



# ***Learning as they go: accessing ongoing learning and development opportunities***

*findings of a survey of foster carers in the UK*

Helen Clarke  
November 2009



the fostering network  
the voice of foster care



## Introduction

Over 51,000 children live with 43,000 foster families on any one day in the UK. Today's foster carers are child care experts working alongside a team of other professionals to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

Being a foster carer requires skill, knowledge, expertise, self awareness, commitment, and the ability to work as part of a team, maintain standards and provide a high quality, effective service to children and young people who most need it. In order for them to be able to carry out their role to the best of their abilities, foster carers complete pre-approval training and fostering services provide them with a range of learning and development opportunities throughout their careers<sup>1</sup>.

Training provides foster carers with the opportunity to learn the skills needed to foster, and to understand the legislative and regulatory framework they work within and the role they play within the team. They learn about the needs of the children in their care, child development, ways to work with the birth family and specialist skills depending on the individual needs of each of child. Fostering services, therefore, have to offer a wide-ranging choice of courses and learning opportunities which enable foster carers to develop their skills.

A review of research on foster care in the UK found that '*consistent, coherent training is hard to supply to foster carers... Methods of training need to be developed, tried out and rigorously evaluated until successful ones are found.*'<sup>2</sup>

Fostering services in the UK are covered by a range of regulations<sup>3</sup> which address the expectation that all approved foster carers will have carried out pre-approval training, most usually *The Skills to Foster*, and be provided with induction training<sup>4</sup> and ongoing opportunities to develop their skills.

The Fostering Network wanted to explore the ways in which foster carers were accessing training and learning opportunities and to identify whether these were meeting their needs. Therefore in August and September 2009 the organisation carried out an online survey of foster carers who had been approved for at least two years. Responses were received from 295 foster carers in the UK and the findings are detailed in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> In England, foster carers are recognised as part of the children's workforce. This requires them to meet induction standards called the *Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care* in their first 12 months of being approved. The Welsh Assembly Government is exploring opportunities to implement standards in Wales but there are currently no plans to do so in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair, I *Fostering Now. Messages from research* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2005) p. 119

<sup>3</sup> UK National Standards for Foster Care 1999; The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2002; The Fostering Services (Wales) Regulations 2003; The Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996; The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009; Foster Placement (Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.

<sup>4</sup> The Fostering Network's post-approval package of learning and development *Pathways through Fostering* provides a programme of training that meets the needs of foster carers as they progress through their early career.

## The findings

The 295 respondents to the survey were an experienced group of foster carers. Everyone in the sample had been fostering for at least two years, and over 40 per cent had been fostering for more than 10 years. The survey found that foster carers were continuing to access training even if they had been fostering for a number of years and two-thirds had gained a formal qualification since starting to foster. A note of caution: as a group these respondents reported attendance at a range and number of events and formal qualifications that was unexpectedly high given previous studies in this area. Further research in this area would help to clarify whether the sample is particularly experienced and keen to take up learning and development opportunities, or whether this is evidence of a trend towards greater desire for and availability of training.

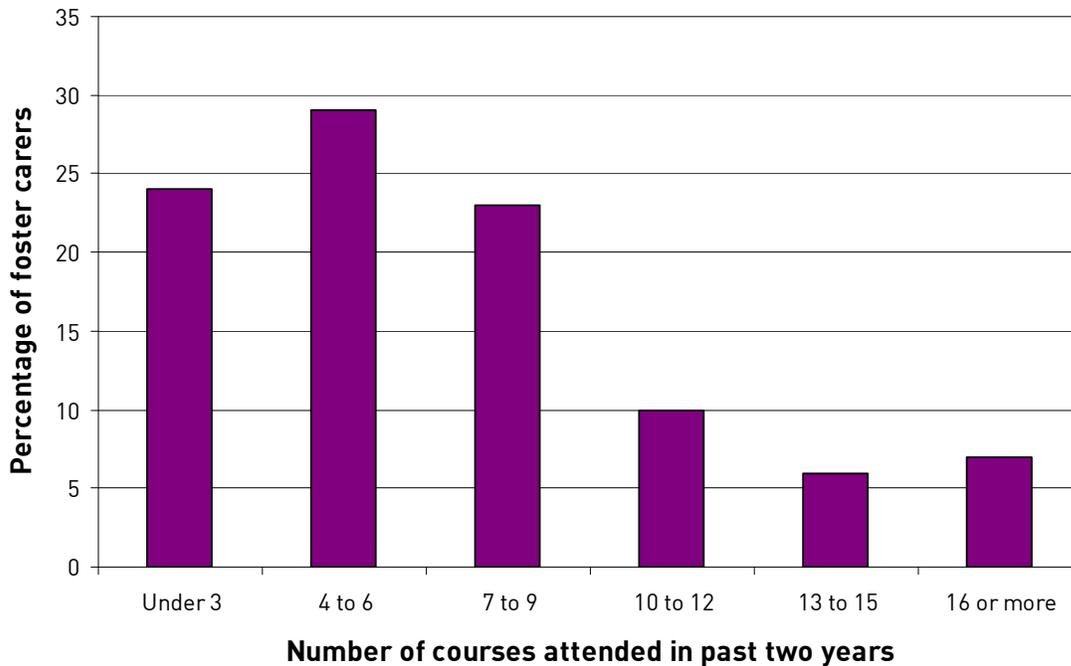
### 1. Access to and availability of post-approval training and learning opportunities

Fostering services offer a wide range of courses to their foster carers, many planning a programme of training opportunities throughout the year. Some fostering services expect their foster carers to attend a minimum number of training hours (or sessions) per year and often this can be linked to the level of fee payment to which they are entitled.

- **95 per cent** of foster carers in our study had been offered training in the past two years.
- **28 per cent** of foster carers stated that attendance at the training offered by their fostering service was compulsory.
- **71 per cent** of foster carers had asked their fostering service to provide them with training in the past two years.
- **88 per cent** of foster carers had attended training provided by their fostering service in the past two years and **41 per cent** of those who responded to the survey had also attended training delivered by an external provider.
- **23 per cent** of foster carers stated that they had arranged training for themselves.

The survey asked foster carers to inform us of all the training courses they had attended in the past two years. A range of standard courses was offered and foster carers selected all those that they had attended. Foster carers also reported attending a further 200 courses on a range of topics and themes. The total number of courses attended by each foster carer varied a great deal as displayed in the following graph:

### Number of training courses attended by foster carers in the last two years



The range of courses attended by the 295 foster carers who responded to our survey was staggering. This demonstrates the challenges faced by fostering services in delivering a comprehensive package of training to all of their foster carers. It is clearly not as simple as a 'one size fits all' programme. However, it should be possible to identify core skills required in the first few years of a career in fostering, such as those gained in achieving a level 3 qualification (or similar) and to develop a post-induction framework suitable for all.

*The training we receive is good, but it is very repetitive and new courses need to be looked for as the face of foster care is changing very rapidly and the skills we need are also changing.*

Foster carers also shared in the survey a number of frustrations with the training currently on offer to them.

*Some of the training is very basic – more specific, specialised and advanced training needs to be offered for suitably skilled, qualified and experienced carers.*

- Foster carers reported not attending due to having already completed the training and not feeling it was worthwhile (**34 per cent**) or because the course was irrelevant and not appropriate (**36 per cent**).
- Some foster carers reported disappointment with the range of training on offer to them, with **40 per cent** agreeing that the training offered by their fostering service felt like a 'tick-box' activity and **39 per cent** reporting that the training available to them was not relevant to their level of experience.

We know that foster carers' lives are busy and can be very complex, and as a result some foster carers reported having to turn down the opportunity to attend training at the last minute.

As well as providing a comprehensive framework of key courses, fostering services must offer training at a time that is convenient to foster carers and in venues that are accessible – close to transport links, within easy travelling distance and so on. An alternative is to enable foster carers to complete courses online.

- **75 per cent** of foster carers had turned down the opportunity to attend training arranged or provided by their fostering service.
- Some training was impossible to attend for practical reasons such as being unable to secure child care (**30 per cent**), planned at an inconvenient time (**46 per cent**) or at a location that was hard to reach (**18 per cent**).
- Foster carers were also unable to attend because of a fostering emergency (**20 per cent**) or because of other personal commitments such as paid work elsewhere (**35 per cent**).
- **11 per cent** of foster carers had completed training courses online.

Offering a suitable and wide-ranging choice of courses at times flexible enough to meet the needs of busy foster carers' lives can be a challenge to fostering services. Practical measures such as covering travel and child care costs, adequate refreshments and good quality training rooms can make a real difference. Arranging for childminders or a crèche to be available could also help foster carers who might find it difficult to find a childminder who can look after particular children in their care, especially as certain training courses will last for the full length of the day.

Overall the majority of foster carers were happy with the training that they received and were keen to have the opportunity to attend more.

- **25 per cent** of foster carers rated the training they had received as excellent, **42 per cent** as good and **19 per cent** as OK, with just **nine per cent** rating it as poor.
- **83 per cent** of foster carers would like to have more opportunities to attend training to improve their skills.

## 2. Workforce development

Foster carers benefit from attending training in a number of ways. When they are new to fostering, training acts as a way to introduce foster carers to the skills and qualities needed to do their job successfully, as well as to help them tackle the many challenges they may face throughout their career. It enables them to understand their role alongside the team of other professionals working with children and how the system works.

*Training is a valuable way of widening my ability to become a better carer and to work as part of a team.*

As with any career, foster carers also benefit from the opportunities of continued professional development and the ways in which it can improve how they do their job. This comes in many forms (not just training) and many foster carers choose to go on and complete formal qualifications such as BTECs and NVQs/SVQs.

*Foster care needs a clear qualification structure beyond NVQ and up to degree level. This would mean it would lead to a professional service. All training should contribute to this structure.*

- Almost **two-thirds** of the foster carers who responded to the survey had been offered the opportunity to gain a formal qualification since becoming approved.
- Almost **half**<sup>5</sup> of respondees had achieved or were working towards an NVQ/SVQ level 3 since becoming an approved foster carer.

Gaining such qualifications can also enable foster carers to specialise in caring for particular children, such as young people on remand or children with certain disabilities or special educational needs, as they gain skills and experience.

- **74 per cent** of foster carers said that undertaking a qualification had improved their understanding of the needs of children.
- **67 per cent** said that it had helped them to become a better foster carer.
- **67 per cent** reported that obtaining qualifications had boosted their confidence, and **31 per cent** of foster carers reported that they had subsequently considered applying for another role in the children's workforce.
- Having qualifications also made **44 per cent** of foster carers feel that their status within the fostering service had been raised.

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<sup>5</sup> This figure (45 per cent) matches that identified in a recent study of more than 2,000 foster carers, which found that over a third of respondents held a NVQ/SVQ relevant to fostering and a further 18 per cent were working towards one. *Love Fostering – Need Pay: a survey of foster carers about fees*, The Fostering Network, 2009.

*There should be a structured training programme for foster carers other than just training courses. I'm not saying this should be compulsory but foster carers should be able to progress their training to higher levels if they so wish e.g. certificate or diploma level courses in social care or even degree level.*

A range of learning and development opportunities for foster carers must take into account the unique nature<sup>6</sup> of the foster care workforce, its levels of education and qualifications, and the current expectations and practice with regard to learning and development.

### 3. Developing skills to meet the needs of looked-after children and young people

Each child who lives with a foster family will bring with them their own individual needs which must to be met and understood. Foster carers, through discussion with their supervising social worker and as part of their development plan, identify and explore ways in which they can improve their knowledge, understanding and practical skills throughout their fostering careers.

Foster carers provide a specialised level of care to each of the children that they look after during their careers. As one foster carer put it:

*We are expected to be homemakers, counsellors, nurses, therapists, mediators and teachers; we are expected to be experts in conflict management, dysfunctional behaviour, and child psychology. Foster carers must have a basic understanding of matters of education, asylum laws and various other legal issues and are required to continue training to maintain these very high standards.*

For foster carers, being able to access timely, relevant and good quality learning and development opportunities throughout their career is essential. Sometimes due to a shortage of foster carers in the UK foster carers are asked to look after a child outside of their approval range and who they may not have the relevant skills and experience to care for. If this arises then foster carers benefit from a whole range of additional support as well as the opportunity to attend training.

- **30 per cent** of foster carers who responded to the survey had looked after a child in the last two years who they did not have the relevant skills and experience to care for.<sup>7</sup>
- **43 per cent** of these foster carers discussed with their supervising social workers the opportunities available to help them improve their skills.

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<sup>6</sup> For further information see *Learning and Development Policy and Recommendations* (The Fostering Network, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> This matches the finding in a recent survey carried out by the Fostering Network in which 30 per cent of foster carers had looked after a child in the last two years who they did not feel equipped to care for. Clarke, H *Getting the Support they Need* (The Fostering Network, 2009)

- Nearly all foster carers (**91 per cent**) agreed that training helped them develop their skills.
- **90 per cent** agreed that attending training courses meant that they could provide a better quality of care for children

## Conclusion

During their careers foster carers access a wide-ranging choice of learning and development opportunities. All should receive pre-approval training and complete a number of core courses in the first year or two of fostering. Some will choose to complete formal qualifications and others will choose to specialise in looking after children with specific needs and require specialist training to do this.

Fostering services therefore have a challenge to meet the needs of all of their foster carers and the children in their care by providing a comprehensive programme of training. This programme needs to be relevant and effective and enable foster carers to fulfil their annual development plan. Training should be available at all levels, and to suit all learning styles, on an ongoing basis. For some foster carers this will include basic education and study skills as well as training in child care practice.

*I feel the training received is relevant, monitored and tailored to suit my development and can only help me be a better foster carer.*

On the whole foster carers reported having access to a wide range of training and learning opportunities through their fostering service, either directly delivered or arranged for them, which was very encouraging news. However, fostering services need to review regularly the training on offer to reduce the likelihood of unhelpful repetition of learning for their foster carers and to provide a range of opportunities even for the most experienced or longer serving foster carers. Attending training should be a positive experience for all.

In order to help foster carers transform the lives of fostered children the Fostering Network believes that a learning and development framework for foster carers needs to be established.

Such a framework would introduce a requirement for foster carers to undertake ongoing professional development, so that all can develop the skills and knowledge they need to do their job to the best of their abilities. It would also set requirements on fostering services to provide a range of courses to meet the needs of foster carers and the children they look after.

## **Recommendations for the four governments of the UK**

1. Implement a learning and development framework for foster carers throughout the UK.
2. Ensure that fostering services have adequate funding to provide foster carers with a range of learning and development opportunities throughout their careers.
3. Explore the opportunities for further relevant accredited training courses for foster carers up to foundation degree level and beyond.
4. Ensure that foster carers are defined and treated as child care experts and part of the children's workforce.

## **Recommendations for fostering services**

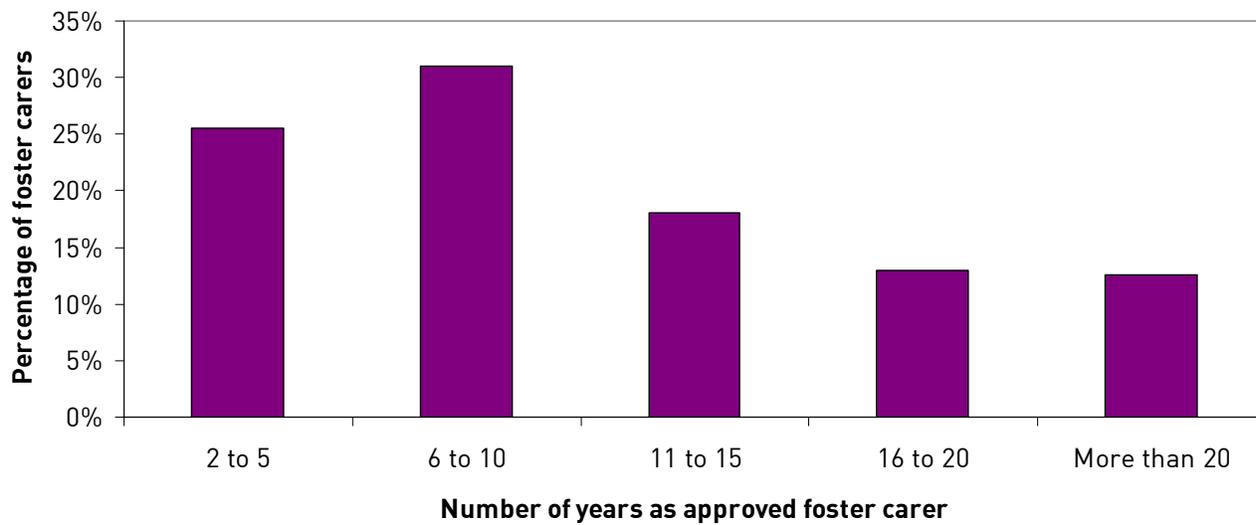
1. Provide foster carers with a range of flexible and accessible learning and development opportunities throughout their careers.
2. Ensure that all foster carers are encouraged and supported to undertake ongoing learning and development opportunities to maintain and develop their skills and knowledge.
3. Ensure access to specialist learning and development opportunities when foster carers require it.
4. Increase access to flexible learning and development opportunities such as online training.

For further information and detail read the Fostering Network's policy and recommendations on learning and development as part of the *Together for Change* campaign. Available to download from <http://www.fostering.net/together-for-change>

## SURVEY RESULTS – ACCESS TO POST APPROVAL TRAINING AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A total of 295 foster carers from across the UK completed the survey. Of these 80 per cent worked for a local authority or health and social care trust and 20 per cent worked for an independent fostering provider.

PLEASE NOTE: The survey only asked for responses from foster carers who had been approved to foster for at least two years. Foster carers who responded to this survey had been approved for the following lengths of time:

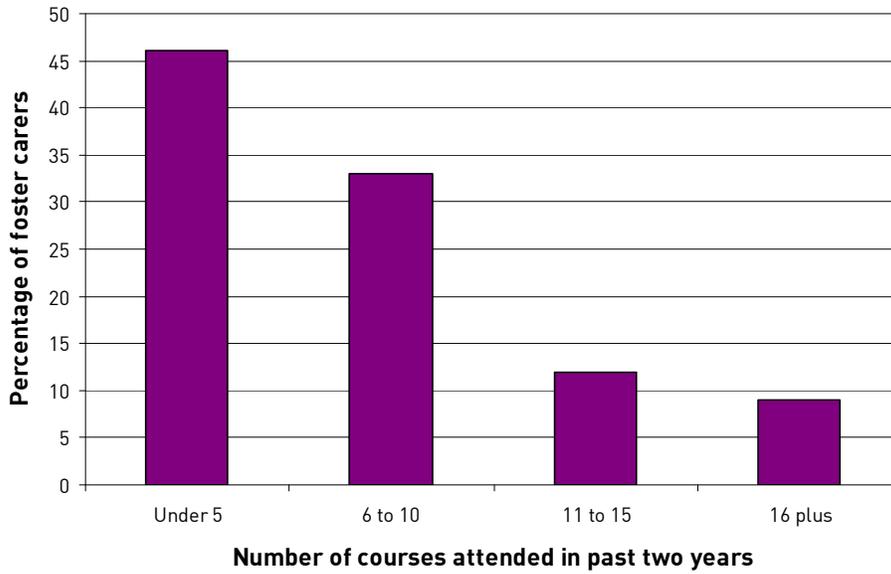


### ACCESS TO AND AVAILABILITY OF TRAINING

	Yes	No	
Have you been offered training by your fostering service in the past two years?	95%	5%	
	Yes	No	Don't know
If yes, was your attendance compulsory	28%	69%	2%
	Yes	No	
Have you asked your fostering service to provide you with training in the past two years?	71%	29%	
Have you attended training relevant to your role as a foster carer in the past two years? <sup>8</sup>	%		
Yes, from my fostering service	88%		
Yes, from an external supplier	41%		
Yes I arranged it myself	23%		
No	6%		

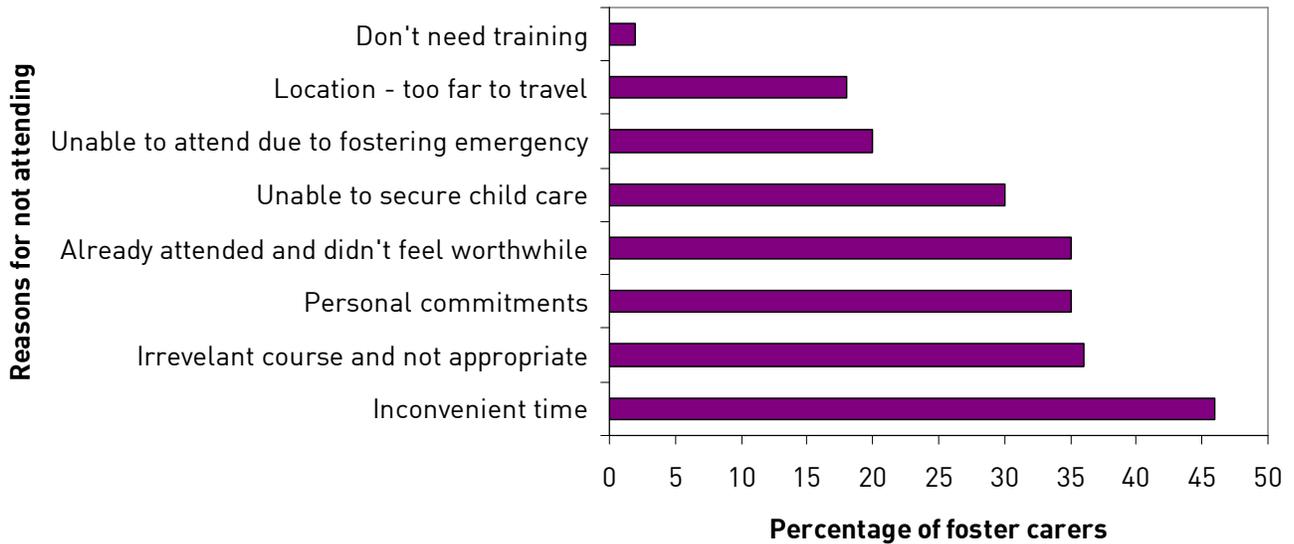
<sup>8</sup> Respondees were able to choose more than one option on this and subsequent questions marked with an \*.

### Number of training courses attended in the past two years



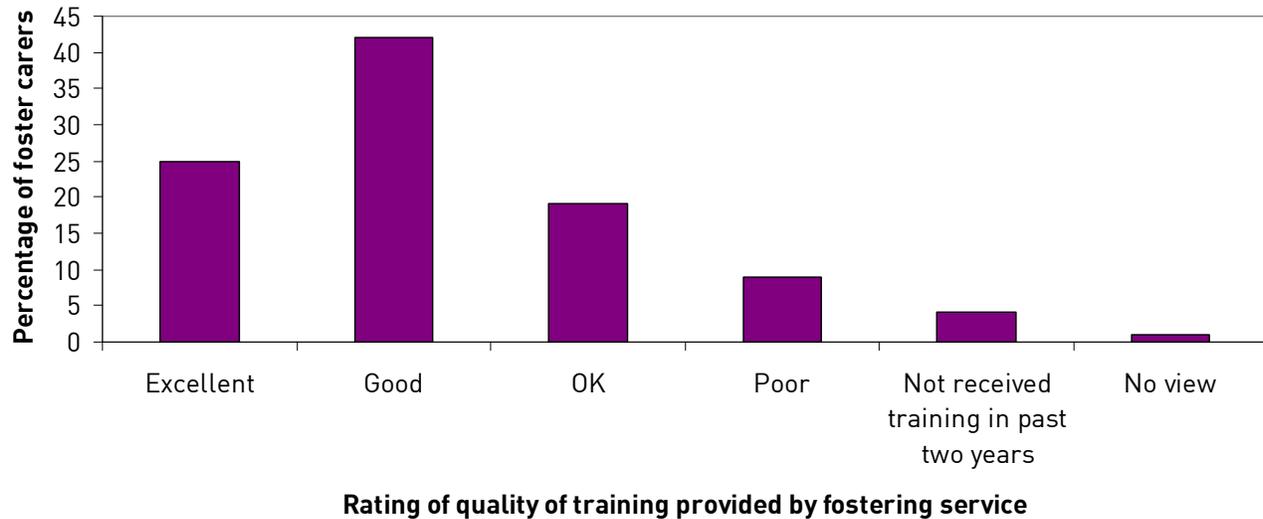
	Yes	No
Of the courses above did you complete any of them online	11%	89%
Have you ever turned down the opportunity to attend training arranged/provided by your fostering service?	75%	25%

Foster carers who turned down the opportunity to attend training cited the following reasons\*:



	Yes	No
Would you like more opportunities to attend training to improve your skills?	83%	17%

### Ratings given by foster carers of quality of training provided



### ACCESS TO AND AVAILABILITY OF QUALIFICATIONS RELEVANT TO FOSTERING

Have you had the opportunity to achieve any relevant formal qualifications since becoming an approved foster carer?*	%
Yes, at my current fostering service	62%
Yes, at my previous fostering service	2%
No	35%
Don't know	2%

By completing these qualification(s) which of the following has it enabled you to do? *	%
Improve your understanding of the needs of children	74%
Provide a better standard of care to children	72%
Be a better foster carer	67%
Increase your confidence	67%
Raise your status within the fostering service	43%
Consider applying for another role within the children's workforce	31%

## DEVELOPING YOUR SKILLS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

	Yes	No
In the last two years, have you had any children placed with you who you did not have the relevant skills and experience to care for?	30%	70%
	Yes	No
Is yes, did your supervising social worker discuss training and/or other learning and development opportunities to help you improve your skills?	43%	57%
	Yes	No
If no, did you ask your supervising social worker for training and/or other learning and development opportunities to help you improve your skills?	62%	38%

## OUTCOMES OF POST APPROVAL TRAINING AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Please rate the following in terms of statements you agree with*	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No View
Attending training helps me develop new skills	55%	36%	6%	0%	2%
The training I receive only helps me brush up on the skills I already have	10%	45%	36%	5%	3%
Attending training courses means I can provide a better quality of care to children	51%	39%	7%	1%	2%
Training is a good opportunity to network and meet other foster carers	59%	39%	1%	1%	0%
The training I receive feels like a 'tick box' activity for the fostering service	15%	25%	47%	9%	4%
The training on offer to me is not relevant to my level of experience	16%	23%	46%	9%	5%