



‘Championing Education’:

an initial evaluation of the Fostering Potential programme

November 2019

Funded by the British & Foreign School Society and the Sir John Cass Foundation

About this report

This report contains an initial evaluation of The Fostering Network's Fostering Potential programme, which aims to support the educational outcomes of looked after children who are placed in foster care.

The programme period runs from May 2018 until April 2020. This report covers the programme planning phase and the first phase of delivery from September 2018 until July 2019

Sections

Introduction and background.....	4
Evaluation approach	8
Project setup period and training delivery	11
The project implementation process	15
Project activity data.....	18
Challenging and enabling factors.....	23
Impact on foster carers and Education Champions.....	28
Impact on children in foster care	31
Impact on local authorities	35
Summary and recommendations	37
References.....	40
Appendix A.....	41
Appendix B.....	42

Authors

Qualitative research fieldwork, analysis and reporting was carried out by Dr Katie Rix, an independent researcher commissioned by The Fostering Network.

Additional reporting narrative and information about the programme delivery process was provided by Susan Soar, the project manager of Fostering Potential.

Participating local authorities

The participating authorities during 2018-2020 were:

- The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- The Royal Borough of Greenwich
- The London Borough of Islington
- Kent County Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Suffolk County Council
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Thank you to the individual employees and foster carers who participated in this research.

Introduction and background

This report presents an initial evaluation of the Fostering Potential programme, delivered by The Fostering Network. The programme is funded by the British and Foreign School Society and the Sir John Cass Foundation.

The Fostering Potential programme aims to support the educational outcomes of looked after children who are placed in foster care. The programme has two aspects: **project delivery work** in partnership with local authority fostering services and an **information dissemination strand**. The project delivery work creates an educational peer support network in each participating local area, delivered by experienced foster carers in the role of Education Champions. The information dissemination strand aims to share information about research evidence, best practice and practical approaches to support the education of looked after children and young people. This aspect of the programme is aimed at foster carers, fostering services, education professionals and anyone with an interest in the education of looked after children.

The programme funding period began in May 2018 and will end in April 2020. Project delivery is ongoing and this report covers the programme planning phase and the first phase of project delivery from September 2018 until July 2019. A supplementary report will be published before the end of the programme period in April 2020. This final report will also evaluate the information dissemination strand.

Reasons for the programme

The Fostering Potential programme was created due to concern about the 'attainment gap' that exists between fostered children and the general population. For example, in 2018 just 35 per cent of looked after children in England reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage Two (the end of primary school). For children who were not looked after, 65 per cent reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at the same age (DfE, 2019) This is a significant difference or 'attainment gap' between looked after children and other children and unfortunately this gap remains as children get older. At Key Stage 4 (GCSE) in 2018 the average Attainment 8¹ score was 19 for looked after children, compared to 44 for children who were not looked after, although this gap was smaller when the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) was taken into account. Research also shows that young people leaving care are less likely to attend university and have poorer employment prospects than the general population, which can have a negative impact on their opportunities and life chances (REES Centre, 2015). The Fostering Potential programme aims to raise the outcomes of fostered children and young people to reduce this attainment gap and improve their opportunities in the longer term.

Research evidence

The programme design and training drew on some of the available evidence around the education of looked after children.

Fostering Potential places the role of the foster carer at the centre of the programme and research has shown the positive impact of longer-term, stable foster care on the educational outcomes of looked after children (REES Centre, 2015). Recent figures from the Scottish Government have also shown that placement stability for children in foster care is directly linked to better educational outcomes (The Scottish Government, 2018).

¹ Attainment 8 is a child's average score across their best eight GCSEs.

The programme design also centres the role of the foster carer in supporting children's education in the home environment. This is due to educational research evidence for the influential role of caring adults in supporting children's outcomes across the age range. A longitudinal study followed 3,000 children from age three to age 18 and showed a strong positive link between what adult carers do to support children's learning and development at home in their early years and their later attainment in school (The EPPSE Study, 2008). As part of the same research, in-depth family case studies of eleven- and twelve-year-old children (who had high attainment despite multiple disadvantage factors) found that the children's adult carers were pivotal in providing active support for learning at home, valuing education and holding high aspirations for children's future education and career pathways (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Research carried out in secondary schools also found that when adult carers are directly engaged with children's learning at home, this has a positive influence on their outcomes. The study found that 'engagement' included providing moral support, taking an interest, valuing education and helping with homework (The University of Warwick, 2007).

The decision to pilot an extra-curricular strand in the project work was influenced by a Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission study on the role of schools in improving social mobility. This research found that disadvantaged children and young people may benefit from exposure to experiences intended to boost 'social and cultural capital', early engagement with universities and early engagement with employers (2014, p45). Likewise, the evaluation of London Fostering Achievement, delivered by The Fostering Network and Achievement for All, (REES Centre and Loughborough University, 2016) found that, for some children, involvement in extra-curricular activities translated into increased confidence and engagement in school. Recent work in Wales also supports the inclusion of an extracurricular and enrichment strand. In The Fostering Network's Confidence in Care programme, care experienced young people participating in arts-based work reported growing in confidence, learning new skills, developing social and emotional competencies and making new friendships (CASCADE, 2019).

In designing the programme, The Fostering Network therefore drew on this research evidence and on other findings from the evaluation of London Fostering Achievement². One element of this programme was peer support. In the London Fostering Achievement programme Education Champions were experienced foster carers, often with education experience, who met with other foster carers at groups and also provided one-to-one support on specific issues. Two Education Champions were employed for four hours per week in each of five boroughs. One of the key recommendations of the London Fostering Achievement evaluation was that Education Champions should be implemented more widely, ideally in every local authority, as a way of improving foster carer retention and delivering better progress for children at relatively low cost. The learning from delivering this programme was taken forward to the design of Fostering Potential.

The programme design

The Fostering Network applied for funding to deliver the Fostering Potential programme in order to pilot and further explore the Education Champion peer support approach. This was granted by the British and Foreign School Society (to deliver regional work) and by the Sir John Cass Foundation (to deliver work in London). The programme funding period began in May 2018 and will end in April 2020. The project manager was recruited on an 18-month part-time contract, with the original intention that all peer support activity would be completed by July 2019³. The programme aim was defined as follows:

² The [London Fostering Achievement programme](#) is also described in Appendix A.

³ The project activity period was later extended to allow for a delayed start in some of the project areas.

Fostering Potential programme aims to raise the educational outcomes of fostered children by increasing foster carers' knowledge and confidence in their role as 'first educators'.

In order to achieve this aim within the available time, resources and funding, the following concepts informed the programme design:

- A partnership rather than a centralised model, with the delivery of peer support work led and managed within each local area.
- The opportunity for each local area to tailor its project work and identify their preferred cohort, in order to fit their own strategic priorities and needs.
- Encouraging local authorities to work with and embed the project into their existing services.
- Building a cohort of Education Champions in each local area, to build upon existing knowledge, skills and confidence within each cohort of foster carers.
- Considering sustainability from the outset, on the basis that a locally tailored project would be more likely to have longevity.
- A positive and strengths-based approach to training and development for Education Champions.
- An information dissemination strand to support knowledge sharing across the programme, involving virtual events (webinars) and an online network.

It is important to note that the programme did not involve direct work with children and young people. The approach was based on providing peer support to foster carers, with the aim of increasing their knowledge and confidence so that they can better support the outcomes of the children who are placed with them in foster care.

Project delivery plan

The Fostering Potential programme therefore required that The Fostering Network form partnerships with local authority fostering services to deliver education peer support to foster carers. The local peer support projects were planned as follows:

The role of the **local authority** was to:

- identify a local coordinator amongst its staff to coordinate the project delivery, supervise the work of the Education Champions in their local area and liaise with The Fostering Network;
- recruit a group of Education Champions, generally experienced foster carers with prior experience or a skillset around supporting looked after children's education;
- identify a priority group of children and young people, defined by age range or other criteria;
- engage the foster carers of those children and young people and match them to the Education Champions;
- support the Education Champions to carry out peer support work with the foster carers of the targeted cohort of children and young people.

The role of the **Education Champions** in each local authority was to:

- meet foster carers regularly on a one-to-one basis e.g. in their homes or at support groups;
- provide peer support to foster carers around supporting their fostered child in Maths/English, in particular working towards the child's individual learning targets (from their personal education plan or PEP);
- identify and work towards an extra-curricular target for each fostered child;
- support foster carers to prepare for PEP meetings.

The role of the **Fostering Potential project manager** was to:

- hold face-to-face meetings to assist with project scoping and planning in each local area;
- support the local authority by speaking at foster carer events as requested;
- devise a person specification and role description to support the process of recruiting Education Champions;
- develop and deliver tailored training for Education Champions in each local authority area, depending on the needs of the target cohort;
- provide ongoing project support and lead on evaluation processes.

Evaluation approach

This section presents an overview of the approach used to evaluate the first phase of the project delivery period.

Aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- report on project implementation and activity
- report on impact at foster carer, child and service level
- explore barriers, challenges and enablers to project implementation.

Methodology

The evaluation employed a mixed methods approach, which involved analysis of surveys and project data, alongside a more in-depth consideration of stakeholders' experiences across the project.

There were three main strands to the evaluation of the Fostering Potential project:

- Quantitative analysis of data provided by local authorities
- Quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey responses from foster carers and Education Champions
- Qualitative analysis of a research focus group and telephone interviews with foster carers, Education Champions and local authority coordinators.

Some case study material was also collected. The project manager also gathered regular project updates from participating local authorities, which have provided context to the evaluation process.

Quantitative research

Pre-project survey

Foster carers in each local authority were asked to complete a pre-project education survey to set a context for the project work. This survey received 264 responses across the seven local authorities and provided a useful overview of the type of educational support foster carers said that they would find helpful. Where relevant, detail has been included within the main report, but a breakdown of results can be seen in Appendix B.

Training feedback

Training participants were invited to complete a written feedback form. A total of 63 responses were received. Analysis of responses to open-ended questions has been integrated into the qualitative findings where appropriate.

Data on children and young people

Participating local authorities were asked to provide anonymous data about children and young people whose foster carer had experienced direct contact with an Education Champion. The aim of this process was to collect demographic and educational data on the children/young people potentially impacted by the programme and to gain an insight into the type, nature and number of Education Champion interactions with foster carers during the period.

The data was requested from local authority coordinators in the form of a spreadsheet (on a previously agreed format). Record keeping sheets were provided to Education Champions in order to support this process. Three of the seven participating local authorities provided datasets for this aspect of the project.

Surveys

Two online follow-up surveys were distributed via local authority coordinators, one for Education Champions and one for foster carers who were receiving support as part of the project. The survey for Education Champions was sent to approximately 53 Education Champions across the project areas. The survey for foster carers was sent out to all individuals fostering for the local authority. Both surveys included questions about:

- Their involvement and engagement in Fostering Potential
- How and where support has been provided to foster carers
- The type of support provided to foster carers
- The impacts of the project on foster carers and their fostered children.

There were 32 respondents to the survey for Education Champions and 25 responses to the survey for foster carers⁴. Analysis of responses to open-ended questions has been integrated into the qualitative findings where appropriate.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was undertaken with a range of stakeholders involved with the project. The aim of this research was to collect in-depth responses from individual stakeholders in order to gain an understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of the project overall and in each of the local authorities participating in the qualitative research.

As an overview, the qualitative research questions related to:

- their involvement in the project and how this was initiated
- the support received as part of Fostering Potential, and where relevant, views on the training provided
- the impacts and outcomes of the project in relation to (where individuals were at an early stage of the project work, they were asked about *expected* impacts and outcomes):
 - foster carers
 - fostered children and young people
 - Education Champions
 - teaching staff and other education professionals
 - other stakeholders
- the sustainability of the project within their local authority and rolling out to other areas
- the enablers and challenges of the project implementation.

In addition to the above, local authority coordinators were also asked about:

- the specific needs of looked after children in their local authority
- how the project aligned with local strategic plans
- the project progress to date and how this compares with the original schedule
- the involvement of the virtual school⁵ in their local authority

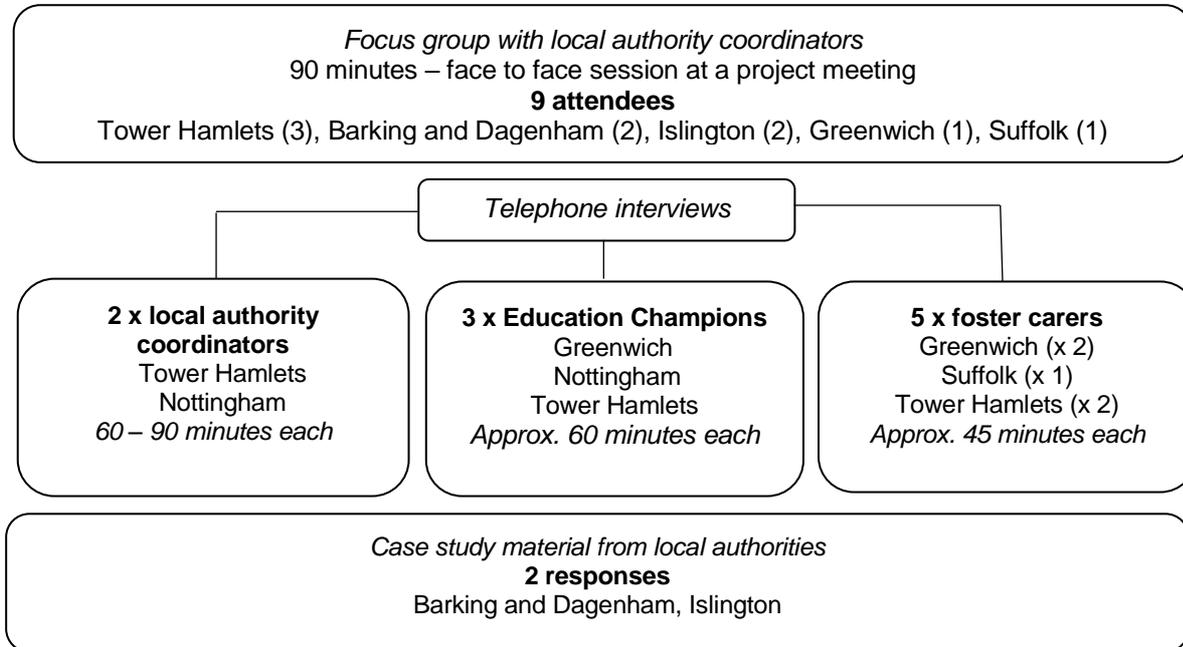
⁴ In the post project survey responses 15 Education Champions and seven foster carers gave responses on direct work between Education Champions and foster carers.

⁵ Virtual schools were established by local authorities to work with looked after children as if they were in a single school and to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve educational stability.

- the local support provided via a locally allocated budget of £1,700.

Participating local authorities were recruited via an opportunity sample. Foster carers and Education Champions were recruited via the local authority coordinators. Figure 1 below, shows a breakdown of participants and the qualitative methods used.

Figure 1. Qualitative methodology



Challenges during the research process

A number of challenges were encountered during the research process, particularly affecting the qualitative work.

- Local authorities participating in Fostering Potential were all at very different stages of implementation. As such, it was necessary to contact more local authorities than originally planned in order to conduct sufficient interviews to inform the evaluation. This also impacted on the ability of local authorities to provide data about children and young people.
- The project delivery was aligned to the school year, so the majority of the research fieldwork needed to take place in the summer period. Annual leave impacted heavily on the recruitment of research participants.
- The high workloads of local authority coordinators meant that there were sometimes waiting periods of several weeks to receive the required information to schedule fieldwork.
- There were challenges in recruiting fostered children to take part in interviews. For looked after children, the corporate parenting responsibility lies with the local authority where the child was taken into care. As such, it is essential to gain research consent, not only from the child but also from both the foster carer and child's social worker. This did not prove possible during this evaluation.

While it was disappointing not to directly include the voice of the child in the qualitative research, questions relating to the impact and effectiveness upon children were included across all other qualitative fieldwork, ensuring that their experiences were captured via other participants.

Project setup period and training delivery

This section describes the project setup period, including the project training and the demographic profile of Education Champions.

Local authority recruitment

The project manager was recruited and took up post in May 2018. Local authority recruitment took place in the period from May to September 2018. The targeting and engagement of local authorities was informed by factors including:

- analysis of published DfE attainment data on the educational attainment of looked after children by local authority
- the geographical focus areas set by the respective funders, Sir John Cass (inner London) and the British and Foreign School Society (all other areas)
- information from The Fostering Network membership and practice support teams, who work in close contact with local authorities.

The participating authorities were engaged via telephone calls, face-to-face meetings and given support to work through a planning document to explore how they might configure the project in the local area. This process included questions to assist each local authority in identifying their target cohort of children and their foster carers; how they might recruit Education Champions to the programme; and ways that they might configure the programme alongside existing services. Seven local authorities joined the programme by September 2018.

Table 1. Local authority focus areas or target cohorts

Local authority	Focus area or target cohort
The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham	Foster carers of children in the primary age range (5–11 years).
The Royal Borough of Greenwich	Foster carers of children transitioning between phases of education: Year 6, Year 10 and Year 11 and children changing school at other points. ⁶
The London Borough of Islington	Friends and Family ⁷ foster carers and foster carers of children in the secondary age range (11–18 years).
Kent County Council	Birth to 18 referral model within two geographical areas of Kent.
Nottingham City Council	Foster carers of children transitioning between phases of education: Year 6 and Year 11 and the secondary age range (11–18 years).
Suffolk County Council	Foster carers of children transitioning between phases of education: Year 6 and Year 11.
The London Borough of Tower Hamlets	Foster carers of children in the primary age range (5–11 years)

⁶ Greenwich later extended their programme to their main cohort of foster carers, on a needs-led basis.

⁷ Friends and Family care is an arrangement whereby a child who cannot be cared for by their parent(s) goes to live with a relative, friend or other connected person. Islington later extended their programme to their main cohort of foster carers.

Next steps to project delivery

Once the local authorities had joined the programme the next steps to project set-up and delivery were as follows:

- Recruit Education Champions and set a date to host project training, delivered by the project manager from The Fostering Network in conjunction with the local authority.
- Match Education Champions to foster carers of children in the target cohort.
- Education Champions to make direct contact with foster carers and for face-to-face work to commence.
- Set up a supervision structure to provide ongoing support and development for Education Champions.

Training

The training phase of the Fostering Potential programme took place between October 2018 and January 2019. The participants were foster carers who were prospective Education Champions in the participating local authorities. The training was led by the Fostering Potential project manager. A total of 58 foster carers were recruited and trained as Education Champions across the seven local authorities. Training group sizes ranged from five to 17.

The aim of the training was to provide Education Champions with an introduction to the Fostering Potential project and peer support framework, so that they could begin to work with foster carers in their local area. The core training programme included an overview of research evidence around the educational outcomes of looked after children, information about the programme, resources to support children and exercises designed to clarify the boundaries and role of an Education Champion. This content was also tailored towards the local authority's identified focus area and target cohort. Each local authority coordinator was encouraged to deliver a session on how the project would be configured in the local area and the local virtual school was invited to contribute specific content on supporting the target age range or cohort.

The Education Champions

Information on the demographic background of the training participants was gathered using The Fostering Network equal opportunities template. There were 45 females and 13 males who took part. Most were White British (28). Other participants were Asian (other) (seven); Black African (six), Black Caribbean (five) or from other ethnic groups⁸ (12).

Training feedback

Training participants were invited to complete a written feedback form. A total of 63⁹ responses were received. The overall feedback on the training was very positive and participants felt that it prepared them well for the role of Education Champion. Table 2 shows how respondents assessed the training, with most rating it as 'very good'.

⁸ Ethnic Groups <5 have not been disclosed to avoid identifying individuals.

⁹ The total number of attendees 63 was greater than the 58 Education Champions due to local authority employees also attending the training.

Table 2. Training ratings from all participants

Rating of training	Number of respondents
Very good	45
Good	13
Satisfactory	4
Poor	0
No response	1
Total	63

The participants' responses to the open-ended questions were analysed by theme, taking into account that some participants covered more than one theme in their responses. When asked '*Which parts of the training did you find most useful and why?*' participant responses included the aspects of the training that defined the boundaries of the Education Champion role (23 responses), all aspects of the training (12 responses), input and information from the local Virtual School (10 responses), research evidence around the education of looked after children (eight responses), the information provided on ways to support children in English and maths (eight responses) and the experience of working in a group with the other participants (six responses). Respondents commented:

'The whole training broke down the task of Education Champion, gave a clear picture of the expectation'

'Training felt just right at this stage of the process.'

'Research was very insightful and powerful. Case examples and also virtual school talk. Easy and relaxed format.'

Respondents were also asked how confident they feel to put what they have learnt into practice. Table 3 shows that most felt either very or quite confident.

Table 3. Training ratings from Education Champion participants

Confidence	Number of respondents
Very confident	21
Quite confident	31
A little bit confident	6
Not at all confident	0
Totals	58

In addition to the written feedback forms, local authority coordinators and Education Champions were asked about the training as part of the qualitative research. Local authority coordinators generally provided positive comments about the training delivered to Education Champions.

'Carers got a lot from it and came away feeling enthused.'

'The training was fantastic.'

One local authority coordinator spoke particularly highly of how well tailored the training was to their local authority. In addition to the positive comments made by local authority coordinators, Education Champions who were interviewed also reported that they found the training useful.

The project implementation process

This section presents evaluation findings on aspects of the project implementation process, including reasons and motivations for taking part at an individual or a service level.

The findings in this section are based on qualitative research with local authority coordinators, Education Champions and foster carers.

Local authorities: reasons for participating

As part of the qualitative research, local authority coordinators were asked about their involvement in Fostering Potential. At the focus group, most reported that their local authority's involvement was initiated by The Fostering Network. In two cases, local authorities had been involved in similar, previous initiatives and so were keen to take Fostering Potential forwards.

'Anything that benefits foster carers and children, we cannot say no to.'

'It was an exciting new project.'

'Really keen to help foster carers focus on improving their own skills.'

When asked specifically about how the project meets the local authority's strategic aims in relation to looked after children, one coordinator commented that it fits with enabling foster carers to support children who are in foster care and build children's aspirations. They were particularly keen to build resilience early and so chose to focus on primary school children. One of the interviewees also commented that offering support like Fostering Potential can help with recruitment and retention of foster carers. The programme also offers a personal development opportunity to those foster carers who train as Education Champions.

Education Champions: recruitment and motivation for taking part

As part of the qualitative research, Education Champions were asked how they were recruited to take part in the project, and their motivations for doing so. The qualitative research highlighted that Education Champions were recruited to the project via two main methods:

- Identification of suitable foster carers to undertake the role by local authority coordinators. They were contacted and asked if they would like to apply for the role.
- Self-referral following wider emails and meetings.

Discussions at the focus group and in the interviews showed that where Education Champions were personally invited to apply (the first method presented above), there was generally more uptake. In contrast, where foster carers were given an open invitation to apply for the role, there seemed to be somewhat less interest as reported by both Education Champions and local authority coordinators. One Education Champion particularly expressed disappointment that so few had put themselves forwards for the role.

However, there were clear criteria (e.g. local authorities could make use of a person specification provided by The Fostering Network), and local authorities did not take on people that they did not feel were appropriate. Those putting themselves forwards tended to already be involved in many initiatives.

'It's the die-hards who volunteer, who are already very busy.' (Local authority coordinator)

The motivation to take part was driven by a number of factors amongst Education Champions. For instance:

- Education was perceived as ‘key’ by all Education Champions.
- A desire to improve foster carers’ knowledge of funding and resources (*‘make them more savvy’*).
- Experiences with their own children had highlighted how much foster carers need empowering.

‘It should be about empowering all foster carers.’

- For one Education Champion, a good working relationship with the virtual school in a previous borough had highlighted that there was scope for this to improve in their present borough. They explained that they could contribute to this by taking on the Education Champion role.
- A good working relationship with the local authority coordinator.

Configuring the Education Champion role

During the scoping and planning phase, The Fostering Network asked each local authority to consider how they would configure the role of Education Champion and how these individuals would be supported or recompensed. Options suggested included configuring the role as a voluntary role with expenses or paying Education Champions for their contact hours. The rate of pay was at the discretion of local authorities, but suggested reference points included the Living Wage or any rate that local authority might already pay foster carers who take on mentoring responsibilities. While one local authority coordinator reported using some of the £1,700 locally allocated budget¹⁰ to fund Education Champions’ time, another felt that their funds were not sufficient for this purpose. This question of remuneration was also raised among all Education Champions. One explained that they are happy to offer support, but as it is not a paid role, this should not continue beyond the scope of the support needed by the foster carer. Similarly, another Education Champion explained that many Education Champions also work, and so taking on the additional duties can put a strain on their time, and as such there is scope to consider further funding for the role.

‘It is too important a task to rely on volunteer foster carers who are so busy.’

Some qualitative findings were also linked to the theme of the commitment required to be an Education Champion and the possibility of individual foster carers taking on too much. One local authority coordinator expressed concern that they are reliant on the goodwill of the Education Champions.

‘We are vulnerable in terms of people’s focus and time.’

Foster carers: recruitment and motivation for taking part

The qualitative research also showed that there were two main approaches to recruiting foster carers to receive support from Education Champions.

The first was identifying foster carers based on the characteristics of the individual child or young person that they have in placement (e.g. whether they fit into the target cohort or age group) and the skills and experience of the foster carers. Where this was the case, support for the foster carers was initiated via contact from local authority coordinators, discussions with supervising social workers or being informed at foster carer development days that their child’s cohort had been selected for the project work.

The second approach was to invite self-referrals from foster carers at meetings and via emails, which was the case in two of the local authorities where coordinators and Education Champions were

¹⁰ A local budget allocation of £1,700 was given to each local authority to support the work of the project.

interviewed. However, only one of the interviewed foster carers had self-referred to the project and their reason for this was because they needed specific support with a school complaint.

The process of recruiting foster carers is discussed in more detail in the section on challenging and enabling factors.

Pairing Education Champions and foster carers for peer support

The qualitative interviews and focus group showed that the criteria involved in pairing Education Champions with foster carers were based on experience, skills and their geographical location. Ages of the children in foster care also played a role in pairing in one local authority.

Following pairing, Education Champions initiated contact with the foster carers whom they were supporting. The interviews showed that this mostly happened via a phone call, where contact details had either been provided by the local authority coordinator or exchanged at events.

The idea of including supervising social workers in the early stages of the project was also raised here. For instance, in one local authority, supervising social workers were meant to speak to the foster carers before contact was initiated by the Education Champions. However, some foster carers were accidentally contacted before this could happen which *'didn't go down very well.'* One Education Champion stressed the importance of 'buy-in' from social workers, as these discussions could help to reduce the hesitation shown by some foster carers. A recurring point made across the interviews with local authority coordinators was the importance of involvement from supervising social workers. For instance, the view was that for long-term embedding, the supervising social workers really need to take more control of the project. By making Fostering Potential part of the overall running of the department, such as integrating it into annual reviews, this can help to *'embed more into the model.'*

Project activity data

This section presents data on project activity from the participating local authorities in the period September 2018 to July 2019.

This data is based on project updates received from local authorities, the Education Champion survey, foster carer survey and on project data received from local authorities. All local authorities provided verbal project updates on a regular basis. However, only three out of seven local authorities provided sets of project data. Two of those local authorities provided a full set of project data and one authority provided a partial set of project data.

Number of participants

Table 4. Number of participants, as reported by local authorities

Participants	Number taking part
Local authorities	7
Active Education Champions as of May 2019 ¹¹	53
Foster Carers who received 1-1 support from an Education Champion ¹²	71
Children and young people whose foster carer received 1-1 support ¹³	68

There was a small degree of attrition of Education Champions between the initial training and the project delivery phase. Fifty-eight prospective champions took part in initial training, but feedback during a project update in May 2019 noted that eleven Education Champions had withdrawn or otherwise dropped out from the programme. The reasons for withdrawal were not collected formally, but anecdotal data included experiencing challenges with their own fostering placement or deciding to take on other responsibilities within the local fostering community. Alongside this, five additional Education Champions were recruited locally and given catch-up training by local project coordinators. This brought the total of active Education Champions to 53 in May 2019.

Type of contact between Education Champions and foster carers

The data provided by three of the local authorities recorded any contact between an Education Champion and a foster carer for the purposes of the programme, for example meetings, phone calls, emails or home visits. In these areas there were 93 contacts between 19 Education Champions and 44 foster carers in the project period, with foster carers receiving between one and six contacts each. This data has been set alongside findings from the Education Champion and foster carer surveys where relevant.

The project planning and training phase anticipated that the project contact would be delivered mainly via Education Champions working 1-1 with foster carers during home visits, in order to make a direct impact on foster carers' knowledge, confidence and practices within the home. However, the findings from the evaluation process showed a wider range of forms of contact in practice.

¹¹ A total of 58 Education Champions were trained Oct 18-Jan 19. This figure reflects the 53 Education Champions described as active as of May 2019.

¹² This figure reflects foster carers receiving direct contact from an Education Champion in the evaluation period.

¹³ The child total differs from the foster carer total due to children entering or leaving care during the period.

Table 5. Type of contact based on data from local authorities and survey responses (most frequent types of contact shown in bold)

Type of contact	Local authority data	Education Champion survey	Foster carer survey
Phone	27	13	0
Visiting foster carer's home	26	10	4
Other face-to-face meeting	26	7	1
Email or other text-based messaging	2	8	0
Meeting at a group / support group	4	12	2
Social media	0	0	0
Other	-	3	1
Total ¹⁴	85 ¹⁵	15 ¹⁶	7

Aggregating these findings suggests that a **face-to-face meeting** (either at home or in another place) was the most common form of contact, followed by contact by **phone**. In addition, the responses in the Education Champions' survey confirmed that they tended to offer a combination of different approaches. For instance, four (of 15) Education Champions reported offering support via all five types of contact; and 10 (of 15) said that they use at least two of the forms of contact.

This combination of support was also evident in the qualitative research. While one Education Champion was yet to be matched with a foster carer, the others reported the importance of meeting with the foster carer face-to-face, usually in their own home. Telephone conversations were mostly used to organise meetings, with the main support provided mostly taking place face-to-face. The importance of meeting face-to-face was also reiterated in the interviews with foster carers. Four of the five foster carers interviewed explained that, in addition to phone calls and emails, all had also received face-to-face meetings. However, one foster carer explained that for them, everything had been done over the phone and email, which they found difficult, and that it would have been more useful to receive support face-to-face.

Type of support provided by Education Champions to foster carers

Based on the data spreadsheets provided by three of the participating local authorities and survey responses, the support provided was most frequently categorised in the following areas:

- Talking about a child's progress.
- Discussing specific issues/problems.
- Suggestions to support English or maths.
- Signposting to other services.
- Talking about a child's future options.
- Preparation for PEP meetings.

¹⁴ Many survey respondents gave multiple answers and so total respondents do not match total responses

¹⁵ There was no data provided in 8 cases – total refers to total visits.

¹⁶ In the post project survey responses 15 Education Champions and seven foster carers gave responses on direct work between Education Champions and foster carers.

Table 6. Type of support based on data from local authorities and survey responses (most frequent responses shown in bold)

Type of support	Local authority data	Education Champion survey	Foster carer survey
Talking about child's progress	22	12	2
Discussing specific issues/problems	21	9	2
Talking about child's future options	13	5	2
Signposting to other services	10	8	2
Suggestions to support English/maths	9	11	3
Suggestions for working with school (survey also included 'or other services')	6	8	3
Preparation for PEP meeting	7	9	3
Suggesting places to visit that might interest the child or young person	Not included	7	0
Suggesting ways to support the child or young person's engagement in extracurricular activities	Not included	6	2
Other - not described above	19	1	1
Total respondents ¹⁷	93	15	7

Responses in the 'other' category across all three forms of data collection included explaining the Fostering Potential project to the foster carer, finding information, helping foster carers with IT skills, talking about extracurricular activities, discussing special arrangements for public examinations, printing resources from online sites that can be used by the carer to support their child with homework and talking about independent living skills. Only one Education Champion reported offering one type of support (discussing specific issues or problems) while all others reported using at least two approaches.

The interviews with Education Champions and foster carers provided more detailed insight to the type and nature of the support provided by Education Champions. This included:

- supporting with IT and computers
- introducing the foster carer (and where relevant, child) to new resources.
- Supporting the foster carer with school correspondence:

'She wants the best for the child, but isn't always sure how to get it.'

- preparation for PEP meetings
- accompanying foster carer to PEP meetings
- support the foster carer to make a school complaint
- encouraging target setting for fostered children
- encouraging foster carer and fostered children to read every evening.

¹⁷ Many survey respondents gave multiple answers and so total respondents do not match total number of responses

Children and young people

The three participating local authorities provided data on 47 children and young people whose foster carer had experienced direct contact with an Education Champion.

Table 7. Demographic data on looked after children and young people impacted by the programme

Age		Sex		Type of provision	
Birth to 5 years	3	Male	19	Early years setting ¹⁸	0
6 to 10 years	23	Female	23	Mainstream school	37
11 to 15 years	12			Special school	3
16 to 18+ years	7	No data	5	FE setting	2
No data	2			Pupil referral unit	1
				Not currently attending school ¹⁹	3
				No data	1
Totals	47		47		47

Of the participating children and young people (as of spring 2019); nine had an identified special educational need or disability, but did not have an education health and care plan (EHCP); and five had a current EHCP.

Wider project activity in local areas

A wider beneficial consequence of the project work was the hosting of locally produced events, training and the development of resources to support the programme. These events were not a centrally planned aspect of the programme design, but were initiated, planned and delivered by local project coordinators. Examples of wider project activity in the period September 2018 to July 2019 are shown in Table 8.

¹⁸ There were three children aged five or under, who were all attending Reception classes in a mainstream school or academy.

¹⁹ One child had been excluded at the time of the project contact; two were recently placed siblings who did not yet have a school place.

Table 8. Examples of wider project activity in local authority areas

Local authority	Wider project activity
Barking & Dagenham	<p>Distribution of resource packs to foster carers, arising from shared project learning about work in Tower Hamlets.</p> <p>Children and foster carers have been encouraged to access The New Town Culture programme, including social activities taking place during school breaks.</p>
Greenwich	<p>Education Champions have presented about different education topics, such as supporting reading, at foster carer development days.</p> <p>Education Champions have developed a resource called 'Top Tips for PEPs' and shared other educational tools with foster carers.</p>
Islington	<p>Additional training for Education Champions was provided by the virtual school.</p> <p>Training on writing personal education plans held for foster carers and Education Champions.</p>
Kent County Council	<p>The virtual school led a workshop for Education Champions on attainment, progress and pupil premium plus, leading to a FAQs document for foster carers.</p> <p>An annual calendar for training about education has been jointly created by the virtual school and the fostering service This is being rolled out to all foster carers across Kent.</p>
The City of Nottingham	<p>Education Champions have created a leaflet about setting personal education plans.</p> <p>Plans for an aspirations day at the University of Nottingham.</p>
Suffolk	<p>Higher education family awareness day planned for all fostered children in Years 7-11 at the University of Suffolk.</p> <p>Plans for training for new foster carers to include an education component, co-delivered by an Education Champion.</p>
Tower Hamlets	<p>Sessions for foster carers at the University of East London, and the Museum of London Docklands. The first session included training for foster carers on the use of Nimbl, an online learning package.</p> <p>Distribution of a pack of educational resources to participating foster carers, tailored to the ages and needs of their looked after children</p>

Challenging and enabling factors

There was a high degree of variation in the progress of the project in different local authorities which was evident across both the qualitative and quantitative findings.

This section considers factors which have influenced project progression, including external and organisational factors, the role of the project lead, the role of Education Champions, challenges in engaging foster carers and the relationship with virtual schools.

External and organisational factors

During the project delivery period several of the local authorities experienced factors that put their fostering service under significant strain. This included Ofsted inspection of children's services, key members of staff moving on and the long-term sickness absence of members of staff. This had knock-on effects on the early phase of project delivery, such as training needing to be postponed or the project being reassigned to members of staff who had not been involved in the initial scoping and planning phases. During the qualitative work, some stakeholders reported that the pairing of Education Champions and foster carers had not yet taken place and that progress in their local authority was not as advanced as they would like it to be. That said, a recurring theme was that, even in the absence of pairing, wider beneficial activities had taken place to promote and support education amongst the fostering cohort (e.g. developing resources).

The role of the project lead and 'buy-in' from other team members

The local authority coordinators come from a variety of roles including team managers and supervising social workers. The role and seniority of the person leading on the project seemed to potentially act as both an enabler and barrier to the progress of the project. For instance, on one hand, where coordinators held a more senior role, this was perceived as helping to push forward progress.

'It is likely to be more successful when the coordinator is at management level, as it is harder when there is no strategic overview.'

'Because I'm so passionate about it, I was able to push it forwards and persevere.'

However, on the other hand, some reported that it was too challenging to undertake a more senior role alongside managing the Fostering Potential Project.

'It's partly my own fault...there is a lack of resources and timing.'

'It's only one per cent of all the work I have to do.'

There was general agreement that the project has *'taken up more time than originally anticipated'* and that the *'half a day commitment has been a little ambitious.'* In addition, in one case, one Education Champion interviewed felt that they were very much driving the project, because the local authority coordinator did not have the time to take it forwards. In one of the local authorities where there has been significant progress with the project, they reported that they had a team to take it forwards. This team included an administration apprentice, meaning that the tasks were spread across a few different individuals. In contrast, some other local authority coordinators reported that they were very much leading the project alone and more *'buy-in'* from management might help to support the person in the local authority lead role.

'My manager hasn't asked about it since it started.'

There were many suggestions across the qualitative research that supervising social workers may be more suited to the role. The qualitative research also highlighted the importance of ensuring social

workers are invested in the project. For instance, one local authority coordinator explained that many social workers are *'not buying into it'* which in turn is impacting upon the willingness to participate from foster carers.

'This was a bit of a situation to try and address...if I had to start all over again, I would get the supervising social workers involved sooner...if they own it more, it would be better.'

Education Champions

The enthusiasm and commitment of the Education Champions was also seen as key in the progression of the project. The focus group and interviews showed just how passionate Education Champions are about the role.

'Anyone who comes into a foster carer's household, should have the same education as their own children.' (Education Champion)

'I want to empower and make sure children get what they are entitled to and not fobbed off.' (Education Champion)

'I really want to encourage what should be there but isn't already there.' (Education Champion)

'I want to give foster carers the tools they need to keep that knowledge and pass it on to other children.' (Education Champion)

One local authority coordinator also explained how their team of Education Champions are particularly good at highlighting the challenges that need to be overcome in developing the project. This was also evident in the interviews with Education Champions. In one local authority, where progress was reported as being behind schedule, there seems to be some frustration amongst the Education Champions, who are keen to take it forwards.

'We are now waiting for the pairings to happen. For the foster carers who came forwards to be Education Champions, it is now a waiting game. We are ready to pick up the baton and run with it.'

Challenges engaging foster carers

Despite the baseline survey showing that over half of responding foster carers in the participating areas would like support relating to their fostered children's education (see Appendix B), the qualitative research showed that there has been some resistance from foster carers to take part in the project. This was evidenced in three main ways:

1. Foster carers have shown reluctance to take part when approached

Where foster carers had been identified and approached to take part (e.g. if their fostered child is part of the target cohort), many feel that they do not need the support, or already receive a lot of support if their fostered child has specific needs (e.g. SEND).

'I was a bit miffed really.' (Foster carer)

'I expected that she would tell me things I already knew.' (Foster carer)

'We were selected because they could see she wasn't meeting her targets. But it was just a slow build and we knew it would happen.' (Foster carer)

'A lot of the foster carers feel like they are being questioned and that they are not good enough. This has been the biggest hurdle, making foster carers realise it's not their fault and that they've done nothing wrong.' (Education Champion).

While participation is *'not officially compulsory'* it had been strongly encouraged among these foster carers. Some local authority coordinators explained that they have attempted to overcome this resistance by making it very clear that *'they've not been singled out.'* However, in some cases, foster carers explained that they felt that their participation in the programme was not optional.

It is also important to acknowledge that, as foster carers' approval is under regular review, they may not wish to allow a perception of any deficit in their skills and knowledge in any area of children's care. One Education Champion felt that there would be more success if it was automatic that all foster carers participated in the programme:

'It should be the norm that everyone gets an Education Champion.'

2. Where local authorities have invited self-referrals, uptake has been low

In those authorities where foster carers are self-referring, it was noted that there has been *'a lack of volunteers amongst the fostering cohort.'* This recurring issue has led to some frustration amongst local authority coordinators. Local authority coordinators reported attending meetings, or inviting foster carers to meetings, in order to inform them about the project.

'Those that came along liked the idea and wanted to get involved.'

However, where this approach had been adopted, there was still feedback from Education Champions and foster carers that more information was needed. For instance, one foster carer reported that the local authority coordinator had presented at a Mockingbird²⁰ meeting about Fostering Potential, but that more detail was needed, such as an information pack. Where foster carers had attended a presentation, some also felt that they would also like to discuss the project with their supervising social worker before taking part. However, alternative self-referral mechanisms could also present problems. In the survey responses from foster carers, one commented that they felt the self-referral process in their local area was a barrier to participation: in this instance foster carers need to refer themselves via their supervising social worker, who then makes contact with the project coordinator.

Shortly before publication, one local authority reported an increase in self-referral which had followed the Education Champions actively promoting the project at support groups. This also supports findings around the importance of Education Champions in promoting the project work.

3. In some cases the peer support was stopped after only one or two meetings

There were three interviews where the pairing was reported as unsuccessful and the support had stopped. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, foster carers said that they already receive enough support elsewhere. Secondly, some foster carers felt there were other priorities for their foster child at present (e.g. discouraging them from gang membership).

'We got on fine, but they were not wanting to participate.' (Education Champion)

²⁰ The Mockingbird programme to support fostering families is also run by The Fostering Network.

'I don't feel it needs to go any further.' (Foster carer)

One local authority coordinator also explained that some foster carers have not understood why they have not been paired with the same Education Champions as in other programmes (i.e. Mockingbird) and that explaining their pairing decisions has been an *'uphill struggle.'*

'This has created a lot of tension.'

'We are having to be the bridge between Education Champions and foster carers.'

However, there were also many reports of successful pairings based on the criteria above (*'Where it worked, it worked well.'*) and speaking with the foster carers themselves did highlight some willingness to participate. For instance: one explained that they wanted the support because they were new to foster caring; one was keen to support their foster child, particularly with her English; and one wanted specific support with a complaint at school. One was also happy to embrace the idea as they are the *'first educator'* but they remained unclear on why they were selected.

There was an overarching view from participants in the qualitative research that newer foster carers may be more receptive to Fostering Potential support, whereas more experienced foster carers tend to feel that they are being singled out. One Education Champion suggested that all new foster carers should be *'buddied up'* with an Education Champion. This was mentioned in both interviews, as well as the Education Champions' survey (three respondents) and foster carer interviews. Another Education Champion expressed the view that the longer-standing foster carers who turn down support might not necessarily be following best practice and that *'new foster carers may be more willing'*. This was also evident when discussing the successful pairings that have taken place as, in two cases, the foster carers are new to fostering, with one still yet to undergo their foster carer training.

Relationship with virtual schools

A recurring theme was that the relationship with virtual schools has presented challenges to the project delivery. In many cases, the fostering team needed support from virtual schools to develop resources and identify the focus within the authority. These challenges have arisen because of tensions relating to time and funding, and the need for a clear local implementation plan. There was some feeling from local authority coordinators that virtual schools *'don't understand what carers go through'* meaning that they may not recognise the importance of the project.

'This was the trickiest part of the process.'

That said, there were many reports of improved relationships with virtual schools as a result of involvement in the project and it was explained that they have been involved in training and building resources.

However, it is important to note that the project was led by the virtual school in two local authorities, but that those service representatives were less involved in the evaluation, so their views are not reflected to the same extent.

Supporting project delivery

As part of the qualitative research, local authority coordinators and Education Champions were asked about the wider support they have received from The Fostering Network and their local authority coordinators, respectively, as well as working collaboratively amongst themselves.

Local authority coordinators

- Local authority coordinators generally spoke highly of the support received and how they have worked with The Fostering Network. However, one coordinator expressed that they would have liked more guidance in terms of how to take it forwards locally. While the timescale of the current programme dictated a prompt start, a similar view was expressed in a different local authority where they expressed that more meetings to discuss the local project setups would have been useful.
- There were mixed views about the level of independence and autonomy given with the local setup of the project. For instance, one local authority reported that it was 'nice to have the autonomy' to select the specific needs and focus. However, there was some feeling that focusing on one group could be limiting the project and that that this needed to be wider.

'Children are transient; I wish we could support them all.'

- Coordinators felt that sharing resources and collaborating across authorities had been useful and that regular project meetings hosted by The Fostering Network had helped to encourage and motivate the project work. For instance, one local authority coordinator explained that another coordinator had given a presentation about Fostering Potential in their local authority and that this had *'inspired'* them. There was also some discussion at the focus group of bringing Education Champions from across the local authorities together, as these shared learning events would be useful for them.

Education Champions

- Education Champions reported regular meetings with their peers and local authority coordinators to discuss the peer support they offer and feedback on how everything is going. All Education Champions reported that they received regular emails and phone calls from the local authority coordinator, as well as seeing the coordinators at the meetings themselves. In one case, the Education Champion reported that the coordinator is also their supervising social worker, meaning the support gained is part of a wider support package.
- Collaborative working amongst Education Champions varied across areas. In one local authority, they reported that they had shared contact details at the initial training and have regular meetings where they can offer support to each other: *'The teamwork has been really good.'* One Education Champion also referred to informal support, whereby they may discuss non-confidential Fostering Potential issues at other fostering related meetings. Two Education Champions reported how they are working with other Education Champions in their local authority to take the project forward. For instance, in one authority they have been working together to target hubs and support groups in order to encourage foster carers to sign up to the project.

Impact on foster carers and Education Champions

This section of the report considers impacts of the Fostering Potential project on foster carers and on Education Champions.

Perspectives from foster carers and Education Champions

These findings were collated across the surveys and interviews with Education Champions and foster carers.

- Foster carers made a number of positive comments in their survey responses, showing that they perceived benefits from engaging with the project work:

'An example is that my Education Champion let me know that I should be receiving a copy of the personal education plan following a PEP meeting, which I had never received before, so that was very helpful.'

'I invited Education Champions to a Mockingbird carers' support group to tell us about what they can do and to empower us with tools to help with our children's education.'

'Looked at different sources to help.'

'Gave me more confidence.'

'It is a good idea, and I hope it continues. Now I know, should I need any extra help, where I should go.'

The surveys and the qualitative work explored how far Education Champions and foster carers agreed that the project had increased the foster carers' **skills, knowledge or confidence**:

- Comments from interviews with foster carers and Education Champions showed a positive impact upon foster carers' **confidence**:

'A lot, a lot, a lot!' (Education Champion)

'There has definitely been an improvement.' (Education Champion)

'100 per cent improved this.' (Foster carer)

'Anything you can do boosts confidence.' (Foster carer)

'The school had not treated me as an equal, but I am now confident to say things.' (Foster carer)

'If you can build confidence in one, it can build confidence in the other.' (Education Champion)

- When asked about impacts upon foster carers' **skills and knowledge**, Education Champions were generally more positive than foster carers. The former reported improvements, with specific reference to IT skills and use of resources. However, foster carers were more hesitant with their answers to this question.

'I cannot answer this, all I can say is that I am trying my best.'

- Where foster carers reported that their skills and knowledge had improved, this related to better access to resources and, in one case, developing a more professional document as part of a complaint they were making to the school.
- Four Education Champions used the additional comments section at the end of the survey to reference the benefits of the project, referring to it as *'fantastic'*, *'wonderful'*, *'great'*, *'excellent'*, *'outstanding'*. One respondent also explained that the project has taken time to implement but that *'it is worth all efforts.'*

Perspectives from local authority coordinators

Local authority coordinators were asked generally about their views of the impacts on foster carers. The focus group and interviews highlighted the following impacts of the support from Fostering Potential on foster carers:

- Building confidence
- Increased resilience in dealing with education issues
- Better articulation of the fostered child's educational needs
- Increased interest and engagement in PEP meetings
- Greater knowledge about the education system and opportunities available
- Increased knowledge of appropriate resources (e.g. training for Tower Hamlets foster carers on the online package Nimbl).

These impacts were perceived to lead to greater outcomes such as:

- feeling more connected with schools and the education system
- building of transferable skills
- enabling their voices to be heard, via the Education Champion.

One local coordinator also mentioned that another benefit for foster carers is an improved relationship across the whole fostering cohort. As a result of the meetings with each other and Education Champions, they have been given the opportunity to learn from each other.

However, it should be noted that across both the surveys and qualitative research, Education Champions and local authority coordinators tended to report greater positive impacts on foster carers than foster carers reported themselves.

Impacts on Education Champions

While not a direct aim of the project, both local authority coordinators and Education Champions referred to the impacts on the latter, as a result of Fostering Potential. These included:

- increased knowledge – *'It's always helpful to get other information'*
- improved relationships between Education Champions and virtual schools
- personal development and empowerment
- connections within the council
- the opportunity to express their views. One local authority coordinator explained that many decisions are made without foster carers, and this has allowed them to ensure they are *'feeling like their voices are heard'*
- helping them to feel enthused to take the project forwards and a desire to share their knowledge
- self-reflection on how they work with their own children –

'There is pressure to be brilliant with my own foster child.'

'Makes you pull yourself up and look at your own practice as a foster carer.'

- learning from foster carers and each other. In particular, when asked how other Education Champions had impacted on their role, two felt that this had a positive impact. For instance, there was one view that it was helpful to work with like-minded people. Another Education Champion explained that working as a group helps to feel like they are working again – *‘I’m very much a people person...whereas fostering feels like extended family...I like the feeling that I’m working again.’*

On a similar note, one Education Champion explained that they *‘loosely pass on information to friends and family’* meaning that there are indirect benefits for people outside of the project.

Impact on children in foster care

This section considers impacts of the Fostering Potential project on children and young people in foster care.

These findings in this section are based on the project data provided by participating local authorities, the surveys (with Education Champions and foster carers) and the qualitative research (interviews with local authorities, Education Champions and foster carers).

Individual learning targets

As per the programme design, Education Champions were asked to provide peer support to foster carers on supporting their fostered child in maths and English, in particular working towards the child's individual learning targets.

These targets are based on the child's personal education plan, as agreed between school, the child or young person, the foster carer and the local authority. The findings in this section are based on project data received from local authorities. Three out of seven local authorities provided sets of project data, but unfortunately very little data was available for this aspect of the work.

Within the data provided for 47 children, information was available about maths targets identified for 13 children and English targets identified for 15 children. Where information was available about the nature of these targets they comprised curriculum and age-specific targets, for example adding and subtracting numbers for maths, or targets relating to daily reading, using inference, constructing sentences and using punctuation for English. Other targets related to maths and English GCSE results and transition to college. Six of those children were recorded as having achieved or partially achieved maths targets and six to having achieved or partially achieved English targets during the programme period.

In addition, all stakeholders were asked about the impacts on children, both via the survey (with Education Champions and foster carers) and the interviews (with local authority coordinators, Education Champions and foster carers).

Perspectives from Education Champions

Education Champions were particularly positive about the impacts upon children, in both the survey and interviews. In the survey, 10 of 14 Education Champions said there had been a positive impact upon fostered children. Two said they hoped to see an impact and two commented that it was too early to tell. The impacts described included:

- building ambition and confidence for transition to post-16 provision
- providing support to choose subjects
- engagement in extra-curricular activities
- improved relationship with carers
- making plans for the future
- a recommended book has improved engagement with reading
- suggesting alternative activities
- PEP support will in turn support the fostered child
- engaging in activities out of school will help in school.

These findings were echoed in the qualitative interviews with Education Champions. Two of the interviewees were positive about the impacts upon the children in foster care, with both increased confidence and attainment.

*‘My help has even tailed off a bit because of such a good PEP report last month.’
(Education Champion)*

However, for one Education Champion the support was perceived to be more about improving awareness of funding and resources, than directly impacting upon the child’s confidence and attainment.

Perspectives from foster carers

When foster carers were asked about the impacts of the project for children in care, their views were more mixed than those of other stakeholders. This was evident in both the survey and interviews. Within the surveys, one answered ‘yes’ they had seen an impact and two commented that they were looking forward to seeing an impact. However, no other comments were made here. Similarly, in interviews with foster carers, while one felt that the project had definitely improved their fostered child’s confidence and attainment, particularly in English, the other foster carers felt that any improvements were a result of other support, rather than Fostering Potential. For instance, one commented that they would be approaching the virtual school, who they already had a good relationship with, to ask for extra support for their fostered child. Similarly, another foster carer explained that they had paid for a tutor which had supported the child. Despite these views, these foster carers also made brief, more positive comments that there had been some passing on of websites which had been useful, and that they were now having more regular meetings with the school and the fostered child, which gives the latter a better idea of what she is working towards.

Foster carers were also asked about the activities they undertook with their fostered children, as a result of the project. Three of the five were able to report positive changes either as a direct result of Fostering Potential, or from the wider fostering support, which they acknowledged includes Fostering Potential. These included:

- completing homework together
- breaking homework into more manageable chunks
- more discussions of homework
- reading together every night
- greater encouragement for their foster child – *‘I tell her to believe in herself more’*
- increased use of education websites.

Awareness and involvement of fostered children

Interestingly, the foster carers took different approaches to involving their fostered children in the support they were receiving. Two reported that the children were aware and involved with the Fostering Potential project, so that they are aware of where they can get this additional support.

‘They are very pleased about it.’

‘He was proudly showing off his work at the PEP meeting.’

‘They embrace the support they’re getting.’

However, the other foster carers interviewed explained that they did not see the project as something the child or young person needed to be aware of. In one case, this was because they saw the support as being just for their own benefit. Another foster carer explained that they were receiving very specific support from the Education Champion in relation to a school complaint, and therefore it was not necessary to make the young person aware of this, as it related to the way the foster carer had been treated in a PEP meeting. Finally, one had chosen not to inform their foster child because they did not see the support as being ongoing.

Perspectives from local authority coordinators

Local authority coordinators were very positive about the impacts upon looked after children and young people. There was a consensus that the project was or could be beneficial for fostered children, in terms of their education. Comments included:

- improvement of children's attainment
- increased interest in learning from children - *'From what we have heard from Education Champions, some of the children are showing more enthusiasm to do their homework and things at school.'*
- improved advocacy from carers to support children at school
- improved attendance at school.

However, local authority coordinators also commented about the need to look at the attainment data of children in foster care. There was a view among some that this had not been considered fully yet, but that looking back at this will help to capture the impacts. This requires involvement from virtual schools and one coordinator felt that the looked after children reviews could be useful for assessing these outcomes.

A local authority also provided the following case study, showing positive impact on a foster carer and child:

Case study

One of the Education Champions had a successful series of meetings with K, who was a friends and family foster carer for her five-year-old granddaughter. K was keen to take part in the programme as her granddaughter had just begun Reception class and she wanted more guidance on how to support her learning. The Education Champion built rapport with K over several visits, suggesting approaches including a calendar for meeting dates, a star chart for the child and a home-school communication book. She also accompanied K and her granddaughter to the library where they registered for library cards and choose some books. By the end of the sessions K had increased in confidence, the communication book was working well, and the strategies suggested were being used. In the final session the Education Champion talked to K about what to expect at the upcoming PEP meeting.

Extracurricular activities

Education Champions were also asked to support the foster carer in identifying and working towards an extracurricular target for the child or young person. This aspect of the project work was left open and could mean any beneficial activity that might support the child in their extracurricular activities, participation opportunities or activities to broaden and extend their life experiences. For example, depending on the age of the child, it could mean taking part in an after-school club or sporting activity, a school council or finding out about future career opportunities. The findings on extracurricular activities are based on project data received from local authorities and on the qualitative research (interviews with local authorities, Education Champions and foster carers).

While data was reported for 47 children and young people, only twelve targets were recorded relating to extra-curricular activities, participation and widening horizons. Categories were provided for recording the targets and these included 'Trips, visits or outreach programmes' (nine) with activity described as *'visiting museums and parks'* or visiting other family leisure facilities; 'Sports, hobbies

and other interests' (four) including cycling and 'Independence and life skills' (two). Six children were recorded as having achieved these targets during the programme period.

However, when local authority coordinators were asked about the impact of the project on extracurricular activities, their responses were generally positive. For instance, there was reference to a more appropriate use of pupil premium among foster carers, which meant that they '*thought outside the box*' and considered a wider range of activities, such as dance classes.

There was also some feeling that the project had led to improved life chances for children and young people.

'It has opened up a world for the child that wouldn't have been opened.' (Local authority coordinator)

Education Champions had more mixed views about the impact of the project on involvement in extracurricular activities. One felt that it *could* increase how much was '*tapped into, it's just discovering it*' and one commented that '*everything helps*' and although the project has not directly impacted upon extracurricular activities, there may have been an indirect effect for children.

In contrast, there was a firm consensus among foster carers that the project had made no impact on the use of extracurricular activities, and that any attendance at these would have occurred without their involvement in the project. The discussion of a child or young person's future plans was only relevant in one interview, in which the foster carer felt it was her job to know about this anyway, and that the project had made no impact upon this.

Impact on local authorities

This section presents evaluation findings on the impact of the Fostering Potential project on local authorities and on other services. The evaluation also explored stakeholders' views on the future sustainability of the work.

The findings in this section are based on qualitative research with local authority coordinators, Education Champions and foster carers.

Impact and effectiveness

As part of the qualitative research, stakeholders were asked about the impact and effectiveness of the project on the local authorities. The comments acknowledged both direct and indirect impacts:

- A recurring theme amongst local authority coordinators was improved partnership working with virtual schools, as the project has provided a vehicle of engagement for this. For example, in one local authority this has led to the development of new guides regarding young people's transition into post-16 provision.
- Improved working relationships with supervising social workers.
- Pushing a focus on the education of looked after children '*on to the agenda*'.
- A positive contribution towards Ofsted inspections and ratings.
- The project has helped to bring old schemes and resources (e.g. the online learning package Nimbl in Tower Hamlets) '*back to life*'.
- The introduction of support groups and raising awareness has led to improvements across the whole local authority, so that '*the whole fostering cohort has benefited*'.
- One local authority coordinator also felt that the impact of the project would be demonstrated via wider results, such as increased placement stability.

Impacts on schools and education professionals

All stakeholders were asked how the project might impact on teachers and other education professionals, specifically in terms of their knowledge of best practice for working with looked after children. Education Champions and foster carers were also asked about any impact on the relationship between schools and foster carers, as a result of the project.

Local authority coordinators and foster carers mostly reported that they did not feel able to answer the question regarding best practice knowledge amongst education staff. One local authority coordinator said it would be helpful to speak with virtual schools about this, and there may be value in inviting teachers to the next meeting.

Education Champions were generally in agreement that the support they are offering, has already, or will have a positive impact upon these relationships. For instance, one Education Champion reported that a foster carer feeling more confident to approach teaching staff has meant they have more regular contact and discussion about the young person's needs, which in turn has improved the relationship.

Foster carers were more mixed in their responses. Two foster carers did not feel that the project had impacted upon this relationship, with one explaining they already have a good relationship. However, two commented that this project has had a positive impact upon their relationship, because of improved communication and confidence:

'It made me stronger, I now don't care what I say.' (Foster carer)

Future plans for the project and sustainability

All stakeholders were asked about future planning for the project and the sustainability of the project work.

Comments from **Education Champions and foster carers** focused on the sustainability of individual peer support, mostly around when a peer support pairing should come to an end. Education Champions pointed out that where a *'young person has come on leaps and bounds'*, questions arose about the necessity to continue offering support. This point was also raised by foster carers, with two asking how far the support needs to be long term. That said, one foster carer who received short-term support questioned how she might access longer term support, as her child had just joined high school and is experiencing issues:

'I'm assuming I can get in touch again, but I'm not sure if I'd go direct or through the coordinator. I'm not sure how to go about it.'

Similarly, one of the other foster carers reported that *'any help is appreciated'* and she was keen to continue to receive support from the Education Champion in the longer term.

Issues of workload and the boundaries of the role also arose when discussing sustainability. One Education Champion explained that there is a need to make the role very clear from the outset. For instance, while some Education Champions have been attending PEP meetings with foster carers, this is very time consuming and instead they have now chosen to support them to prepare for it rather than attend with them. One Education Champion explained that it is very important that the Education Champion does not *'become everything'* to that foster carer and that they try to meet the time guidelines of one hour given to them.

When **local authority coordinators** were asked about sustainability and longer-term planning for the project, recurring ideas were to integrate the project into other schemes such as mentoring or the Mockingbird program. One local authority coordinator said that they will continue to offer learning events to foster carers and Education Champions, every two to three months. In addition, one local authority coordinator explained that they are going to extend the project to include another cohort (older children) and so offer more training to foster carers.

One local authority coordinator felt that the project needed further defining before extending it further. They felt that there was some conflict between whether the project relates to general support for the whole fostering cohort, or whether it is an individual peer support programme, and whether the support provided is proactive or reactive. There was also a consensus that there was a need to make clear how much staff time and resources was needed for the project, in order to encourage other local authorities to take part.

Summary and recommendations

This section presents a summary of the key findings and describes some of the main challenges and enablers encountered during the project work. The report closes with some learning points and recommendations for future programmes.

Summary of key findings

The main findings from this evaluation include:

- Overall, stakeholders feel that the project is an **excellent concept**. Local authorities and Education Champions are keen to take part and feel passionate about doing so. Education Champions' enthusiasm for the peer support work was recognised by all stakeholders and there has been a low rate of attrition amongst Education Champions.
- There is a **wide variation in progress between different local authorities**. In some local authorities the project is now well established, whereas in others, it is still very much in its infancy.
- The greatest impact on foster carers was found to be increasing **foster carers' confidence in working with their fostered children to support their education**.
- Local authorities have been using one of two methods to recruit foster carers: identifying and engaging foster carers whom they think are appropriate for support; and asking for self-referrals. **Identification and engagement of foster carers has a greater rate of uptake than self-referral**.
- Stakeholders described **positive impacts of the project for fostered children**. These included improved attainment and confidence, increased interest in learning, greater use of resources and increased foster carer contact with the school.
- Foster carers also reported **positive changes in the activities they do with their fostered children**, including completing and discussing homework together, reading together every night and increased use of education websites.
- Most contact between Education Champions and foster carers has been **face-to-face**, which seems to be preferred by foster carers. This comprises contact in the foster carer's own home and elsewhere. The next most frequent form of contact was by phone.
- The most common type of support provided during contact between Education Champions and foster carers was **talking about the child's progress**, followed by **discussing specific issues or problems**.
- Many stakeholders felt that the project has helped to **improve the working relationship** between fostering services and virtual schools.
- While not a direct aim of the programme, both local authority coordinators and Education Champions spoke about the **positive impact on Education Champions themselves**.
- Stakeholders also flagged some **wider benefits** of the project for foster carers and for services. For instance, local authorities developed and hosted **educational events and activities** that were open to the whole fostering cohort, Education Champions have written **locally produced resources** and local authorities have worked with external stakeholders, such as the Museum of London.

This evaluation highlighted the following barriers and enablers to project delivery:

- **The seniority of the local project lead** was a key factor in local project progression and was perceived as either a barrier or an enabler by different stakeholders. Some stakeholders felt that those in senior roles were able to ensure the project was perceived as important and build momentum at a service level. Others felt that the local lead holding a more senior role made it challenging for the project to progress because that individual had a lack of time and capacity to

run the project. Configuring the project responsibilities across a small team may be a solution to this issue.

- Although local authority coordinators promoted the project and encouraged foster carers to participate, a key challenge was **engaging foster carers to receive support from Education Champions**. This particularly applied to more experienced foster carers and related to them feeling 'singled out', which in turn acted as a barrier to accessing peer-support.
- Linked to this, were difficulties in **achieving 'buy-in' from other local authority team members**. There was some feeling that an increased project investment from more senior staff, and social workers, would help project progression, as well as encourage foster carers to take part.
- **Education Champions** were seen as important enablers to the project by all stakeholders. Many noted their enthusiasm and passion for the role, and their project input was perceived to be vital to project success. The **collaborative team working** amongst Education Champions also helped to promote the work and support the development of several resources.
- The **relationship with virtual schools** was perceived to be very important to the project. A positive working relationship was perceived as helping to drive Fostering Potential forwards, but several stakeholders referred to initial challenges in engaging virtual schools to become involved in the project although, in most cases, this has now improved.

Next steps for Fostering Potential

The programme period runs until April 2020 and the planned work in this period includes:

- ongoing peer support work between Education Champions and foster carers in local authorities, with an emphasis on local authorities embedding the approach into their ways of working
- further activity on the information strand of the programme, including the production of resources based on the peer support work
- exploring opportunities for a learning event to bring together local authorities, Education Champions and foster carers from different areas.

A follow-up report on the embedding phase of the programme will be produced in spring 2020, including an evaluation of the information strand.

Recommendations for future education peer support programmes

The Fostering Network will also be considering future programmes based on the work of Fostering Potential. Recommendations from the evaluation of Fostering Potential include:

- **Deeper consideration of how to engage foster carers to take part** is the most important recommendation for future programmes. Further exploration of foster carers' concerns and motivations for taking part may be helpful. Suggestions from the evaluation process include aligning the programme with other support such as the Mockingbird programme or giving all new foster carers an Education Champion.
- Greater **involvement of supervising social workers** is a key recommendation for future programmes. This may achieve greater 'buy-in' at a local level and help to engage foster carers by discussing the project at supervisions.
- Future programmes need to take forward learning from the current programme about the **capacity and resources required to run a local project**, which many local authority coordinators felt needed to be clearer from the outset. This should be communicated to local authorities or independent fostering providers before they commit to future work.
- There may be benefits to **configuring a wider local team including administrative support** to run local Fostering Potential projects, rather than relying on a sole coordinator. This approach was particularly successful in one local authority, whereas authorities relying on a sole lead were vulnerable to capacity issues and delays.

- The project is reliant on the skills, enthusiasm and capacity of the **Education Champions** and planning for how to recompense, support and retain them must be an ongoing element of future programmes.
- While the timescale of the current programme dictated a prompt start, there is scope for **local authorities to receive more in-depth support** from The Fostering Network in the local setup and arrangements of the project, particularly in the early stages. This may mean a longer start-up process to future programmes.
- The collaborative work amongst Education Champions in local areas shows that there may also be **benefit in working across participating local authorities to support each other**. Geographical clustering or more face-to-face events may assist with this in future programmes.
- It may be helpful to further **clarify and refine the peer support model** and communicate this to stakeholders. For instance, during interviews local authority coordinators asked whether the project is intended to provide support to individual foster carers in response to a specific situation or individual need, or whether it is a wider model that provides proactive and preventative support to a larger number of foster carers.
- The aim and scope of the work to support **extra-curricular activities, participation and widening horizons** could be further developed in future programmes. While the foster carer interview participants felt that the project had little impact on children's extracurricular activities, local authority coordinators and Education Champions recognised the potential benefits of the work that had taken place.
- There is scope to **work more closely with schools and education professionals**, regarding good practice for working with looked after children.
- Finally, this evaluation faced many **methodological challenges** in the recruitment of research participants, particularly fostered children, and collection of monitoring data from local authorities. It is important that any participating local authorities set up systems to fully support the project in terms of evaluation, to ensure that the outcomes and impacts can be fully considered. This includes engaging with children's social workers at an early stage to ensure that the child's voice is heard as part of the evaluation.

Further information

For further information about the Fostering Potential programme please contact Susan Soar, Project Manager on susan.soar@fostering.net

The programme webpage is available on The Fostering Network website at thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/fostering-potential

References

- Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre. (2019). *The Value of Cultural and Creative Engagement: Understanding the Experiences and Opinions of Care-experienced Young People and Foster Carers in Wales*. Cardiff: The University of Cardiff.
- DfE. (2019). *Outcomes for children looked after by LAs: 31 March 2018*. London: DfE.
- The EPPSE study. (2008). *Final report from the primary phase: Pre-school, School and Family Influences on Children's Development During Key Stage 2 (Age 7-11)*. London: DCSF
- REES Centre. (2015). *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- REES Centre and Loughborough University. (2016). *Evaluation of the London Fostering Achievement Programme*. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- The Scottish Government. (2018). *Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2016/17*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Government.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2010) Learning in the home and at school: how working-class children 'succeed against the odds'. *British Educational Research Journal*. 36:3, 463-482.
- The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. (2014). *Cracking the Code: how schools can improve social mobility*. London: DCSF.
- The University of Warwick. (2007). *Engaging parents in raising achievement: do parents know they matter?* Nottingham: DCSF

Appendix A

The London Fostering Achievement programme and the peer support approach

The London Fostering Achievement programme (2015-16) aimed to improve educational outcomes for children in care in London. The consortium commissioned to deliver London Fostering Achievement brought together The Fostering Network and Achievement for All. The programme included generic training on education for foster carers, masterclasses, direct work with schools and peer support from Education Champions. Twenty-nine of London's 31 Boroughs signed up for the programme. This programme drew upon learning within The Fostering Network from previous programmes, including the long running Fostering Achievement²¹ in Northern Ireland.

In the London Fostering Achievement programme Education Champions were experienced foster carers, often with education experience, who met with foster carers at existing groups and also provided one-to-one support for carers on specific issues. Two Education Champions were employed in each of five Boroughs, for four hours per week. They worked with foster carers to boost their confidence around supporting children's educational needs by, for example, attending meetings with them, working with them and their fostered child at home on English or maths, or helping them to navigate the educational system. The evaluation of the London Fostering Achievement programme (2016) was carried out by the REES Centre of the University of Oxford and Loughborough University and showed that, out of the four strands of the programme, the Education Champions emerged most strongly in terms of impact. The Education Champions were described as a key source of information about the support and services available. Interviewees were of the view that their experience in both education and foster care and their shared understanding with other foster carers were essential to the role. One of the key recommendations of the evaluation was that Education Champions should be implemented more widely, ideally in every local authority. It was suggested as a way of improving foster carer retention and delivering better progress for children at relatively low cost.

Implementing this recommendation by carrying out a further pilot of the Education Champions approach became the primary driver of the Fostering Potential programme.

²¹ The programme is now known as Fostering Attainment and Achievement. It works with foster and kinship carers as primary educators to improve educational outcomes for looked after children in foster care in Northern Ireland.

Appendix B

Foster carer baseline survey

Foster carers in each local authority were asked to complete an education survey to set a context for the evaluation of the project work. The survey received 264 responses across the seven local authorities.

Foster carers were asked about their knowledge and confidence in supporting the education of their fostered children.

Table 9. Baseline survey responses from foster carers regarding knowledge and confidence

Response	Number of responses
I know exactly how I can support them to achieve their full potential and where to get more support if needed.	116
I know how to support them but would like more help or guidance so that they can do as well as possible.	96
I do my best to support them, but I am not very confident in some areas of learning.	35
I don't feel at all confident in supporting their learning and would like more help in this area.	3
Totals	250

Foster carers also provided responses to the open-ended question: '*Thinking about supporting your fostered children's education and learning at home, are there any areas where you would like additional support?*'. There were 202 separate responses to this question, describing a wide range of areas where foster carers would like more support.

Responses included wanting more support in general or across a range of areas (50 responses), extra support or information around supporting children with SEND (21 responses), support with English or, predominately, maths (18 responses), wanting tuition or more tuition support (15 responses), support with children's psychological, attitudinal or motivational issues around learning (14 responses), more support from or clarity around the role of the Virtual school and the use of pupil premium plus (13 responses), provision for children following exclusion (seven responses) and more support from social workers (three responses). Among the responses already described above, foster carers also described needing more support in working with school or needing basic information that would normally be provided by school (26 responses).

The responses, particularly to the open-ended question, suggested that foster carers in the participating areas perceived a need for the programme.