning, and relationship-based practice. At its core, the programme recognises that the wellbeing of foster carers, and the quality of relationships across the "team around the child", are critical to achieving stable, nurturing environments for children and young people. This programme is funded by Welsh Government.

This focus reflects growing evidence of challenges within fostering, including high levels of carer burnout, feelings of isolation, and significant rates of carers leaving the role - often linked to a lack of support and connection.

In response to this and led by the Fostering Network, Pioneers were identified to strengthen peer support, professional collaboration, and community within fostering services. It is grounded in the recognition that foster carers possess a wealth of lived experience and that this lived experience is a critical resource in addressing challenges such as isolation, lack of support, and carer attrition by supporting other carers and contribute to improvements in fostering practice.

Within the programme, Pioneer foster carers are experienced carers who take on an additional role alongside their fostering responsibilities. Their purpose is to provide informal peer support, share knowledge, and act as a bridge between foster carers and fostering services. Pioneer carers often support newly approved carers, help facilitate support networks, and contribute to discussions about service development and improvements.

The Pioneer role recognises the importance of peer-to-peer support within fostering. Foster carers often face complex and emotionally demanding situations, and support from someone who understands the realities of the role can be invaluable. Pioneer carers can provide reassurance, practical advice, and encouragement, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and improve carers' confidence and resilience.

Another key aim of the programme is to help foster carers become active contributors to service development. Through their experience and direct engagement with other carers, Pioneers can identify emerging challenges, highlight areas for improvement, and help services understand the realities of fostering from a carer's perspective. In doing so, they help promote a culture where foster carers are recognised as equal partners within the team around the child.

In practice, Pioneer activities vary across local authorities but may include mentoring new carers, facilitating peer support groups, contributing to training or recruitment activities, and helping to strengthen communication between carers and the fostering service. Through these activities the programme seeks to improve the fostering experience for carers while also contributing to more stable placements and better outcomes for children and young people.

2. Here2There and the Evaluation Approach

The evaluation of the Pioneers was facilitated by Here2There, an organisation specialising in participatory learning, reflection, and evaluation processes. Here2There focuses on approaches that enable individuals and communities to reflect on their experiences, share learning, and identify meaningful change.

For this evaluation, Here2There supported the use of the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology. The MSC approach is a qualitative and participatory evaluation technique that focuses on identifying and analysing stories of change experienced by programme participants. Rather than relying solely on quantitative measures or predefined indicators, MSC captures the human impact of programmes through personal accounts of change.

The core principle of the MSC methodology is to ask participants to describe what they believe has been the most significant change resulting from their involvement in a programme or initiative. These stories are then shared, discussed, and reviewed by panels of stakeholders who select the stories that best represent the most meaningful or important changes that have occurred.

MSC is particularly suited to complex programmes where outcomes may vary between individuals or where change is difficult to measure using traditional evaluation methods. By focusing on participants' experiences and perspectives, the method allows evaluators to gain deeper insight into how and why change has occurred.

In the context of the Pioneer evaluation, the MSC approach enabled us to capture the lived experiences of Pioneer carers, exploring how the programme has influenced their roles, relationships, and the wider fostering community. The process provided an opportunity for carers to reflect on their journeys, identify meaningful developments, and highlight the impact of peer support within fostering services.

3. Structure of This Report

This report brings together the findings from the evaluation of the Pioneers using the Most Significant Change methodology.

The report includes:

- The final selected Most Significant Change story, chosen through a structured panel review process.
- A thematic review of the interviews conducted with Pioneer carers, identifying recurring themes, experiences, and areas of impact across the programme.
- A thematic analysis of the panel discussions, highlighting the values and priorities identified by stakeholders during the selection process.
- Recommendations for the future development of the Pioneer role, informed by the insights gathered through interviews and panel discussions.

Together, these elements provide a reflective overview of the programme, highlighting both the strengths of the Pioneer role and the opportunities for further development.

4. Methodology and Process

Using MSC, Here2There acted as independent evaluators, facilitating the evaluation process and supporting the collection, analysis, and review of the stories. The following documents the process followed:

4.1 Capturing the Stories

A total of 28 Pioneer carers participated in interviews as part of the evaluation.

All interviews were conducted online using a semi-structured format. This allowed participants to share their experiences openly while ensuring that key areas were explored consistently across interviews.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the Pioneer role and to describe what they felt had been the most significant change resulting from their involvement in the programme.

The interviews explored:

- the participant's fostering journey
- their involvement in the Pioneers
- activities they had undertaken as a Pioneer
- changes experienced personally or within the fostering community
- reflections on what they considered to be the most significant change

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was then reviewed and edited into a Most Significant Change story, written in the first person and closely reflecting the

language used by the interviewee. Care was taken to ensure that the stories remained authentic to the participant's voice while presenting the information clearly and concisely.

All participants gave informed consent for their stories to be used as part of the evaluation and had the opportunity to review / edit or add to their story before it was shared.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Alongside the story-writing process, a thematic review was undertaken across all interview transcripts.

This involved reviewing the full set of 28 stories to identify common experiences, recurring themes, and areas of perceived impact across the Pioneers.

The thematic analysis explored:

- common changes described by Pioneer carers
- key words and phrases used to describe their experiences
- examples of impact within fostering communities
- barriers or challenges experienced within the programme

Importantly, all stories were included in the thematic analysis, including those that were not taken forward into the panel selection process. This ensured that the evaluation captured insights from the full range of Pioneer carers who participated.

The findings from this thematic review have also informed the recommendations presented later in this report.

4.3 Shortlisting Stories for Panel Review

While the evaluation collected 28 stories, reviewing all stories within a single panel process would have been impractical.

To ensure a manageable and meaningful review process, the Here2There evaluation team conducted an initial review of all stories.

During this stage it was agreed that stories from Pioneer carers who had been in role for less than 12 months would not be included in the panel review process. This decision was made to ensure that the stories considered by the panels reflected a sufficient period of experience within the Pioneer role and were more likely to demonstrate meaningful change over time.

This reduced the number of stories taken forward for panel consideration from 28 to 16.

Importantly, the remaining 12 stories were not excluded from the evaluation. They were still:

- included in the thematic analysis
- reviewed as part of the recommendation development

- published in the appendix of this report

4.4 Shortlisting Panels

Even with this reduction, 16 stories remained too many for a single panel to review effectively.

To address this, three shortlisting panels were convened, each reviewing a smaller group of stories.

Each panel consisted of 5–6 participants and represented different stakeholder perspectives:

- Panel 1: Young people with lived experience of care
- Panel 2: Foster carers
- Panel 3: A mixed panel including foster carers, social workers, and a Virtual School Head

Each panel reviewed five or six stories and was asked to select two stories to progress to the final panel.

All panels were conducted online.

Panel participants were not provided with the stories in advance; instead, the stories were introduced and read during the panel session itself.

4.5 Panel Process

Each panel followed a structured and participatory process designed to encourage reflection and discussion.

For each story:

1. A panel member volunteered to read the story aloud to the group.
2. Following the reading, the Here2There facilitator opened the discussion and invited reflections and comments from the panel.
3. Panel members shared what stood out to them in the story and why they felt the change described was significant.

During these discussions, the Here2There team recorded notes capturing key reflections and themes raised by the panel.

Once all stories had been read and discussed, the facilitator reviewed the key points recorded for each story.

Panel members were then asked to:

- identify their favourite story
- identify a runner-up story

Each participant shared their selections with the group.

Votes were scored using a simple points system:

- Favourite story: 2 points
- Runner-up story: 1 point

The two stories receiving the highest number of points were identified as the panel's selected stories.

Before confirming the result, panel members were invited to reflect on the outcome and consider whether they wished to champion an alternative story and re-vote. This step helped ensure that the final selections reflected the collective view of the panel.

Each shortlisting panel therefore selected two stories, resulting in six stories progressing to the final panel.

4.6 Final Panel

The six shortlisted stories were then reviewed by a final panel.

The final panel members consisted of:

- Welsh Government Policy office
- Head of Foster Wales
- The Fostering Network Head of Practice
- Foster Carer
- Education coordinator for children looked after

The final panel followed the same process used in the earlier panels:

- stories were read aloud
- panel members shared reflections and discussion
- votes were cast for favourite and runner-up stories

Following the scoring process, the panel selected:

- The final Most Significant Change story
- A Highly Commended story

These selections represent the stories that panel members collectively felt best captured the most meaningful changes resulting from the Pioneers

5. Limitations of the Evaluation

As with all evaluations, there are several factors that should be considered when interpreting the findings presented in this report.

Firstly, the evaluation uses the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology, which is intentionally qualitative and participatory in nature. MSC focuses on capturing personal experiences and perceived changes rather than measuring predefined quantitative outcomes. While this approach provides rich insight into how participants experience change, it does not aim to measure the scale or statistical impact of the programme.

Secondly, the evaluation is based on self-reported experiences from Pioneer carers. The stories collected reflect participants' own perspectives on the changes they have experienced. While these perspectives provide valuable insight into the lived experience of the programme, they may not capture the full range of impacts across the wider fostering system.

Thirdly, the process of selecting stories for panel review required a reduction in the number of stories considered by the panels. Although 28 stories were collected as part of the evaluation, only 16 were taken forward for panel consideration due to practical constraints and the need to ensure that stories reflected at least 12 months of experience in the Pioneer role. However, all 28 stories were included in the thematic analysis and remain part of the overall evaluation dataset.

In addition, the panel selection process reflects the perspectives of those who participated in the panels. While the panels were intentionally designed to include a range of stakeholders — including young people with lived experience, foster carers, and professionals — the outcomes inevitably reflect the values, priorities, and perspectives of those particular participants.

Finally, the Pioneer role itself is still developing across many areas, and the experiences shared in the stories reflect different stages of implementation. Some Pioneer carers have been in the role for several years, while others have joined more recently. As a result, the stories represent a snapshot of the programme at a particular point in time rather than a complete picture of its long-term impact.

Despite these limitations, the MSC approach provides valuable insight into how Pioneer carers experience their role and the changes they perceive within fostering communities. The stories, thematic analysis, and panel discussions together offer a rich and reflective understanding of the programme's emerging impact and highlight opportunities for future development.

6. The MSC Story

Through the MSC review process, panels carefully considered the stories submitted and discussed which examples best illustrated the most meaningful changes resulting from the Pioneers. The story presented below was ultimately selected by the final panel as the Most Significant Change story, as it powerfully reflects the role of peer support, lived experience, and community within fostering. While one story has been highlighted here, all of the stories collected as part of this evaluation provide valuable insight into the diverse ways in which the Pioneer role is making a difference. The full set of stories gathered during the evaluation can be found in Appendix A.



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?

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.

7. Thematic Overview of Pioneer Stories

This thematic overview synthesises insights from the Most Significant Change (MSC) stories collected from Pioneer participants (2025–2026 evaluation). The aim is to identify cross-story themes, highlight recurring language, and extract wants, requests, and recommendations emerging from participants' experiences.

The analysis focuses on patterns of meaning across stories, using the interview narratives themselves as the primary evidence base.

7.2 Key Cross-Story Themes

Peer Connection and Relational Support

A dominant theme across stories is the importance of connection between carers. Pioneers are repeatedly described as providing peer understanding, emotional reassurance, and practical guidance that complements formal support systems.

Participants emphasised that speaking to someone who “understands fostering from experience” helps carers feel less isolated and more confident in navigating challenges.

Evidence from stories

- Pioneers often provide informal, accessible support through conversations, WhatsApp groups, or direct contact.
- Carers value having “someone to say you’re doing the right thing.”
- Peer conversations help carers validate concerns before escalating issues to social workers.

Implications

- Peer networks play a crucial role in confidence building and emotional resilience among carers.
- Informal support channels can prevent escalation of issues by resolving concerns early.

Emotional Reassurance and Validation

Many stories emphasise that Pioneers offer affirmation, encouragement, and reassurance during difficult situations. Carers often experience uncertainty, investigations, or complex behavioural challenges with children. Pioneers help them process experiences and maintain confidence in their role.

Evidence from stories

- Carers reported feeling “supported and validated after a chat with a Pioneer.”
- Pioneers frequently provide encouragement after difficult events or challenges.
- Emotional reassurance is often cited as the most impactful aspect of support.

Implications

- Emotional validation strengthens carer retention and wellbeing.
- Peer reassurance complements professional guidance by addressing the human and emotional dimensions of fostering.

Practical Guidance and Knowledge Sharing

Pioneers frequently act as informal knowledge brokers, sharing practical advice based on lived experience.

This includes guidance on:

- navigating fostering processes
- responding to behavioural challenges
- accessing educational support
- managing safeguarding or investigations.

Evidence from stories

- Pioneers support carers with questions that may feel too small or informal for social workers.
- Peer advice helps carers identify when to escalate issues.
- Support is often delivered rapidly and informally through messaging or conversation.

Implications

- Practical peer guidance helps carers solve problems quickly and confidently.
- Lived experience provides contextual insight not always available through formal training.

Early Intervention and Preventative Support

A recurring pattern is the value of early engagement with carers, particularly those new to fostering. Several participants noted that support earlier in the journey could prevent difficulties later.

Evidence from stories

- Pioneers often begin supporting carers shortly after approval or during early fostering stages.

- Informal conversations can help carers anticipate challenges rather than reacting to them.
- Carers sometimes hesitate to ask for help until a crisis develops.

Implications

- Early peer support can act as a preventative intervention.
- Structured early engagement with Pioneers may improve confidence and preparedness.

Shared Identity and Community Building

Many stories highlight the role of Pioneers in creating a sense of community among carers.

This includes:

- peer groups
- shared communication channels
- mentoring relationships

Evidence from stories

- WhatsApp groups and informal networks help carers stay connected and share experiences.
- Participants noted the importance of not feeling alone in fostering challenges.
- Pioneers sometimes act as bridges between carers and wider fostering communities.

Implications

- Strong peer communities contribute to carer retention and wellbeing.
- Community-based support reduces isolation and builds collective resilience.

Role Clarity and Consistency Across Regions

Several stories reflect uncertainty around the scope and structure of the Pioneer role. Participants raised questions about consistency across local authorities and expectations of the role.

Evidence from stories

- Some participants suggested all Pioneers should understand the role in the same way.
- There is interest in greater alignment across councils if a national approach is intended.
- Support availability varies depending on local context or resources.

Implications

- Clearer role definition could strengthen consistency, visibility, and effectiveness.
- Greater coordination could enhance the national impact of the programme.

7.3 Key Themes and Implications

Relationships Between Foster Carers, Social Workers and Local Authorities

Across the stories, foster carers describe very different experiences in their relationships with social workers and the wider local authority system. In some areas, carers report collaborative and respectful relationships where their experience is recognised and valued. In others, carers describe a more cautious dynamic in which they feel the need to carefully manage what they say or how they raise concerns.

Several participants reflected on a historical sense of separation between carers and professionals. One Pioneer described this dynamic as:

“Before this, it felt more ‘us and them’. Carers were doing their best in their own corners.”

This perception can affect carers’ willingness to speak openly about challenges or uncertainties. One Pioneer explained that carers may sometimes feel hesitant to raise concerns in formal settings because they worry their comments could be misinterpreted or recorded negatively:

“I’ve used that opportunity to create safe spaces, like our coffee mornings, where there are no social workers present. Because sometimes carers won’t open up if they think what they say could be misinterpreted or taken down as a concern.”

At the same time, the stories also include examples of positive and evolving relationships between carers and their fellow professionals from the team around the child. In some cases, experienced foster carers are increasingly recognised as a valuable source of knowledge and insight.

One Pioneer described the significance of being approached by social workers for advice:

“Sometimes social workers come up and ask me, ‘What would you do here?’ or ‘Who did you speak to about that diagnosis?’”

These interactions represent a shift towards more collaborative working relationships, where carers’ lived experience is recognised as a meaningful contribution to practice.

Several stories suggest that the Pioneer role can help bridge the gap between carers and services. By offering informal peer support and helping carers reflect on situations, Pioneers can give carers greater confidence to raise issues constructively with their supervising social workers.

As one participant explained:

“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.”

Overall, the stories highlight that the quality of relationships between carers and the local authority system can significantly shape carers’ experiences of fostering. Where relationships feel collaborative and respectful, carers describe feeling valued and empowered. Where they feel more distant or hierarchical, carers may be more reluctant to share concerns openly.

Isolation Among Foster Carers and the Role of Pioneers in Strengthening Connection

A second recurring theme across the stories is the sense of isolation that many foster carers experience. Fostering is often carried out within the home, and carers may have limited opportunities to connect regularly with others who share similar experiences.

Several participants reflected on how opportunities for connection have decreased in recent years. One Pioneer noted:

“Since COVID, I’ve found those connections are really lacking. Before the pandemic, I got a lot of connection through training, coffee mornings, events... But that’s changed. It’s quieter now. People are more isolated.”

In this context, opportunities to speak with other carers who have lived experience of fostering become particularly important. Peer conversations allow carers to share challenges, ask questions, and gain reassurance from people who understand the realities of the role.

As one participant explained:

“When carers talk to other carers, particularly Pioneers, they’re more open. They say how they really feel.”

Pioneers help facilitate these connections through a range of informal activities, including mentoring conversations, coffee mornings, peer networks, and messaging groups. These interactions provide carers with a space where they can discuss experiences freely, seek practical advice, and feel understood.

In many cases, this support is available outside the working hours of formal services. One Pioneer described how carers often seek reassurance in the evenings when new situations arise:

“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.”

By providing accessible peer support during these moments, Pioneers help carers feel less alone in managing difficult situations.

Through these connections, the programme contributes to building a stronger sense of community among foster carers, where individuals feel supported not only by professionals but also by others who share their experience.

Implications for Foster Carer Retention

The stories suggest that the relationships and connections described above may have important implications for foster carer retention. These findings reflect wider evidence that improved relational support and connection could prevent many carers from leaving fostering services.

Periods of uncertainty, formal review, or investigation can be particularly stressful for foster carers. During these times, carers may feel isolated or uncertain about their future within the fostering service. Several stories describe situations where Pioneers provided sustained peer support during these challenging periods.

One Pioneer shared an example of supporting a carer whose annual review had recommended deregistration:

“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... Eventually the whole thing was reconsidered. The carer will likely stay registered.”

Stories such as this illustrate how peer support can help carers remain engaged with the service during difficult moments, rather than withdrawing from the fostering community.

In some local authorities, Pioneers have been permitted to offer informal support to carers during investigations or review processes. Participants indicated that this approach can help carers feel less isolated during a period when they might otherwise disengage from the system.

Where this support has been available, participants suggested that it has helped some carers remain within fostering who might otherwise have chosen to leave. This aligns with broader findings that many carers feel unable to seek support or experience isolation within the role.

More broadly, the Pioneers appear to contribute to retention by strengthening carers’ confidence, sense of belonging, and access to peer support. When carers feel connected to others who understand their experiences, they may be better able to navigate challenges and remain committed to fostering.

While the stories do not provide quantitative evidence of retention outcomes, they offer qualitative insight into how peer relationships, community connection, and trusted support networks can influence carers’ decisions to continue fostering.

7.4 Word Cloud

This Word cloud is derived from the MSC stories and the experiential outcomes emphasised by participants (e.g. support, help, community, confidence). The prominence of these term reflects the frequency with which they appeared across the stories.

Peer Support During Investigations

Several stories highlighted the stress and isolation carers can experience during investigations or reviews. Participants suggested that allowing appropriate peer support from Pioneers during these periods could help carers feel less isolated.

Strengthening Communication and Peer Networks

Informal communication channels — including messaging groups, peer conversations, and local networks — were frequently mentioned as valuable sources of support. Participants emphasised the importance of maintaining accessible, responsive peer communication spaces for carers.

8. Most Significant Change Panel Discussions

As part of the evaluation of the Pioneers, a series of Most Significant Change (MSC) panels were convened to review and discuss stories describing the changes associated with the programme. These panels brought together a range of perspectives from across the fostering system.

Four panels were conducted:

- A panel of foster carers and individuals involved with the Pioneers from the Fostering Wellbeing programme
- A panel including fostering practitioners and professionals connected with the programme
- A panel of young people with care experience
- A final panel of senior stakeholders, including senior leaders within fostering services and representatives connected with policy and the wider fostering network.

Each panel reviewed a set of stories and discussed what they believed represented the most meaningful changes arising from the Pioneer's work. The final panel reviewed the stories shortlisted by the earlier panels.

The detailed discussions and reflections from each panel are included in Appendix B. This chapter provides a synthesis of the key insights emerging across the panels, highlighting the themes that resonated most strongly and where perspectives aligned or differed between groups.

8.1 Key Themes Emerging Across the Panels

Strengthening Peer Support and Community Among Foster Carers

Across all panels, one of the most consistent themes was the importance of peer support and the strengthening of community among foster carers.

Participants frequently highlighted how the Pioneers have created opportunities for foster carers to connect with one another through informal gatherings, peer networks and shared activities. Examples such as coffee mornings and peer discussions were described as important spaces where carers could speak openly and support one another.

These spaces were valued because they:

- Reduce feelings of isolation among foster carers
- Provide opportunities to share experience and advice
- Build trust and mutual support within the fostering community.

Both foster carers and professionals recognised that fostering can often be an isolating role. The Pioneers are seen as helping to rebuild connections and foster a sense of belonging within the fostering community.

Senior stakeholders in the final panel also reflected on how these community-building activities help strengthen relationships within fostering services and contribute to more collaborative systems.

The Value of Lived Experience and Peer Leadership

Another theme that emerged strongly across the panels was the importance of lived experience as a source of knowledge and leadership.

Participants consistently recognised that foster carers bring valuable expertise through their everyday experience of caring for children. The Pioneer role enables carers to share this experience with others, providing support that feels credible and relatable.

Panel discussions highlighted how Pioneers contribute by:

- Supporting other carers informally through conversation and shared experience
- Signposting resources and training opportunities
- Leading discussions or activities that strengthen peer learning.

The Pioneer role was therefore viewed as an example of peer leadership within fostering, where carers play an active role in strengthening the system rather than simply receiving support from professionals.

Senior stakeholders reflected that this form of leadership has the potential to influence practice across the fostering network.

Recognition and Encouragement for Foster Carers

Across several panels, participants discussed the importance of recognition and encouragement within fostering services.

Participants noted that foster carers often undertake demanding and emotionally challenging work, yet do not always receive consistent recognition for their efforts. Stories describing moments of encouragement or appreciation resonated strongly with panel members.

Participants reflected that simple forms of recognition can:

- Reinforce carers' confidence
- Strengthen motivation
- Support carers to continue in their role.

The discussion suggested that creating a culture where foster carers feel valued is an important aspect of sustaining the fostering community.

Addressing Isolation in the Fostering Role

Isolation emerged as a recurring issue across the discussions.

Participants from different panels noted that foster carers are often geographically dispersed and may have limited opportunities to interact with other carers. This can make it difficult to share experiences or seek advice.

The Pioneer were frequently seen to be as helping to address this challenge by creating opportunities for carers to connect and support one another.

Participants also recognised that reducing isolation among carers can have wider benefits, including improved wellbeing for carers and stronger support for the children they care for.

Building Trust and Partnership Within the Fostering System

Several discussions highlighted the importance of trust and partnership between foster carers and fostering services.

Some participants described experiences where foster carers had felt excluded from decision-making processes or disconnected from professional systems. Stories describing improved relationships and stronger collaboration therefore resonated strongly.

Panel members reflected that the Pioneers can contribute to rebuilding trust by:

- Creating opportunities for dialogue between carers and professionals
- Encouraging collaboration and shared problem-solving
- Ensuring that carers' voices are heard and valued.

Senior stakeholders noted that these developments can contribute to stronger partnerships within fostering services.

Supporting Foster Carer Learning and Development

Participants also responded positively to stories where foster carers demonstrated a commitment to learning and improving their practice, particularly in areas such as trauma-informed care.

The young people's panel emphasised the importance of carers understanding trauma and the experiences of children in care. Participants reflected that carers who actively seek training and learning opportunities are better able to support children effectively.

This theme highlighted the importance of continuous learning within fostering, supported through peer networks and shared knowledge.

8.2 Insights from Young People with Care Experience

The panel of young people with care experience offered particularly important perspectives on the stories.

Participants emphasised that the most meaningful examples of change were those where foster carers demonstrated:

- Genuine care and commitment to children
- Patience and willingness to build trust
- Efforts to understand children's experiences and backgrounds.

Stories describing carers learning about trauma, advocating for young people, or making efforts to understand cultural identity resonated strongly with the group.

Importantly, some young people reflected that hearing the stories had been inspiring and empowering. Participants described how the stories demonstrated the positive difference foster carers can make, and several expressed that the stories had inspired them to consider becoming foster carers themselves in the future.

This response highlights the potential of positive fostering stories not only to illustrate change within the system, but also to influence how young people with care experience view their own future role within it.

8.3 Different Perspectives on What Constitutes “Significant Change”

Although many themes were shared across panels, participants sometimes differed in how they defined what makes a change most significant.

Some panel members were particularly drawn to stories that demonstrated emotional impact, such as the dedication and compassion shown by individual foster carers.

Others focused more on practical or systemic changes, such as initiatives that created new structures for peer support or influenced practice within fostering services.

These differing perspectives reflect the varied roles and experiences of panel members across the fostering system. However, rather than creating disagreement, these perspectives enriched the discussion by highlighting multiple dimensions of change.

8.4 Overall Reflections Across the Panels

Taken together, the panel discussions illustrate that the Pioneers are perceived to be creating meaningful changes across several interconnected areas.

These include:

- Strengthening peer support networks among foster carers
- Reducing isolation and building community within fostering
- Encouraging foster carer leadership and the sharing of lived experience
- Supporting foster carers' learning and development

- Strengthening relationships and trust within fostering systems.

Across the panels, stories that resonated most strongly were those that illustrated authentic relationships, peer support, and genuine commitment to improving the experiences of children and carers.

The discussions also demonstrated that the Pioneers are valued not only for the practical activities they enable, but also for the culture of collaboration, recognition and shared learning that they help to foster.

8.5 Panel Conclusion

The MSC panel discussions provided a rich opportunity to reflect on the changes associated with the Pioneers from a range of perspectives across the fostering system.

While each panel brought its own experiences and priorities, there was strong alignment around several key themes, particularly the importance of community, peer support, leadership by foster carers and the strengthening of relationships within fostering services.

The discussions also highlighted the powerful influence that positive fostering stories can have. For young people with care experience in particular, hearing about the dedication and commitment of foster carers was both reassuring and inspiring.

A detailed summary of the discussions within each panel can be found in Appendix B, which captures the reflections, themes and areas of agreement identified during the MSC process.

Together, these discussions provide valuable insight into how the Pioneers are contributing to positive change within the fostering community.

9. Recommendations and Future Considerations

The stories and panel discussions highlight the significant value of the Pioneers in strengthening peer support, building confidence among foster carers, and creating stronger connections across the fostering community. Ultimately, these benefits contribute to the stability, quality, and sustainability of foster care placements, which are critical for achieving better outcomes for children and young people who are looked after.

The following recommendations reflect opportunities to further strengthen the programme through greater coordination, shared learning, and clearer structures for collaboration, ensuring that foster carers are well supported to provide the best possible care for children and young people.

9.1 Strategic Considerations

Strengthen National Coordination and Shared Learning

Participants across stories and panel discussions expressed interest in greater national alignment across the Pioneers. While local flexibility is important, there is clear value in enabling Pioneers across different authorities to learn from each other and share effective approaches.

Developing a national framework for knowledge sharing could help spread innovation and reduce duplication of effort. This could include mechanisms for sharing successful initiatives, learning from challenges, and highlighting emerging good practice.

Develop National Pioneer Role Profiles

Several discussions highlighted the potential value of a national directory or profile system for Pioneers, identifying individual areas of expertise or experience. This could enable Pioneers and services to identify who may be able to support in specific situations.

For example, some Pioneers have particular experience in areas such as:

- supporting new carers
- education and neurodiversity advocacy
- complex placements
- peer mentoring and community building

A national profile system would allow local authorities and Pioneers to connect carers with relevant expertise across authority boundaries when needed, strengthening the overall support network.

Recognise the Role of Peer Support in Carer Retention

The stories suggest that peer support can play an important role in helping carers navigate difficult periods, including investigations, reviews, or challenging placements. In some authorities, allowing Pioneers to provide informal peer support during investigations has helped carers remain engaged with the service and continue fostering.

National guidance could explore how peer support can be safely integrated into these processes while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

Continue Developing the Pioneer Role as a Bridge Between Carers and Services

Across the stories, Pioneers frequently act as a bridge between carers and local authority services, helping carers articulate concerns, share learning, and build confidence in engaging with professionals.

Further strengthening this bridging role may help foster more collaborative relationships between carers and the system, moving away from perceptions of an “us and them” culture.

Formalise and expand the role of Pioneers in supporting foster carers through allegations

Periods of investigation and allegation represent some of the most challenging and high-stress points within a foster carer’s journey, often leaving carers feeling isolated, and vulnerable. Strengthening the availability of appropriate peer support during these periods has the potential to ensure that experienced and committed foster carers feel supported to remain within the fostering community, rather than disengaging at a point of crisis.

The Pioneer role is well placed to offer relational, informal support during these times, helping carers to feel heard, reassured, and less alone. However, given the sensitivity and complexity of investigations, it is important that this support is delivered within clear and appropriate boundaries, complementing rather than conflicting with formal processes.

Targetted training and development is should be provided for Pioneers to support them in “walking the line” effectively. This could include guidance on maintaining appropriate boundaries, understanding investigation processes, offering emotionally supportive but non-intrusive peer support, and knowing when and how to signpost or escalate concerns.

By equipping Pioneers with the confidence and clarity to provide the right type of support at the right time, the programme can strengthen its contribution to foster carer wellbeing and retention, ensuring that carers feel valued and supported through some of the most difficult periods of their fostering experience

9.2 Operational and Implementation Considerations

Share Event Blueprints and Practical Resources

Many Pioneers have developed successful initiatives such as:

- coffee mornings and peer discussion groups
- informal mentoring arrangements
- themed learning sessions for carers
- online peer support networks

Capturing and sharing event blueprints and practical guides for these activities could help other authorities replicate successful approaches without needing to develop them from scratch.

These could include simple templates covering:

- event purpose and format
- facilitation approaches
- safeguarding considerations
- lessons learned.

Create a Repository of Best Practice Stories

The MSC stories themselves highlight the value of real examples of change and impact. Creating a shared repository of short “best practice stories” could help Pioneers and local authorities:

- illustrate the value of peer support
- share innovative approaches
- support learning across the network.

These stories could also be used to support training, programme development, and national advocacy.

Support Cross-Authority Collaboration Between Pioneers

Panel discussions suggested that greater opportunities for Pioneers to connect with peers in other authorities would be valuable. This could include:

- regular cross-authority learning sessions
- thematic discussion groups
- opportunities for Pioneers to share challenges and solutions.

These connections would help strengthen the sense of a wider Pioneer community, while allowing innovative approaches to spread more quickly.

Continue Supporting Informal Peer Networks

The stories consistently highlight the importance of accessible, informal peer support, including messaging groups, coffee mornings, and one-to-one mentoring conversations.

Ensuring that Pioneers have the time and support to facilitate these connections will remain an important part of maintaining the programme’s impact.

9.3 Looking Forward

The Pioneers demonstrate how peer connection, lived experience, and community support can strengthen fostering systems. By building on the learning captured in these stories and panel discussions, there is an opportunity to further develop the programme as a coordinated network of experienced carers supporting one another.

Supporting foster carers in this way ultimately helps ensure that children and young people in care experience stable placements, confident carers, and strong support networks, creating the conditions for positive and lasting outcomes for children and young people looked after.

9.4 Conclusion

This evaluation set out to explore the changes associated with the Pioneers from the Fostering Wellbeing programme using the Most Significant Change methodology. Through the collection and review of stories from participants, the process created space to reflect on the personal, relational and cultural impacts of the initiative.

The findings from this evaluation highlight the Pioneers are an effective, practical and relational response to some of the most pressing challenges within fostering. Evidence shows that many foster carers experience burnout, isolation, and a lack of support, with significant numbers leaving the role within the first five years.

The Pioneer role directly addresses these challenges by strengthening peer support, building community, and creating opportunities for carers to feel recognised, valued, and connected. Through informal support, shared learning, and lived-experience leadership, Pioneers help create the conditions in which carers are more confident, resilient, and able to continue in their role.

The stories and panel discussions consistently highlighted the importance of peer relationships within fostering. They bring to life the impact that Pioneers can have when supporting others, sharing knowledge, and helping foster carers feel less isolated in what can often be a demanding role. This peer support helps carers feel more confident, connected and resilient, strengthening their ability to respond to the complex needs of the children and young people they support.

Another key theme emerging from the evaluation was the growing recognition of foster carers as partners within the wider fostering system. Through the Pioneer role, carers are increasingly able to contribute their lived experience to discussions about practice, learning and service improvement. This helps to strengthen relationships between carers and professionals and supports a more collaborative culture.

While the MSC approach does not seek to measure impact in quantitative terms, it provides rich insight into how participants themselves experience change. The stories collected illustrate how acts of support, encouragement and shared learning among carers can strengthen the overall fostering community.

In this way, the initiative contributes not only to improved carer wellbeing, but also to the sustainability of fostering services and the stability of placements for children and young people. As part of the wider Fostering Wellbeing programme, it represents a shift towards a more connected, relationship-centred system in which all members of the fostering community are supported to work together effectively. By strengthening peer networks, valuing lived experience and fostering collaboration, the Pioneers are contributing to a stronger fostering environment that supports improved wellbeing, stability and outcomes for children and young people, looked after.