An Evaluation of the Fostering Links Project

The Fostering Network Scotland
November 2007

Mary McKenna CQSW,
MSc. Applied Social Research
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Executive Summary

There are over 3,000 foster carers providing care in their own homes for some of the most complex and vulnerable children in Scotland. This report describes the impact that the Fostering Links project has made in the last three years in strengthening the fostering community and enabling them to have an influence on policy, practice and developments in foster care. Since its inception in 2005, the Fostering Links project has developed a range of activities to involve foster carers, fostering workers and fostering agencies in identifying common issues of concern; to reduce isolation of foster carers; and to enable foster carers to become involved in developments at a strategic level in fostering practice in Scotland.

Through the development of a programme of Focus Groups, regularly bringing together representatives of foster carers and agencies, the Fostering Links project has identified key areas of concern and made proposals for improving services. It has published reports of the findings from Focus Groups and these have been influential in informing the draft National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy. Alongside this there have been a series of Membership Meetings held to inform and educate all those involved in fostering children and these have helped reduce isolation and developed the knowledge, confidence and skills of foster carers. Meetings have been arranged in a number of venues to ensure accessibility, and special initiatives have been developed to involve the fostering communities in the remote islands. Through regular Scottish Newsletters and the updates to the Fostering Network website, the Fostering Links project has informed the fostering community on news and developments in foster care and reduced the isolation of carers. The project has also trained foster carers and young people to participate in media events that publicise and promote foster caring and inform the wider public of the issues that affect foster carers.

This report has evaluated these activities and concluded that the Fostering Links project has made a considerable impact in strengthening the fostering community in Scotland. There is now an effective infrastructure for consulting the fostering communities on developments and this is informing policy and planning within the Scottish Government. Foster carers’ vision of their contribution has expanded and they are now empowered to take up a role in influencing the future of the service. Through the Fostering Links project, the Fostering Network has become more effectively informed of the views and concerns of all of its members. Clearly, the Fostering Links project has strengthened the ability of the Fostering Network to represent its members and promote improvements in foster care services in Scotland.
**Introduction and Background**

The Fostering Network is the leading voluntary organisation involved in foster care in the UK. Its members include 50,000 foster carers, 214 local authorities and 196 independent fostering agencies. In Scotland, the Fostering Network has a membership of over 3,000 individual foster carers, 54 foster care providers, including all 32 local authorities.

Following the success of a membership drive in Scotland in 2004, three-year funding was obtained from the Big Lottery Fund to secure a post to build on the strength of the fostering community. This work is called the Fostering Links project and the worker appointed has established a range of activities to bring foster carers, fostering workers and policy makers together to strengthen the fostering community in Scotland.

This report outlines the main activities undertaken by the Fostering Links project from January 2005 - Sept 2007. It identifies the impact these have made on foster carers and the fostering community and the influence it has made at national and UK level in relation to its three key aims:

- To strengthen the support to groups within the fostering community
- To reduce isolation within the fostering community
- To highlight the issues facing the fostering community.

**Methodology**

This report is based on evidence from the following sources:

- An analysis of evaluation forms completed by the participants attending 18 Focus Group and Membership Meetings held between 2005-2007. This data has been collated, analysed and, where appropriate, charts illustrate the evidence obtained.

- A series of interviews with key stakeholders in fostering services in Scotland, including:
  - The Scottish Government Team Leader for foster, kinship and residential services for looked after children
  - The Care Commission, Team Leader Fostering Inspections
  - The Association of Directors of Work
  - The Chief Executive of The Fostering Network in the UK
  - The Director of the Fostering Network Scotland
  - The Chair of the Advisory Group of the Fostering Network Scotland
  - Five Regional advisors for the Fostering Network who are also foster carers.
  - The Fostering Managers in Western Isles Orkney, and Shetland Island Councils.

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1 Until September 2007 the Scottish Government was called the Scottish Executive; for consistency it will be called the Scottish Government throughout this report.
Most of these interviews were conducted by telephone, using a semi-structured questionnaire. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to interviewees for verification. Quotes have been drawn from interviews and used throughout this report to illustrate themes raised. A list of those interviewed is appended to this report.

The Fostering Links project

The Fostering Links project has contributed to the development of a range of activities, meetings, events, publications and training, many of which involve and complement the overall service provided by the Fostering Network Scotland. However, for the purposes of this report, the main activities and those where the Fostering Links project has had primary responsibility for developing and delivering, are described and evaluated. The main activities are as follows:

- Focus Groups
- Membership Meetings
- The Islands Initiative
- Independent Providers Forum
- The Scottish Newsletter
- Publications
- The Website
- Media Training

Focus Groups

In order to strengthen support to the fostering community, reduce isolation, and identify issues of shared concern, the Fostering Links project has been instrumental in establishing a series of Focus Groups across Scotland. The purpose of Focus Groups has been to bring together foster carers and fostering workers to identify common issues and concerns about the fostering services in Scotland and to help influence policy and planning at a strategic level. All local authorities and fostering agencies are invited to send representatives to Focus Groups, both foster carers and fostering workers, in proportion to the size of their agency. To enhance the Focus Groups, regional advisors have been appointed to gather the views of carers in preparation for meetings and actively encourage agencies to participate in Focus Groups. They are also available for advice locally and feed back the outcome of Focus Group meetings to foster carer groups and agencies in their area. The regional advisors are all active foster carers who have now become an important part of the infrastructure to support the involvement of foster carers in policy and service development.

Between 2005 and 2007 ten Focus Group meetings have been organised, in a range of locations, the length and breadth of the country. In total 103 foster carers and 79 fostering workers participated in Focus Groups, with an average attendance of 18 members at each meeting. All those who attended meetings were asked to complete detailed evaluation forms. Based on 152 returns, representing 83% of participants, these evaluations reveal that Focus Groups consistently meet the aspirations of those attending.
This chart illustrates that 97% of participants rated the Focus Group they attended as Good or Very Good. Where poorer ratings are mentioned in evaluation forms these relate to the venue or catering.

A more detailed analysis of evaluation forms confirms that foster carers value the opportunities to meet other foster carers and fostering workers, to share experiences of fostering and to discuss key concerns.

In this evaluation both foster care representatives and policy makers consistently highlighted the value of bringing foster carers and fostering workers together to identify common issues.

‘When meetings started there was a them and us. Groups separated into workers and carers and then we found

we identified the same issues, so now we all meet together. This is very important in improving communication’.

Regional advisor

‘The mix is very important, carers and workers, agencies and authorities’.

Regional advisor

One regional advisor acknowledged the importance of having meetings across Scotland:

‘In the past, carers in the north felt very isolated and there was no opportunity to have their views heard or to be involved in consultation….I have also benefited from hearing the views of representatives of different agencies and therefore have a more informed view of fostering’.

Regional advisor
Some of those interviewed for this evaluation had not attended Focus Groups. Nine interviewees, four regional advisors and four policy makers were able to rate the content and impact of Focus Groups on a scale from Poor to Very Good as follows:

- Seven out of eight considered Focus Groups are a Very Good way of informing people of new developments.
- Six out of eight considered Focus Groups provided a Good opportunity for foster carers and fostering workers to influence policy makers. The other two interviewees rated this as OK.
- All nine rated the organisation of meetings as Very Good.

The regional advisors, were also able to comment on the value of Focus Groups from the perspective of a foster carer:

- Four out of five rated the peer support available for foster carers at Focus Groups as Good or Very Good.
- All five had great confidence that their issues would be heard at Focus Groups.
- Four out of five thought Focus Groups were Good or Very Good at reducing isolation of foster carers.

Some Focus Groups have involved representatives from the Scottish Executive, Care Commission and other key stakeholders to update and inform the Group on developments across Scotland. The evaluations indicate that this is appreciated:

‘The knowledge that everyone is pulling in the same direction to further and improve foster services. That someone is sticking up for us’. Regional advisor.

Over the last three years the Director of the Fostering Network Scotland has observed the development of the service and considers that the Focus Groups have been instrumental in helping foster carers understand the contribution they can make to influencing policy in Scotland:

‘There is a growing recognition, by some foster carers, that they represent the service. They are becoming aware of the power and influence that they have. It is no longer about their own particular placement, or their difficulties with their local authority, it is about the future of fostering in Scotland. They have left their baggage behind and are able to engage at a more strategic level.’ Director, the Fostering Network Scotland

The Chief Executive of the Fostering Network identified the benefits Focus Groups in Scotland have made to the Fostering Network throughout the organisation:
'They ensure we are more connected to members than otherwise. When making recommendations on policy to government it is rooted, grounded in our members experience'. Chief Executive of the Fostering Network

When issues and concerns are raised at Focus Groups, they are progressed by the Fostering Network in a range of different ways. One regional advisor commented that feedback on action taken has increased confidence in the value of the Focus Groups:

‘Participation has improved over time, as foster carers know their concerns are heard, see their words written down, feel their issues are taken forward. They come more prepared for meetings. They understand the structure for consultation and the processes. They have confidence they will get feedback from meetings with Procurators Fiscal, Chief Constables, Ministers’. Regional advisor

The same Regional advisor illustrated the degree to which Focus Groups have raised expectations of having an ongoing consultative role in fostering developments in Scotland:

‘The Fostering Links project does very valuable work. If the Fostering Network were not doing it, it would be missed by foster carers and fostering workers alike. Focus groups are now a taken for granted part of the fostering calendar, one of the ways experience is shared, and people are kept informed’. Regional advisor

A minority of fostering agencies do not take up invitations to participate in Focus Groups for which there could be several explanations, including: the self sufficiency of the agency, the logistics of disseminating information and identifying representatives, or the reluctance to expose their foster carers to the experience and practice of other fostering agencies.

In early 2007, in partnership with the Scottish Government, the Fostering Links project organised a series of six consultation events to consult foster carers and fostering workers on the National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy. In total 16 events were organised in six locations: Edinburgh, Kilmarnock, Perth, Inverness, Aberdeen and Glasgow. While similar in style to earlier Focus Groups, these meetings had a wider constituency of participants. They involved 150 delegates, including 28 kinship carers, 61 foster carers and 61 fostering workers, from 28 local authorities and 13 voluntary and independent fostering providers.

The meetings stimulated considerable interest in the proposals contained in the National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy and the feedback from these consultations was recorded and submitted to the Scottish Government. The Team Leader from the Scottish Government appreciated the value of these meetings and confirmed they provided a major contribution to its consultation on the Strategy. She acknowledged that it would have been extremely difficult for the Government to obtain such comprehensive feedback without the help of the Fostering Links project:

‘The challenges of organising such a consultation process are beyond our capacity’. Team Leader, Foster, kinship, and residential services for looked after children, Scottish Government.
To make the Focus Group more effective the Fostering Links project has developed some infrastructure to support these meetings over the three years. To improve the dissemination the worker has identified Focus Group representatives to provide a contact point within each fostering agency. It has also identified regional advisors, foster carers from across Scotland, who attend the Scottish Advisory Committee of the Fostering Network and who have helped establish the links between the foster carers, Focus Groups and the national agenda. These representatives and regional advisors promote the value of Focus Group participation and develop initiatives in their region and support individuals in the responsibilities they undertake. The Team Leader from the Scottish Government recognised the importance of this behind the scenes support:

‘The example of the foster carers’ involvement in meeting with Members of the Scottish Parliament on the Education Committee illustrates how the Fostering Network effectively supports individual foster carers to inform and influence policy makers. I heard the foster carers feedback their experience at a Focus Group and it was clear they were empowered by this process’.

Team Leader, Foster, kinship, and residential services for looked after children, Scottish Government

As well as supporting individual foster carers, the infrastructure developed around Focus Groups has supported the development of the Fostering Network Scotland. One regional advisor described her role as:

‘Supporting the Scottish Board members of the Fostering Network in their governance’. Regional advisor
In November 2006 a Super Focus Group was organised to bring together the members of the Scottish Advisory Group, regional advisors, and Focus Group representatives with key members of the Scottish Government and the Care Commission to update and inform them on current issues. The focus of this meeting was primarily around areas of policy and practice that would be included in the draft National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy.

The Chair of the Fostering Network considers that the Focus Groups informed and influenced policy development in Scotland and, more routinely, she considers the infrastructure and information from Focus Groups has strengthened the Fostering Network:

‘The Advisory Group is now informed by the issues from across the membership and can talk with more authority’. Chair of the Scottish Advisory Committee

During the lifetime of the Fostering Links project there have been additional funds identified by the Scottish Government to assist recruitment and retention of foster carers and to improve availability and access to training. The Fostering Network appreciate that these funds are targeted at some of the key issues identified by foster carers and fostering agencies through Focus Groups.

Informed by the effectiveness of the Fostering Links project in Scotland the Chief Executive of the Fostering Network confirmed that an equivalent post has been developed in Wales to develop similar consultation processes.

There is substantial evidence that the programme of Focus Groups has strengthened the fostering community in Scotland in the following ways:

- By creating a regular forum for foster carers and fostering workers to share experiences beyond their agency.
- By highlighting key issues facing the fostering community.
- By informing and influencing developments in fostering services at a strategic level with the Scottish Government.
- By influencing the Fostering Network in Scotland, and the UK.

**Membership Meetings**

To increase knowledge and strengthen the whole of the fostering community in Scotland, the Fostering Links project has established a series of Membership Meetings. Membership Meetings have a training remit, often focussing on a particular aspect of fostering practice. These meetings are open to all people interested in foster care, professionals, and carers, and follow a workshop format, often led by an expert in an aspect of fostering. Like Focus Groups, these meetings have also been arranged in venues across the country to increase participation and accessibility for members.

Since 2005, there have been eight Membership Meetings, involving 284 members, with an average attendance of 35 at meetings. There is substantial evidence from the evaluation forms completed by 214, 75% of those who attended, that these meetings achieved their aim of increasing the knowledge of people involved in fostering services. Evaluations are exceedingly positive, as illustrated:
This chart illustrates that Membership Meetings were consistently rated highly, that 70% of those who attended rated the meetings as very good, and less than 1% rated them as fair.

Analysis of the evaluation forms indicates that participants appreciated Membership Meetings for the following reasons:

- Gaining new knowledge and skills:
  
  'Input on attachment was excellent. Workshop on foetal alcohol syndrome was very interesting and thought provoking'.

- Increasing confidence:
  
  'Renewed my enthusiasm for doing what I believe I can do well'.

- Understanding of the wider context of fostering services:
  
  'I gained an awareness of the role of the Care Commission'.

'I know more about what the Fostering Network are doing on our behalf'.

Over the three-year period of operation of the Fostering Links project, Membership Meetings have consistently attracted members and, in total, 285 people have participated in meetings. This attendance should be set against a backlog of logistical challenges which face everyone organising events for foster carers. Foster carers often live some distance from their agency and due to their child care responsibilities often have to plan their outings to be able to return home before schools finish. When surveyed in 2003, some fostering agencies struggled to overcome these problems and, as a result, do not arrange regular meetings or forum for foster carers and have difficulty securing foster carers' participation in events:

- 10% of fostering agencies do not arrange regular group meetings for
foster carers to share information and support.

• 48% of fostering agencies do not involve foster carers in a consultative group or equivalent forum in their agency.

• Over 50% of foster carers who had not participated in training in two years, blamed timing, distance and lack of childcare cover as the reasons for not participating. (Caring for Our Children, Parts 1 and 2, 2003).

There is evidence that Membership Meetings have made a contribution to strengthening the fostering community in Scotland:

• By creating opportunities for foster carers, fostering workers and others involved with looked after children to share knowledge and experience

• By educating and informing the fostering community about new developments.

The Islands Initiative

In order to reduce the isolation experienced by foster carers and fostering workers in the remoter island communities in Scotland, the Fostering Links project has devoted time to deliver a programme to the two Northern Islands authorities, [Shetland and Orkney] and to the Western Isles. The Fostering Links project recognised that it was unrealistic to expect remote island Councils to be able to support the attendance of foster carers and fostering workers at Focus Groups and Membership Meetings on the mainland. The Fostering Links project has developed a unique initiative to these fostering communities by working in conjunction with the Fostering Network’s training manager, to develop a programme of information sharing, training and consultation, involving their foster carers and staff. All three Councils were enthusiastic about the value of the Fostering Networks visits:

'It is vital to us. It is unrealistic to consider that we could send all our workers and carers off the island as a group. When they, the Fostering Network, come here we can work together, we get better attendance, there is some status in the training provided. It is hugely valuable. We are limited by finance and we also need training geared to our needs. They are
attentive to our particular needs.’

Adoption and Fostering Manager

All three Councils acknowledged they have difficulties in recruitment of new foster carers and providing carers with the range of support and training needed to sustain foster carers when they have a difficult placement. Another challenge, which became apparent in discussion with each of the Island Councils, was how vulnerable these small fostering services are to staff change. The fostering service can become precarious when they lose just one or two key members of staff and each authority has challenges recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced fostering workers.

There is evidence that the initiative the Fostering Links project has developed in relation to the three island Councils is appreciated and that it has strengthened their connection with the wider issues in fostering in Scotland and reduced foster carers’ and fostering workers’ sense of isolation.

Independent Providers Forum

In order to strengthen the fostering community across Scotland the Fostering Network, through the Fostering Links project, have supported the establishment of a forum to bring together the independent fostering providers to share experience and identify common concerns. There have been some tensions in bringing the voluntary sector fostering services and the growing number of independent fostering providers together to recognise common concerns and to find ways of working together. However this Forum is established and providers are recognising that they have a contribution to make to improving service provision.

The past chair of the Independent Providers Forum was interviewed and she acknowledged that the Fostering Links project and the Fostering Network have made a key contribution in facilitating meetings and patiently finding formats for sharing information. This has enabled the group to:

‘...recognise that the independent providers can have an impact and influence on fostering practice’.

Chair of the Independent Providers Forum 2006-07

One outcome of the Independent Providers Forum has been to develop a best practice Guide to improve the transfer arrangements when foster carers move from one fostering provider to another. It is hoped this Guide will prevent some of the difficulties which have arisen in the past and improve the ability of agencies to work together in future. This Guide was presented to the Association of Directors of Social Work in Scotland for their consideration and agreement. The Fostering Manager who represents ADSW on the Fostering Network Advisory Group confirmed the value of this guidance:

‘The Guide is helpful as it lays out some procedures for dealing with an area where there have been difficulties and helps agencies address this area better’.

Local Authority Fostering Manager and ADSW representative on Scottish Advisory Group.

There is evidence that supporting the development of the Independent Providers Forum has enabled this group of service providers to share common issues and to work together to produce an outcome, which should improve fostering practice between agencies.
The Scottish Newsletter

Another method of strengthening the fostering community in Scotland has been through the preparation of a Scottish Newsletter, *Fostering in Scotland*, which the Fostering Links project has produced four times per annum over the last three years. In 2005, 3,000 copies were produced. This has risen to 3,800 copies, which are delivered to every fostering household and fostering agency in Scotland. While a comprehensive evaluation of the Newsletter was beyond the resources of this report, five of the seven interviewees who were familiar with the content of Newsletter considered the relevance and the quality of the Scottish Newsletter as Very Good.

‘There has been a huge difference in the awareness of the Newsletters since all Local Authorities and agencies became members of the Fostering Network. The profile of it has been raised both for foster carers and fostering workers.’ Regional advisor

‘The Newsletter has been helpful in informing foster carers about policies and grants in the last year.’ Scottish Government Team Leader, Foster, kinship, and residential services for looked after children.

Three of these seven foster carers, fostering managers and policy makers considered that the Scottish Newsletter makes a Very Good contribution to strengthening the fostering community in Scotland while the remaining four all rated this as Good.

There is evidence that the Scottish Newsletter is relevant and keeps foster carers and fostering workers informed about developments in fostering in Scotland. It highlights key issues for foster carers and helps strengthen the community.

Publications

In order to highlight the issues facing the fostering community the Fostering Links project has published four reports, during the period of this evaluation;

- Planning the changes, 2005
- Steps forward, 2005
- Support to foster carers, 2007.

The first two reports collated findings from Focus Groups held in 2005. These identified the concerns of foster carers and fostering workers and made proposals for policy change in four key areas:

a) Handling allegations against foster carers
b) Recruitment, retention and support of carers and workers
c) Allowances and fees
d) The education of looked after children.
The Chair of the Fostering Network Advisory Group in Scotland confirmed that these publications had a significant impact at the time and focused subsequent discussions with the Scottish Government, such that she considered that they had:

‘…..laid the foundation of the Fostering Strategy in Scotland’. Chair of the Scottish Advisory Committee

Six of those interviewed were familiar with these publications, three rated them as Very Good, and three rated them as Good. They confirmed that the publications reflect the views of foster carers and highlight significant issues relating to the fostering community. Those interviewed considered that the publications made a Very Good contribution to building the strength of the fostering community in Scotland.

The Team Leader of the foster, kinship and residential services for looked after children, echoed these sentiments and confirmed they had informed Scottish Government thinking at that time. She acknowledged that the themes raised in these early reports had been the focus of regular meetings with civil servants and the Fostering Network in the intervening years. She also identified that in relation to influencing politicians the Fostering Network publications have had significant impact and outlined the reasons for this:

‘The publications, policy briefings, and campaign materials are very good because they are informed from a wide base of information, from foster carers and fostering agencies’.

Team Leader, Foster, kinship and residential services for looked after children, Scottish Government.

The Director of the Fostering Network Scotland also recognises that the reports informed the Education Working Group on the issues facing looked after children contained in the early reports. This supported the input of young people and foster carers into this Working Group, and can be evidenced in the subsequent government report on Looked After Children and Young People: We Can and Must Do Better; published in January 2007 by the Scottish Government.

The third report collated the feedback from the special Focus Groups on the Draft National Strategy and, as mentioned earlier, formed a significant element of this national consultation.

In 2007, the Fostering Links project undertook a survey of the support needs of foster carers and recently published this report which highlights shortfalls within existing support provision for foster carers. Like the other reports, this is being circulated to all agencies and
the findings of this report will be the focus of discussion with policy makers.

While the Fostering Network publications appear to inform and influence policy at a national level, it is much more difficult to identify their influence at a local authority or agency level. One foster carer, who was also on a National Working Group on Education, was so disappointed to find her local convenor of social work services was unaware of the Fostering Network publications, she arranged for him to receive copies of reports.

There is evidence, from interviews, that the quality and content of the Fostering Network’s publications are highly valued. There is evidence that two reports in particular, prepared following Focus Groups in 2005, have informed and influenced policy makers in Scotland.

The Website
The Fostering Network have a UK website and the Fostering Links project is involved in monthly tele-conferencing meetings with the Fostering Network UK to update the Scottish content of the site. The Fostering Network confirm that in 2006-07 the UK website had 3,099,101 hits and 229,731 visits within the site. The increasing use of the web site is evidenced, in there being 3,649,378 hits in just seven months, April to October 2007, with 140,826 visits within the site.

Foster carers interviewed recognised the importance of the Fostering Network having a website, but some confessed that they did not use it themselves. However the Team Leader from the Scottish Government and the Island Council Managers indicated that they, and other policy makers, found the web site valuable.

While the Fostering Network website may not be widely accessed by established foster carers, there is evidence that it is used by the public and by policy makers, and it is increasingly accessed as a method of providing information about fostering in Scotland.

Media
In order to bring some of the issues facing the fostering community in Scotland to public attention the Fostering Links project has supported a range of media events, including TV and Radio interviews, and local and national newspaper articles. The table overleaf illustrates the extent of media coverage, newspaper articles, radio and TV coverage generated by the Fostering Network in Scotland between January 2005 and July 2007.
In order to support this activity, the Fostering Links project has delivered media training for foster carers in 21 local authorities, three voluntary fostering agencies and two independent fostering agencies. In all, 34 foster carers and three young people have been trained, to increase their confidence and ability to promote public awareness of the needs of children in foster care and the value of foster caring. Foster carers welcomed this training and the opportunity to be involved in practice interviews. They reported increased confidence and preparedness to be involved in media opportunities and their evaluations were very positive:

- 81% of foster carers who participated in the media training rated it as Very Good and the remaining 19% rated the training as Good.

Once trained, the foster carers have been involved in a wide range of media opportunities created by the Fostering Network and there is now a pool of knowledgeable, confident carers and young people whom the Fostering Network can call on when required by the media to illustrate and support news and features. This is invaluable to policy makers who reported that they are confident in the quality of the people who the Fostering Network can provide to support media events:

‘In publishing “Sons and Daughters” they were able to identify young people to talk to their stories. This is invaluable for public awareness and for policy makers’. Team Leader, Foster, kinship and residential services for looked after children, Scottish Government

The media also have confidence in the quality of responses the Fostering Network provides, such that one TV company had commissioned a series of programmes to support Foster Care Fortnight in Scotland. While it is not within the extent of this evaluation to survey the public impact of such media coverage, it is beneficial that the Fostering Network is providing positive media stories to raise awareness of the need for more foster carers in Scotland.

There is evidence of regular, supportive, media coverage of foster care generated and supported by the Fostering Links project which is appropriately involving foster carers and raising awareness of the needs of children and the fostering community in Scotland.

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Table 1: Details of the media coverage in Scotland 2005-2007
The Cost of the Fostering Links project

Since its inception in January 2005, the Big Lottery Fund, through a grant totalling £184,885.00, has supported the Fostering Links project financially.

In total the Project has been running for 3 years and the costs are projected to the end of the financial year 2007-2008. The total expenditure of the Project has been £202,303. An analysis of the budget indicates that almost half the expenditure is staff costs, with a further 25% for travel and subsistence, training and development, management and overheads. The other 25% of expenditure relates to direct costs of hiring venues, printing and posting newsletters and publications. The average annual cost of the Fostering Links project is £67,500.

The pie chart below indicates how the costs of the Fostering Links project have been spent throughout the three years.

Chart 3 The distribution of costs of the Fostering Links Project
Summary of the evaluation

There is substantial evidence that through the activities described in this report the Fostering Links project has made a considerable impact on fostering services in Scotland. It has raised the profile of fostering and has created an infrastructure to support ongoing dialogue between foster carers, fostering workers, agencies and policy makers. In relation to its three key aims:

The Fostering Links project has strengthened the support to groups within the fostering community by:

- Increasing the knowledge, skills and confidence of foster carers to participate in meetings.
- Creating opportunities for foster carers and fostering agencies to be involved in service planning and development.
- Empowering foster carers through the development of Focus Groups for effective consultation with the Scottish Government.
- Influencing the financial support that has been made available for fostering services in Scotland.
- Increasing the profile of fostering through a range of media events.
- Enhancing the contribution of the Fostering Network in Scotland to policy and practice developments within the UK organisation.
The Fostering Links project has reduced isolation within the fostering community by:

- Producing regular Newsletters distributed to foster carers in their homes.
- Arranging meetings in venues across Scotland, and consulting widely on the issues and concerns that affect foster carers in different agencies.
- Developing an initiative to support foster carers and fostering services in the remote island communities.
- Creating an Independent Providers Forum for new and emerging fostering agencies to come together to influence policy and practice.

The Fostering Links project has highlighted issues facing the fostering community by:

- Publishing reports, relevant to foster carers throughout Scotland, with recommendations for improvements to services.
- Empowering foster carers and fostering workers to become key stakeholders in fostering services in Scotland.
- Informing the *National Foster and Kinship Care Strategy* of the key concerns raised by foster carers and fostering service providers.
- Influencing policies within education to support looked after children.
- Expanding the vision of foster carers and increasing their confidence to participate at a strategic level.

In conclusion, the Fostering Links project has strengthened the influence of foster carers and fostering workers in improving services and has enhanced the voice of foster care in Scotland.
## Appendix 1 - List of people interviewed

### List of people interviewed for this evaluation

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Position and Other Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne Black</td>
<td>Chair of the Scottish Advisory Group and Vice Chair of the Fostering Network UK</td>
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<td>Debbie Booth</td>
<td>Foster Carer and Regional Advisor</td>
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<td>Marjorie Booth</td>
<td>Team Manager, Care Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jackie Brock</td>
<td>Team Leader, Foster, kinship and residential care team, Scottish Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Hampton</td>
<td>Manager Fostering Services, West Lothian Council and representative of the Association of Directors of Social Work on the Fostering Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lynne Isaacs</td>
<td>Foster Carer, Regional Advisor and member of We Can and Must Do Better Advisory Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kay Jackson</td>
<td>Foster Carer and Regional Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Maclver</td>
<td>Social Worker Fostering and Adoption, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephan Morgan</td>
<td>Director of Children’s Services Shetland Islands Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Ritchie</td>
<td>Director, the Fostering Network Scotland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjorie Ruddick</td>
<td>Foster Carer and Regional Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Tapsfield</td>
<td>Chief Executive, the Fostering Network UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shona Thain</td>
<td>Social Worker, Job share Fostering, Orkney Islands Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katrina Weldon</td>
<td>Foster Carer and Regional Advisor</td>
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Appendix 2 References

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