

# Improving Effectiveness in Foster Care Recruitment

an interim report of the  
*Innovation in Foster Care Recruitment Study*

funded by the Department for Education and Skills



the fostering network  
helping children to thrive



## Acknowledgements

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Garry Lemon for his ongoing support throughout the project and in particular the collation of responses to the survey

### Focus fostering services

Barnardo's North East	Blackburn with Darwen Council
Brighton and Hove Council	Cornwall County Council
Derbyshire County Council	Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Fosterplus	Hampshire County Council
London Borough of Islington	London Borough of Merton
National Fostering Agency	Norfolk County Council
North Yorkshire County Council	Nottingham City Council
Plymouth City Council	Shropshire County Council
South Gloucestershire Council	Sunderland City Council
Swiis Foster Care (North West)	Thurrock Council
Wolverhampton City Council	

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## 1. Setting the scene

This interim report is the result of a study, undertaken in 2005-06 by the Fostering Network, into current practice regarding the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England. The majority of the study focuses on the recruitment of foster carers. In addition it looks at the first year of a foster carer's career and asks what lessons can be learnt from exit interviews where these are undertaken. The aim of the study is to try and understand why some fostering services are significantly better than others at recruiting, and in some cases increasing their pool of foster carers, than others.

### 1.1. Background

There has been growing recognition in recent years that the shortage of foster carers is a contributory factor to the poor outcomes of looked-after children. This has led to a greater emphasis on the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Choice Protects, launched by the Department of Health in 2002, recognised the need to increase the availability of foster carers who could provide high quality placements. Many local authorities used their time-limited Choice Protects funding to invest in developing their own fostering services.

*Every Child Matters*<sup>1</sup>, published in 2003, continued to emphasise the contribution of foster carers and highlighted the importance of training and support. Crucially, *Every Child Matters* made clear for the first time that foster carers were to be considered as part of the children's workforce.

The Children Act 2004 signalled the Government's intention to introduce a national minimum allowance for foster carers, and in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children Agenda*<sup>2</sup>, the Government re-emphasised the importance of improving foster care by strengthening the foster care workforce. Among the recommendations and initiatives proposed in all of the above were:

1. The importance of a proactive approach to recruitment
2. The importance of good training and support in enhancing the status and number of foster carers
3. The improvement of support offered to foster carers facing allegations
4. The development of a helpline for foster carers (Fosterline, which is funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and run in association with the Fostering Network, commenced in 2005)
5. The improvement of planning and commissioning of services for looked-after children

Despite the added investment from Choice Protects, and the emphasis in *Every Child Matters* on the importance of foster carers, a survey of local authorities in 2004 undertaken by the Fostering Network found that the shortage of foster carers in England had risen to 8,200<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Every Child Matters (HM Government 2003)

<sup>2</sup> Every Child Matters: Change for Children Agenda (HM Government, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> *Survey of the shortage of foster carers*, (the Fostering Network, 2004)

The map below illustrates this shortage, with regional breakdown.



Not having enough foster carers has huge implications for local authorities and children who need a placement. It leads directly to a lack of choice of placement for children, foster carers and fostering services. It is likely to increase the chances of a child having to leave the area in which they currently live. It will increase the chance of a child having to move school, and make it more difficult for children to maintain contact with family and friends. It is likely to contribute to placement instability, to poorer outcomes for children and young people and to greater dissatisfaction among foster carers.

*Being Fostered: A National Survey of the Views of Fostered Children, Foster Carers and Birth Parents about Foster Care*<sup>4</sup> found that two-thirds of fostered children said they had had no input into the decision of which foster home they were to be placed in. A survey of over 5,000 foster carers by the Fostering Network<sup>5</sup>, also in 2005, found that two-thirds of foster carers in local authorities had at least one child or young person placed with them who they were not approved for. Foster carers said they felt that fostered children were being squeezed in wherever there was a space rather than being placed with a family best suited to meeting their needs. A report<sup>6</sup> for the DfES by Jane Held in 2005 identified a lack of placement choice as one of four critical factors that affects placement stability. The findings of all the above highlight the difficulties that arise from the shortage of foster carers.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan R *Being Fostered* (CSCI, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> *Placement Survey* (The Fostering Network, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> Held J *Qualitative Study: The Placement Stability of Looked After Children*, (DfES, 2005)

Although the Fostering Network’s 2004 survey has not been repeated, the available evidence suggests that there is still a marked shortage of foster carers, and in particular a lack of the right foster carers in the right places. The continuing difficulties that local authorities experience in offering placement choice, and in making placements within a child’s locality, are evidence of this.

With the drafting of the *Children’s Workforce Strategy* in 2005 and the inception of the Children’s Workforce Development Council, foster carers are part of the fostering team more than ever before. Foster carers are seen as colleagues and fellow professionals providing a high quality service for children in care. These developments will lead to some significant changes in the ways in which new foster carers are targeted, recruited, trained and supported.

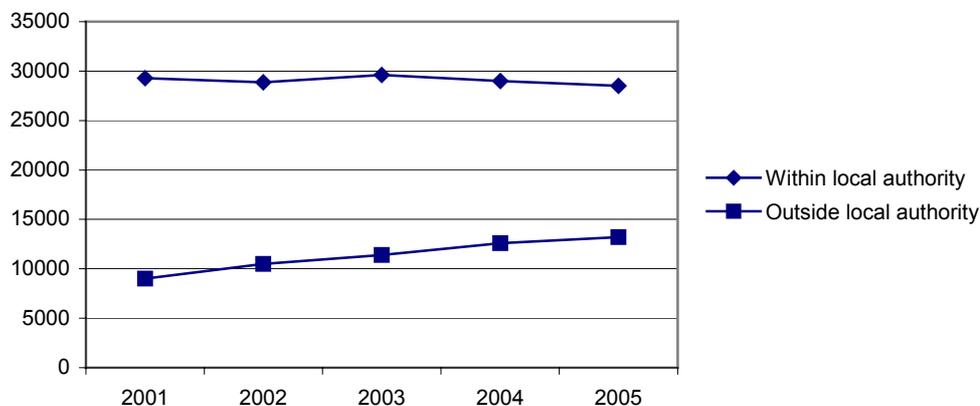
Despite the shortage of foster carers, local authorities have been successful in increasing the number of children placed with foster families, both in real terms, and as a proportion of the total number of looked-after children.

At 31 March 2005 there were 60,900<sup>7</sup> looked-after children in England, 68 per cent of whom were being cared for by foster carers. Although the total number of looked-after children in 2005 represents a one per cent decrease on the year before, this figure still marks a three per cent overall increase from 2001. It should also be noted that the number of children living with foster carers increased every year, both in total and as a proportion of all looked-after children.

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
<b>Number of looked-after children</b>	58,900	59,700	60,800	61,100	60,900
<b>Number of looked-after children in foster care</b>	38,300	39,200	41,100	41,200	41,700

The following three graphs show a further breakdown of the above figures for children in foster care. Graph one shows that since 2001 there has been a steady increase in the number of children placed outside of their local authority.

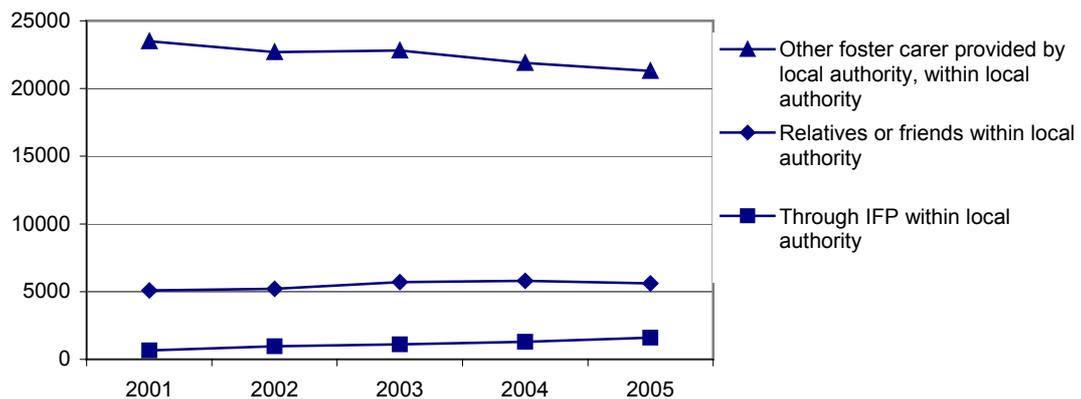
**Graph one** (placement of looked-after children in foster care, within and outside their authority, 2001-2005)



<sup>7</sup> Children Looked After by Local Authorities (DfES, 2001-2005)

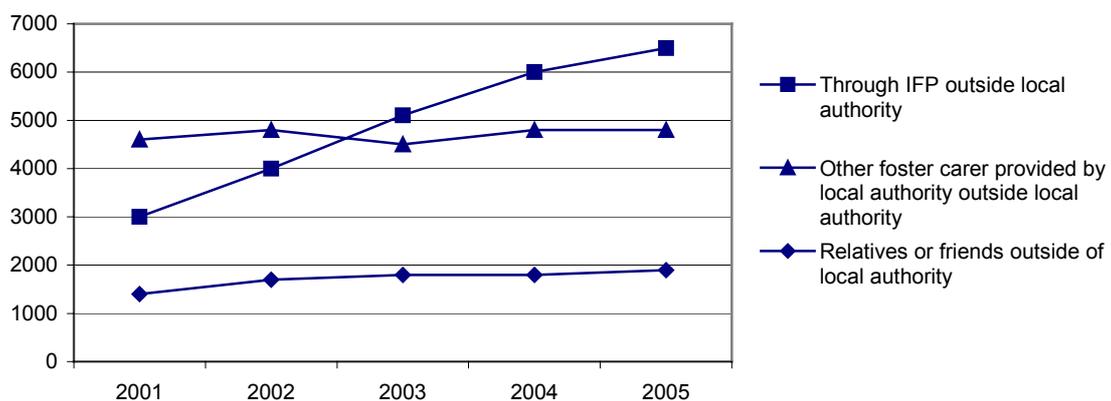
Graphs two and three show whether children were placed with local authority or independent fostering provider (IFP) foster carers. It is evident that local authorities are increasingly relying on placements from IFPs. In fact, despite the stronger focus on recruitment, local authorities have seen a reduction in the number of children placed with their own foster carers. This reduction is even sharper when the growing number of children placed with family and friends foster carers is discounted.

**Graph two** (placement of looked-after children in foster care within the authority, 2001-2005)



This picture is not repeated in each local authority; performance varies significantly, with some increasing the number of children they place with their own foster carers. However, most follow the national trend, with the result that almost a third of fostered children are still placed outside of their local authority, either with foster carers from their local authority or an IFP. Although in some instances this is planned, for many it is the result of necessity. These children can face difficulties keeping contact with their birth families, moving schools and maintaining friendships.

**Graph three** (placement of looked-after children in foster care outside the authority, 2001-2005)



For the first time in 2005 the DfES obtained statistics on the distances children were being placed away from their home. While nearly three-quarters were being placed within 20 miles of their home, 10,900 children were living at least 21 miles away from home (information was not made available for the other children). Although in some areas these children may still be placed within authority (if it is a geographically large one), this is still an indication of the continuing problems caused by the shortage of foster carers.

The increased usage of IFP placements suggests that the independent sector has not been finding it as difficult to recruit foster carers as local authorities. As noted in *Making Every Child Matter: Messages from Inspections of Children's Social Services*<sup>8</sup>, published by CSCI in 2005, an explanation for this could be that the reward packages offered by many local authority fostering services are still less comprehensive than those offered by IFPs.

The growing trend, within local authorities to place children outside of their authority (planned or otherwise) has been of great concern to central, regional and local government, key policy makers and fostering services.

The key challenge for local authorities is to increase the supply of local foster carers by recruiting more themselves and working in a more systematic and effective manner with IFPs.

## 1.2. Findings from previous research

Considerable research has been undertaken into the recruitment and retention of foster carers, the most comprehensive study in recent years being Triseliotis et al's *Delivering Foster Care*<sup>9</sup>. Their findings and recommendations have been taken on by many fostering services, most notably the power of word of mouth (many fostering services offer an incentive for their foster carers to encourage family and friends to foster) and that recruitment activity should be planned as part of a written strategy.

Key findings from *Delivering Foster Care*

- In around half the authorities, formal campaigns were held back because of budgetary constraints and non-availability of experienced staff
- A lot of effort went into recruitment but mostly in an episodic and unsystematic way. What appeared to be missing were a long-term policy and direction, clear targeting and a marketing approach
- An expectation for 'instant' results influenced the way some managers viewed such efforts
- Word of mouth, feature articles and advertisements in the local press and documentaries on TV appeared to be the most influential recruitment methods

This study will question whether some of these findings still hold true, and where results are being achieved will identify how fostering services have managed to increase their success.

Success in recruiting and retaining foster carers is key to delivering an effective fostering service. In 2004 the Fostering Network published the *Good Practice Guidelines for the Recruitment of Foster Carers*<sup>10</sup>. It drew on the experiences of fostering services, sharing good practice and identifying the key elements to be considered when writing and implementing a recruitment strategy. This interim report is the next step.

<sup>8</sup> *Making Every Child Matter, Messages from Inspections of Children's Social Services* (CSCI, 2005)

<sup>9</sup> Triseliotis J and others *Delivering Foster Care* (BAAF, 2000)

<sup>10</sup> *Good Practice Guidelines for the Recruitment of Foster Carers*, (the Fostering Network, 2004)



## 2. Background and methodology

The aim of the study was to learn more about and understand why some fostering services are significantly better at recruiting, and in some cases of increasing their pool of foster carers, than others.

The advisory group identified that the challenges faced by fostering services in the recruitment and retention of foster carers are constantly evolving, and agreed that future additions to the findings of the Innovation in Foster Care Recruitment study so far would be of real benefit.

The Fostering Network will therefore be holding nine regional seminars from April to June 2006 to share the findings of the interim report and engage representatives from fostering services around England in discussions about what they are doing well and plan to do in the future.

Discussions at the seminars will add to the findings of the interim report and will be available to view on the Fostering Network's website ([www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)) later in 2006 and further explored at a national conference in March 2007.

### 2.1 Methodology

All local authorities in England were sent a short survey to complete (see Appendix 1). They were also invited to be one of 18 focus local authorities (two needed in each of the nine government regions) to discuss their responses further. Some volunteered to act as focus fostering services while others were asked, in order that the spread reflected English councils' diversity in terms of:

- Urban/rural location
- Geographical size
- Density of population
- Number of looked-after children

In addition to local authorities, IFPs were invited to take part in the study, as their experiences around the recruitment and retention of foster carers are equally valuable. Those that volunteered were sent a survey to complete (Appendix 1).

Following receipt of the 78 completed surveys (responses were received from half of all English local authorities), the focus fostering services were offered either a 90 minute telephone interview, or participation in a focus group in February 2006. Both methods concentrated on the following:

- Responsibility for recruitment within a fostering team
- Recruitment budget
- Developing a pool of foster carers
- Turning enquiries into approved foster carers
- First year of fostering
- Working in partnership to provide best placement choice
- Learning from exit interviews
- Future of foster care recruitment

The findings from the survey (Appendix 2 shows some of the key results) and feedback from the telephone interviews and focus group have been compiled into this interim report.



## FINDINGS

### 3. Responsibility for recruitment within fostering team

#### key findings

- All fostering services need a strategy for the recruitment of foster carers. Without a comprehensive strategy they are less likely to recruit the type of foster carers required to meet the needs of their looked-after children
- Fostering services with a dedicated recruitment post (regardless of professional background) have more success recruiting foster carers
- Local authorities that involve the whole fostering service and a range of other key individuals have more success in recruiting foster carers

#### 3.1 The recruitment strategy

*'It is all about being really pro-active and persistent'*

fostering manager

A comprehensive recruitment strategy is essential for all fostering services.

It is imperative that fostering services have a clear plan of what they intend to do in the next year, and the forthcoming years, and how they are going to go about doing it.

Fostering services were asked if they had both a recruitment policy (that is, practice and procedures) and a written recruitment strategy (such as a three-year plan), as both of these are required as part of the National Minimum Standards<sup>11</sup>.

**While eight out of 10 fostering services had a recruitment policy, nearly one in four fostering services still did not have a recruitment strategy.**

#### essentials

##### Advantages of a comprehensive recruitment strategy

- Opportunity to detail the needs of looked-after children for specific targeted recruitment
- Information all in one place – helpful to consult when talking to media
- Continued monitoring to ensure recruitment is on track and on target
- Easier evaluation of a particular activity's effectiveness in attracting enquiries
- Clearer timeline to encourage colleagues to be involved, so you do not appear to be always asking for their help
- Explanation to elected members and directors of children's services
- Leverage for further budget allocation

<sup>11</sup> *National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services* (Department of Health, 2002)

Fostering services were asked to share what was incorporated in their recruitment strategies. The length and detail of strategies varied significantly, but it became clear that there are six essential areas that an effective strategy should cover.

## essentials

### A recruitment strategy must include

1. Analysis of current and recent looked-after children and foster carer populations, and the types of foster care provided
2. Identification of targets for further recruitment – what types of foster carer are most needed
3. A plan for all recruitment activity, including scheduled events
4. Breakdown of budget allocation to specific activities
5. Identification of others involved in recruitment and their roles
6. Development of a system to monitor and evaluate success

In addition to these essentials, strategies should consider:

- analysis of local competition;
- profile of the area – geographic profile, age and ethnicity of population, economic activity and types of employment. This geo-demographic analysis can be used to identify and understand potential motives to foster, target markets and where to focus promotional activity. Analysis can help determine where to focus direct marketing and advertising campaigns.

It is also essential that the recruitment strategy is regularly reviewed as the needs of looked-after children and demographic profile will change over time.

***'You need to know what works best and what doesn't. I have taken some things out of [my strategy] last year that I felt we hadn't got anything from. I have put other things in that were not there before to try'***

team manager

## 3.2 Responsibility for the recruitment of foster carers

The involvement of everyone in the fostering service in the recruitment of foster carers is essential. A strategy should identify the role each individual can play, including the tasks they are expected to undertake.

The recruitment of foster carers has often been the responsibility of the team manager or a supervising social worker. In the second half of the 1990s many local authorities introduced posts focused primarily on the recruitment of foster carers. In the case of Warwickshire County Council, for example, this was a social worker who undertook various marketing and PR courses in order to develop the skills to carry out the role.

**In 2005-06 over half of fostering services had a recruitment officer (or similar) responsible for the recruitment of foster carers.**

A number of local authorities had used the money available from the Government's Choice Protects initiative to introduce a new post to the team. For some local authorities this post has continued to be funded after the initiative ceased. For others this has not been possible. Where this has been the case, the effectiveness of the team in recruiting foster carers has been greatly compromised; a one-time thriving

fostering service could become a fostering service struggling to recruit the foster carers required to meet the needs of looked-after children.

### 3.3 Roles of the post responsible for recruitment

Fostering services were asked to identify the roles of the post with main responsibility for recruitment. Over three-quarters of posts had responsibility for:

- writing, monitoring and evaluating the fostering service's recruitment strategy;
- managing the recruitment budget;
- developing and producing promotional materials;
- promoting the need for foster carers in local media and area;
- organising information sessions and other recruitment events;
- networking and outreach work with community organisations and groups.

Just over half of these posts were responsible for taking initial enquiries. Of these, three out of five were not required to have a social work background. Some fostering services had a dedicated post or team to handle initial enquiries, allowing callers to be given more detail about the task and for more information about them to be taken down. Where this was the case fostering services found having such a post advantageous.

#### **Two-thirds of dedicated posts were responsible for both the recruitment of foster carers and adoptive families.**

Other responsibilities included:

- performance management
- analysis of quantity and types of people recruited against targets
- evaluation of what does and does not work
- evaluation of service provided and quality of that service
- organisation and supervision of the pre-approval training
- tracking enquiries throughout the process
- writing and editing newsletters
- development of packages, strategies and practices to retain foster carers
- development of the website
- management of relationship with external suppliers such as PR and marketing agencies

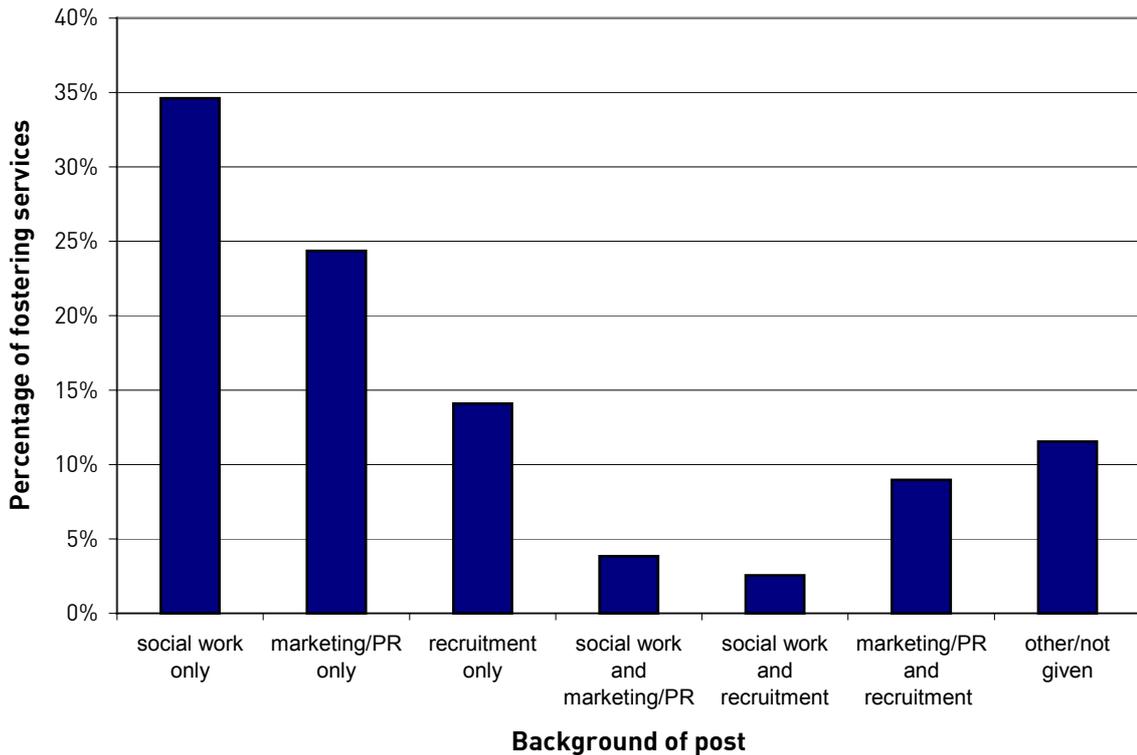
### 3.4 Dedicated post for the recruitment of foster carers

#### **Only just over half of fostering services had a post dedicated to the recruitment of foster carers.**

Feedback from fostering services suggested that it was beneficial to have a dedicated member of staff, regardless of their professional background.

Fostering services were asked to detail whether or not the post responsible for recruitment required either a social work, marketing/PR or recruitment background. Detailed in the graph over the page are the percentages of fostering services that require one or more specialism from their post responsible for recruitment.

### Background of post responsible for recruitment



Just under half of fostering services required the post responsible for recruitment to have a marketing/PR and/or recruitment background. 35 per cent of fostering services required the post responsible for recruitment to have only a social work background.

Those who recruited a marketing or PR specialist needed to ensure that the post holder developed a good understanding of the work that foster carers do and the assessment process. Those with a social work background needed to develop an understanding of marketing and promotion, and where necessary to work with colleagues elsewhere in their fostering service, such as marketing or PR specialists, to gain advice, guidance and assistance.

Fostering services need to be realistic about what is possible to 'learn on the job' and when it is important that a qualified professional is used for the task. To successfully implement a recruitment strategy you need to understand your product - in this case fostering. You do not necessarily need to understand all the complexities associated with assessing and supporting a foster carer. There are stages to any recruitment process and a fostering service needs to decide when part of the process gets beyond the remit of a specific post. They also need to consider when a role is better undertaken by someone else if the skills of a member of staff are being underutilised by their over-involvement in a task they are not fully qualified to do.

## essentials

### **Benefits of a dedicated recruitment post**

- Allocated time to focus fully on the task of recruiting foster carers
- Taking full responsibility for the recruitment of foster carers and ownership of the strategy
- Time to focus on the needs of the fostering service and fully research and implement a strategic approach to recruitment
- Freeing up time for colleagues to focus on their own roles, such as supervising placements, handling placements of looked-after children and developing other areas of the fostering service
- Time to develop contacts within the fostering service and the wider community

These benefits can be diluted if the post is:

- undervalued or misunderstood by other team members
- isolated from the rest of the team (either physically or structurally by having no clear role or place within the team)
- disengaged with the complete process of recruitment (up to and beyond approval at panel)
- unable to try new ideas and do things differently

Considering the key tasks that a dedicated recruitment post undertakes:

- Writing, monitoring and evaluating the fostering service's recruitment strategy
- Managing the recruitment budget
- Developing and producing promotional materials
- Promoting the need for foster carers in local media and area
- Organising information sessions and other recruitment events
- Networking and outreach work with community organisations and groups.

Fostering services should consider if it would be beneficial to the effectiveness of the team to consider restructuring. This can mean that a decision has to be made to replace a social worker post with a marketing and/or PR specialist to lead on recruitment.

## essentials

### **Benefits of a marketing and/or PR specialist carrying out the recruitment of foster carers include:**

- having skills and experience more suited to the task
- the ability to communicate without social work jargon that means very little to the majority of the population
- the ability to learn about fostering and understand the needs of the service while in the role
- having time to truly consider the needs of the fostering service so that recruitment is proactive rather than reactive
- leaving social workers time to do what they are qualified and skilled to do

*'One of the things that I have learnt is to try and get away from the social work jargon, basically make our message more friendly, but still informative'*

service manager

*'Somebody who is used to mixing with the public from a marketing point of view, knows about targeting certain groups and all the tasks that go with it . . . in the last 12 months [our marketing officer] he has upped enquiries by 100 per cent'*

practice manager

## case study

### **South Gloucestershire Council – marketing officer**

In 2005 South Gloucestershire Council appointed a marketing officer for the fostering service. The post has responsibility for, or involvement in, most aspects of the recruitment process. As a result all enquiries are effectively tracked and supported through the process.

The first few months were spent learning the terminology, about fostering and how the fostering team worked. It took about six months to write a good strategy (including profiles of the area and the children and competition for the recruitment of foster carers).

The marketing officer is responsible for the promotion of fostering, and organising all advertising, publicity and events including information sessions. All initial enquiries are now handled by the post (previously this was the receptionist's role), so it is now possible to provide more information to first-time callers, and where necessary pass them on to the duty team.

All *The Skills to Foster* courses are arranged and attended by the marketing officer, but are delivered by a social worker and foster carer (as recommended). This ensures that all applicants have a continuity of contact throughout the process, and allows the marketing officer to follow their progress highlighting any areas where there is cause for concern.

## case study

### **Thurrock Council – business development manager**

Recruitment of foster carers is the responsibility of the business development manager for vulnerable groups. This post is also responsible for handling all the arrangements for commissioning placements from IFPs, as well as the recruitment of adoptive families.

The post manages the relationship with the external marketing company as well as the call centre used to handle initial enquiries and distribute information packs.

As a result of being responsible for the commissioning of IFP placements, the manager is able to have a clearer strategic overview of the fostering service and pinpoint where there is most need for foster carer recruitment.

**case study**

**Kingston upon Hull City Council – recruitment team**

The responsibility for recruitment lies with the manager of the fostering business team. The manager is supported by a full-time marketing officer and two part-time recruitment officers.

The recruitment officers are responsible for taking initial enquiries and carrying out initial visits. The marketing officer is responsible for all promotional activities including developing new materials, arranging advertising in the media and throughout the area and organising all events. Once prospective foster carers make a formal application they are dealt with by the assessment team.

**case study**

**Norfolk County Council – dedicated recruitment and assessment team**

The team comprises one team manager, two assistant team managers and seven and a half social work posts (and some sessional workers), supported by a team assistant who handles all initial enquiries. Some foster carers with their NVQ Level 3 also work alongside the team.

The rest of the fostering service is divided into east and west of the county into two family placement support teams and one provider team that organises all the placements for the county.

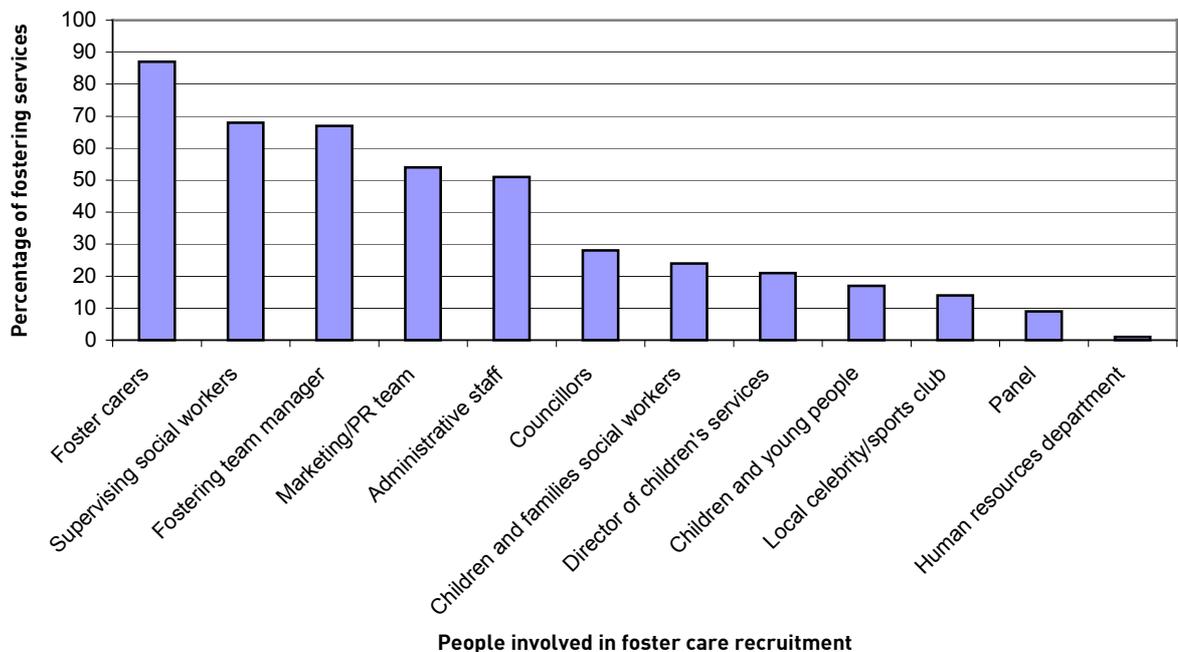
The role of the recruitment officer for fostering services is justifiably a valued position. Although a relatively new concept, individuals are already moving around fostering services looking for new challenges and taking experiences from their last position.

There is growing expertise that will be of use in offering consultancy to those fostering services still considering whether a dedicated post is the answer to their recruitment concerns.

### 3.5 Who else is involved in the recruitment of foster carers?

The recruitment of foster carers should not be seen as solely the responsibility of one post or team. Where recruitment is more successful, the whole organisation tends to be involved. Respondents to the survey, however, described a variety of ways in which individuals or groups can be invaluable to the success of foster care recruitment.

#### Other people from the fostering service involved in the recruitment of foster carers



While it was common for foster carers to be involved in recruitment, it is notable that only 28 per cent of local authorities said that councillors played an active role, while only 17 per cent included children and young people.

***'I suppose what I think about foster care recruitment is that it needs to be [a priority at a senior] level. You can't do it on your own in the corner. The council is serious has got to be serious about recruitment'***

fostering manager

#### **Foster carers** (used by 87 per cent of survey respondents)

Foster carers are already doing it. They will remember why they became foster carers and can bring the role to life by sharing their experiences. Any prospective foster carer is likely to be keen to hear from those actually caring for children. Foster carers can also share their very local knowledge. This is particularly useful in geographically large areas where it is not feasible to know every shopping centre or community organisation, ideal places to promote a need for more foster carers.

In addition, foster carers can provide invaluable access into community, religious and minority ethnic groups that the fostering service has had difficulty developing a relationship with in the past. They can also advise which local newspapers and radio stations they read and listen to, which may be useful in terms of targeting advertisements.

Foster carers are widely used by fostering services to share their story in the local media. By working with the local media to be interviewed at the time of a big recruitment push the experiences shared by foster carers can help gain valuable, and free of charge, publicity for the campaign.

## case study

### Norfolk County Council – working with foster carers

Five foster carers with NVQ Level 3 give four hours a week to work alongside the recruitment and assessment team to help recruit new foster carers. The foster carers give talks to potential foster carers, attend team meetings, help with *The Skills to Foster* training and do initial visits, usually on their own. They have regular supervisions and join the rest of the fostering team on training courses and at meetings.

A couple of the foster carers have been really keen to get further involved in the assessment of new foster carers and they now co-work with the assessing social workers.

***‘The most important part is . . . actually talking to someone who is doing it. You can’t edit what they are saying can you? So people are getting the true picture, they are not getting anything that is a one-sided account or a rosy view of fostering’***

assistant team manager

## case study

### Wolverhampton City Council – recruitment group

The marketing officer, social workers and foster carers meet bi-monthly to discuss future plans for recruitment. The marketing officer leads on all the proposals. Members of the fostering service more involved in planning also input into the group’s discussions and proposals. The forum enables people from all stages of the process to have the opportunity to put across their perspectives. Everyone’s ideas are listened to and encouraged.

Involvement can be hindered by the *Fostering Service Regulations*<sup>12</sup> that do not allow foster carers to take on more than five hours’ paid additional tasks for the same service that employs them as carers. This regulation also impacts on other ways in which they can be involved, including attending initial visits, co-delivering pre-approval training, operating out-of-hours help lines or providing mentor support if they are being paid.

***‘We work in partnership with the foster carers. We class them as our colleagues so they are involved in every step of delivering the fostering service’***

practice manager

## Marketing and PR team (54 per cent)

This is particularly vital if the post responsible for recruitment has little or no previous experience of these areas. The press team will already have strong contacts with local newspapers and radio stations. They will also have a clearer view of what else is happening throughout the area that fostering promotion could ‘piggy back’ on or try out. They have experience and skills that social work staff might not, such as

<sup>12</sup> *Social care, England Children and Young Persons, England: The Fostering Services Regulations* (HM Government, 2002)

identifying news hooks, seeing promotional opportunities in recent changes within the service or creating responses to developments at a national level.

### **Administrative support** (51 per cent)

Making good use of administrative support and having sufficient staff levels to support all stages of recruitment are essential. Support staff can field initial enquiries, arrange mailings, catalogue and monitor all data, organise events and support assessors with some aspects of assessments such as chasing up CRB checks and referees.

### **Councillors** (28 per cent)

All elected members have a responsibility as corporate parent to the children coming into their care. Councillors can be very useful to fostering services if they understand the role they play in improving the lives of looked-after children. Although less than a third of local authorities involve their councillors in some way, it is encouraging that fostering is put high on their agenda in these areas at least.

Councillors can be particularly useful for attracting the media, simply by attending a balloon launch, for example, or offering a quote for a press release. Many fostering services hold award ceremonies for their foster carers and elected members or mayors are invited to give awards and meet and celebrate their foster carers.

### **Director of children's services** (21 per cent)

Again, the directors of children's services have a role as corporate parent. They take personal responsibility on behalf of the local authority for improving the full range of support offered to the children in and leaving care. With the development of Children's Trusts and fostering coming under the director of children's services, it is important that each 'new' director is kept informed of the work of the fostering service and what is being done to improve standards for children in care. A multi-service approach within the council should enable better co-operation and communication across the wide variety of services looked-after children need.

#### **case study**

#### **London Borough of Islington – working together**

Since early 2005 Islington's Fostering Team has been steadily raising the profile of fostering and the needs of the fostering service throughout the council. There is now a real commitment across the council to the recruitment of foster carers.

This has been achieved through a variety of methods:

- Forging links with individuals at operational level, such as the communication team;
- Offering all staff (from refuse collectors to finance officers) £500 if they recommend someone who is approved as a new foster carer;
- Working with the Corporate Parent's Board. This board brings together representatives from housing, education, primary care trusts and councillors.

The whole council has embraced the recruitment drive. However, in return the team's performance is scrutinised at the highest level, with weekly performance reports to the executive member responsible for children. Even with the weekly monitoring and analysis of performance there are benefits to the team because they can account fully for how the money is being spent.

***‘The reason I think that we are successful is that we have had this drive for recruitment embraced by the whole council, including the chief executive’***

fostering manager

## **Children and young people** (17 per cent)

A surprisingly small number of fostering services work with children and young people to help with the recruitment of foster carers. For those fostering services which do, the input of both the sons and daughters of foster carers and looked-after children has been invaluable.

### **case study**

#### **Thurrock Council – working with young people**

Where possible looked-after children and young people and sons and daughters of foster carers attend the information sessions for prospective foster carers, as well as some events.

Young people have been consulted on a variety of areas including the development of some of the fostering recruitment materials and the creation of a new adoption website, which is being designed to incorporate the real story of a young person’s experience in the care system.

In a recent report by the children’s rights director, *Being Fostered*<sup>13</sup>, over three-quarters of fostered children said having their views heard made a difference to how they were looked after in foster care.

## **Local celebrity / sports club** (14 per cent)

Wonderful interest from the local media can be achieved, with little or no cost, by developing a relationship with local celebrities or sports clubs. Appearances at events throughout the year and prizes for foster families and looked-after children, such as tickets to a match, will also make everyone feel more valued and celebrated, aiding retention. This need not be limited to local luminaries but can be developed further by working with local companies.

## **Panel** (9 per cent)

Working closely with and involving the panel in recruitment can have a significant effect. They can offer advice and feedback about what is and is not working and where they see there is a real need to recruit more foster carers. In addition they can raise any concerns they have over the standard of new foster carers being assessed for approval.

## **Human resources department** (1 per cent)

The nature of fostering may not be an orthodox form of employment, but the advice of colleagues in HR teams should still be heeded. When targeting prospective foster carers you are ultimately asking them to take on a new ‘job’ and therefore the role

<sup>13</sup> Morgan R *Being Fostered: A National Survey of the Views of Foster Children, Foster Carers, and Birth Parents about Foster Care* (CSCI, 2005)

should have the same clear job description and person specification as any other position in the fostering service.

### 3.6 Outsourcing of activity

A number of fostering services had worked with external suppliers to develop, design and implement their recruitment activity. Although costly, where well managed the results were very effective.

However, feedback from some fostering services suggested that they needed to be clearer with their specifications as vague briefs had led, in some cases, to suppliers taking advantage of their naivety.

#### case study

##### **Shropshire County Council – outsourcing recruitment**

In 2002 the fostering service explored the practicalities of outsourcing the whole recruitment process. They met with a variety of companies and ended up contracting a company to handle all their promotional activity, including re-developing the fostering service's identity. The company handles everything, in consultation with the service manager, up to and including initial enquiries.

The council has a recruitment strategy until 2008. They renew the contract with the supplier on a yearly basis. The council has found this a very successful partnership and is delighted that the outcomes of the company can be measured effectively. One key target for the company was that the council was able to approve one new fostering household for every six initial enquiries passed on. This has been achieved.

#### case study

##### **Plymouth City Council – working with PR companies**

In 2004-05 the local authority invested considerably in the recruitment of foster carers. An external company was contracted to re-brand the fostering service's recruitment materials. The new identity and image were extremely successful at attracting prospective foster carers, so much so that more than six months after the main campaign ceased the council still had a long waiting list.

The marketing officer plans to be a great deal more focused with promotion from now on. They are delighted with the interest but are keen in future to attract people who can provide the placements they need.

It is important to be clear about what a fostering service actually wants to achieve before contracting with an external supplier. If you are a small unitary authority looking for between 10 and 20 new fostering households, do you really need a massive re-branding of your service and total saturation of your community, resulting in hundreds of enquiries that your team's administrative systems cannot cope with and does not need?

## **REMINDER - key findings**

- All fostering services need a strategy for the recruitment of foster carers. Without a comprehensive strategy they are less likely to recruit the type of foster carers required to meet the needs of their looked-after children
- Fostering services with a dedicated recruitment post (regardless of professional background) have more success recruiting foster carers
- Local authorities that involve the whole fostering service and a range of other key individuals have more success in recruiting foster carers



## 4. Auditing need to target recruitment

### key findings

- An audit that identifies the type, profile and needs of looked-after children must be undertaken. This need to be used, together with profiles of existing foster carers, to identify gaps and priority areas for future recruitment
- Fostering services needs to be clear about what type of foster carers they need, and where appropriate work with other fostering services to provide specialist placements for children with very specific needs

Currently there is a shortage of around 8,200 foster carers in England<sup>14</sup>. This shortage represents the number of new foster carers needed by English local authorities to provide best placement choice. Placement choice means:

- offering a wide enough variety of foster carers to reflect the needs of looked-after children
- being able to offer children in care a choice of foster carer to be placed with

Therefore, developing a pool of foster carers is not only about increasing the number of in-house foster carers to ensure that all looked-after children are placed within the authority, but also that foster carers are available who best match their needs.

### 4.1 Developing a pool of foster carers

Developing and maintaining a keen, active and skilled pool of foster carers is essential. Sufficient vacancies are needed to be able to offer placement choice if fostering services are going to be able to place children in a family that is right for them.

### essentials

#### How to develop a pool of foster carers

To develop a pool of foster carers it is important to understand:

- the needs of your looked-after children and any particular carer shortages
- who you already have
- who you did have
- who you are good and not so good at attracting
- when to work in partnership to provide what you do not have

**Seven out of 10 fostering services had a target for the recruitment of foster carers in 2005-06.**

<sup>14</sup> The Fostering Network, 2004

## 4.2 What are we asking foster carers to do?

The ways in which prospective foster carers are being targeted varies from one fostering service to another. It is important that any promotional activity has a clear explanation of the task and what is needed from that particular fostering service.

All over the country prospective foster carers are being encouraged to *think about fostering*, if they *have a spare room and time in their life to look after a child* or if they want to *make a difference*.

### **Two-thirds of fostering services that responded to the survey received over 200 enquiries from prospective foster carers in 2004-05.**

***'You have got to go out there and say what you need, and not just that someone is needed'***

senior social worker

Poor handling of initial enquiries, information sessions and initial visits by not counselling out unsuitable candidates early on can use up large amounts of staff hours.

***'You have got to be realistic. I only really want people that can really do the job. It is not just about getting the enquiries through is it? It is about getting the quality carers through'***

team manager

***'It is being honest and up front with people about some of the challenges that are ahead, but you need to sell the rewards that go with it and just continue to do that'***

team manager fostering and adoption

Following feedback from the telephone interviews and the focus group it is apparent that once fostering services have developed a strong identity in their community, further work is needed to make their needs clear, and to dispel the myths around who can and cannot be a foster carer.

Foster carers have been described as 'ordinary parents recruited to a special task'<sup>15</sup>. While this may be true it is far from a complete description of fostering. It is advisable that the task is clearly described to avoid misleading people; it is unhelpful to gloss over the realities of fostering, Ten minutes with a current foster carer will soon paint the true picture of the challenges and rewards of fostering.

Some fostering services are becoming increasingly more explicit about what is expected from foster carers.

Feedback from one fostering service involved in the treatment foster care pilots relayed that they had had a surprisingly large response to an advertisement placed in the jobs section of the local paper. The advert identified the key aspects of being a treatment foster carer. Not all the applicants were suitable for this scheme but the staff were able to ask them if they had considered other types of fostering. Feedback from the service suggested that it really helped to outline at the start the true responsibilities of a foster carer and not to be concerned about how foreboding such information would be at the first stage.

<sup>15</sup> Sinclair I and others *Supporting Fostering* (University of York, 1999)

One way to promote fostering could be to use the competencies outlined in the Fostering Network's assessment materials.<sup>16</sup> The 14 areas of competence a foster carer needs are:

**Can care for children and young people, by**

- providing a good standard of care to other people's children which promotes healthy emotional, physical and sexual development as well as their health and educational achievement
- working closely with children's families, and others who are important to the child
- setting appropriate boundaries and managing children's behaviour within these, without use of physical or other inappropriate punishment
- having a knowledge of normal child development and being able to listen to and communicate with children appropriate to their age and understanding

**Provide a safe and caring environment, by**

- ensuring that the children are cared for in a home where they are safe from harm and abuse
- helping children keep themselves safe from harm or abuse, and to know how to seek help if their safety is threatened

**Working as part of a team, by**

- working with other professional people and contributing to the department's planning for the child/young person
- communicating effectively
- keeping information confidential
- promoting equality, diversity and rights of individuals and groups within society

**Think about own personal development, by**

- appreciating how personal experiences have affected yourself and your family, and understanding the impact that fostering is likely to have on you all
- having people and links within the community which provide support
- using training opportunities to improve skills
- sustaining positive relationships and maintaining effective functioning through periods of stress

Feedback from the focus fostering services suggested that there are pros and cons about being up front about the money received by foster carers. Having clear information about the financial support offered to foster carers can be useful but it is important to monitor whether or not it actually results in more suitable applicants.

***'One thing that worked for us was being more specific around the amount of pay foster carers were receiving, which coincided with a large increase in the fees paid to our carers'***

service manager

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<sup>16</sup> *Becoming a Foster Carer: an Applicants Guide to the Assessment Process* (The Fostering Network, 2000)

### 4.3 Targeting foster care recruitment

Any recruitment strategy should have a target for the number of new fostering households recruited in one year, in order to evaluate if you are being effective. What this target is and how it is arrived at is crucial to any success. For example, members of senior management setting an arbitrary figure so as to reduce dependency on IFPs without any consideration of resource implications can be unhelpful.

**Over a quarter of fostering services did not specify that they had a target for the recruitment of their new foster carers in 2005-06.**

A well thought out and considered target, backed by appropriate resources, can lead to greater success. Prospective foster carers need to see clear information about the task ahead and what the requirements are of any fostering service they may choose to foster for. If you are clear with your demands then you are more likely to receive approaches from people fit for the purpose.

### 4.4 Where are the current shortages?

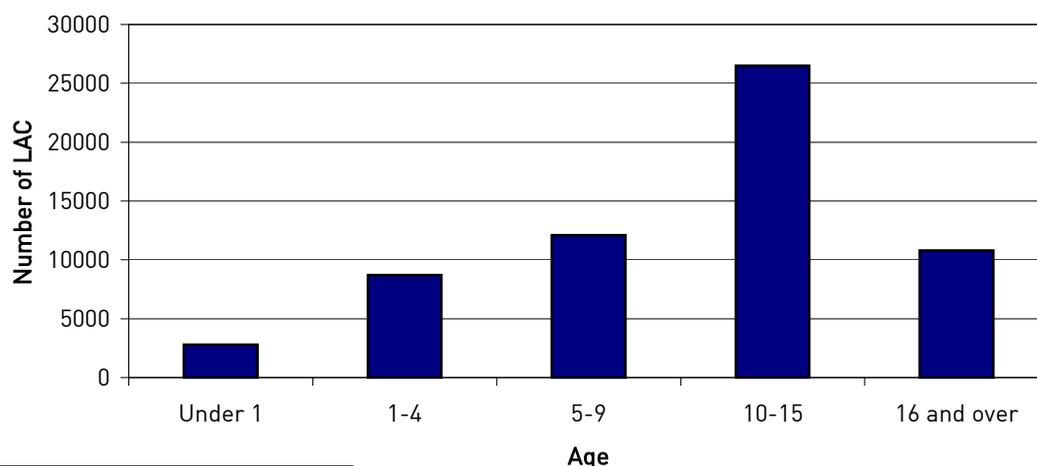
There are specific shortages experienced by most fostering services which vary throughout the country and from one sort of fostering service to another. However, most fostering services reported shortages of foster carers for teenagers and sibling groups.

#### Foster carers for teenagers

Fostering services are working hard to encourage people to consider fostering teenagers, using a variety of methods including: working with their local youth service; developing links in the community; and going out and talking to groups that work with young people about what fostering is and how they could be involved.

In addition to prospective foster carers being apprehensive about looking after children with challenging behaviour, the shortage of new carers coming forward is exacerbated by there being a much greater number of teenagers in the care system than any other age group<sup>17</sup>:

#### Age of looked-after children (March 31 2005)



<sup>17</sup> Children Looked After by Local Authorities (DfES, 2006)

## case study

### Shropshire County Council – teenage foster carers

The council, working with a contracted marketing company, co-ordinates a series of targeted advertising pushes throughout the year. In addition to working closely with the local media to publicise and advertise their need, they ensure that they have an open evening scheduled with the specific type of foster care being showcased.

This has been successful in recruiting foster carers for teenagers. They ensure that current foster carers are on hand to share their experiences and that the emphasis is on caring for teenagers throughout the evening.

***‘Anyone who says you can’t find carers for teenagers, is talking rubbish. It is just how you organise yourself’***

fostering manager

### Foster carers for sibling groups

A huge concern for fostering services is being able to keep sibling groups together. This is becoming increasingly difficult as the cost of housing rises and the likelihood of foster carers having room for three or more children at one time becomes slimmer. The situation is most prevalent in London where the cost of housing is highest. There are proposals in place to try and alleviate this problem, such as one fostering service which works closely with the housing department so that those committed to fostering are considered a priority for re-housing to a larger property.

### Diversity of foster carers available

Fostering services were asked to breakdown their target for recruitment in 2005-06 by type of foster care. Their overall target for the recruitment of foster carers ranged from six to 160 new fostering households in one year.

Fostering services were asked if they had specified any particular need for carers from minority ethnic groups.

### Half of fostering services had a target to recruit specific minority ethnic groups.

The targets varied throughout the country, but a number of London boroughs reported shortages of white British foster carers and foster carers for unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees.

Planning and preparing for providing placements for children from a wide variety of countries and cultures is difficult. It is essential, however, that a fostering service ensures they have carers who are equipped with the skills and experience to deal with the needs of these children. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people often arrive traumatised by what they have experienced and need very specialist support.

***‘What we want to do is have discussions with people who have got links with those communities and then pitch it right’***

fostering manager

Some fostering services were doing well at developing links within their communities. Successful partnerships had been developed with the *Sure Start* and *Connexions* initiatives as well as a host of voluntary and community sector organisations.

**case study**

**Brighton and Hove Council – minority ethnic recruitment officer**

The council has a dedicated BME recruitment officer who has experience of working in the community rather than a social work or marketing background. About five per cent of the authority’s population are from minority ethnic communities with no one group dominating.

Minority ethnic groups are targeted by identifying community leaders, making links with a variety of different community groups and by attending a range of suitable events throughout the year. Partnerships have been developed with local organisations such as Mosaic (promotes the needs of minority ethnic children) where the council runs information sessions.

When children are placed with foster carers of a different ethnicity, the minority ethnic recruitment officer also provides additional support and advice on the needs of the children and visits them in their own homes. The council has also developed a resource pack for carers with transracial placements, offering practical advice and information.

**case study**

**London Borough of Camden – working with the Bangladeshi community**

The London Borough of Camden is funding a scheme to encourage Bangladeshi residents to consider fostering. The borough has a population of 12,500 Bangladeshi residents, none of whom were foster carers for the borough when the scheme began. Hopscotch Asian Women’s Centre is working with social services to promote fostering in the community. The project also aims to identify why Bangladeshi residents have not come forward in the past. They are still working on developing links and finding it quite a slow process, but already have one new fostering household that is nearly approved.

**REMINDER - key findings**

- An audit that identifies the type, profile and needs of looked-after children must be undertaken. This needs to be used, together with profiles of existing foster carers, to identify gaps and priority areas for future recruitment
- Fostering services need to be clear about what type of foster carers they need, and where appropriate work with other fostering services to provide specialist placements for children with very specific needs

## 5. Recruitment budget

### key findings

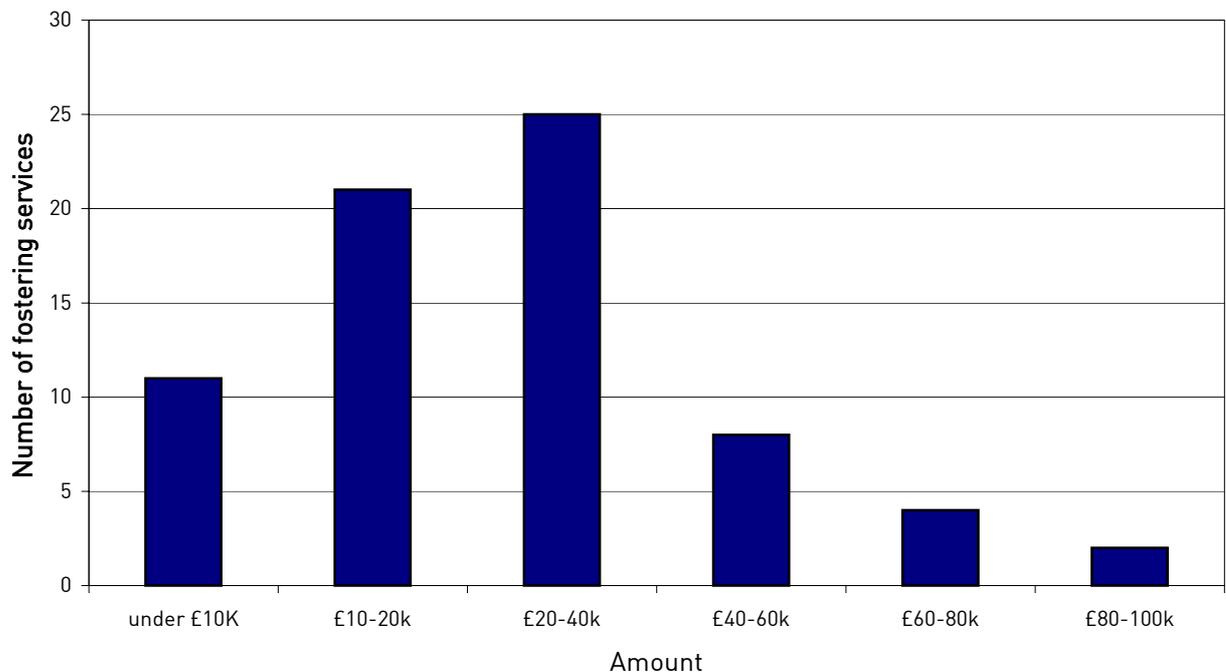
- A dedicated recruitment budget is key to receiving high levels of initial interest
- Identifying the level of funding available for recruitment is the first stage in prioritising how and where to best allocate resources
- The larger the recruitment budget, the greater the chance of attracting people – but not necessarily of the quality required

The recruitment of foster carers can be very expensive, especially as it uses a lot of staff hours to thoroughly assess and support applicants through the process.

Fostering services were asked to detail how much they spent on recruitment in the fiscal year 2004-05. Unfortunately this part of the survey was often sparsely completed. This may be due to a lack of enthusiasm to share exact figures or, more worryingly, it could mean that in just under half of the fostering services surveyed the person with main responsibility for the recruitment of foster carers did not manage the budget or that there was no clear budget allocation for recruitment. However, from the data that were received, it is clear that the amount of money available to fostering services for the recruitment of foster carers varied widely.

### How much did your fostering service spend on recruitment in financial year 2004-05 (April – March) *excluding staff costs?*

#### Recruitment spend



There was no real correlation between the amount of money spent on foster care recruitment and the size of the looked-after children population or area. There was, however, clearly a greater success in attracting initial enquiries, the more money spent. The rate of drop off during the application process varied significantly and could not be analysed in full.

It is clear that the more promotion of need for new carers then the more chance there is that people will respond. However, this does not necessarily bring forward the most suitable candidates.

***'[The budget] is extremely tight and if I wasn't motivated and as passionate about the children as I am it would be very hard work . . . slogging around radio stations and talking to people'***

marketing officer

The ways in which budgets were allocated and spent varied significantly between fostering services. Fostering services were asked not to include spend on staff time, although it is essential that every recruitment strategy include this as the full recruitment process takes up a considerable number of staff hours. In addition very few fostering services included their spend on assessments.

In 2005, the Fostering Network and BAAF jointly published the *Cost of Foster Care*. This report for the first time identified the actual cost of recruiting a new fostering family as £11,500 per new fostering household<sup>18</sup>. This figure included promotion, staff costs, assessment, approval and training.

## 5.1 Promotional materials

For any prospective foster carer there is a choice of who they can foster for, so each fostering service is clambering to stand out from the others. Having the most wonderful promotional materials is no substitute for good packages of financial and other support needed to be an effective foster carer.

In an increasingly competitive market fostering services have in some instances spent large amounts of money developing their corporate identity. Feedback from the surveys showed fostering services were spending anything from £300 to £28,000 on their promotional materials.

Most fostering services now have a clear and distinct identity which spans their whole promotional activity, from pages on their website, advertisements in local press and promotional stands at the local shopping centre to information packs.

### case study

#### **Brighton and Hove Council – promotional CD-Rom**

The council has invested in a promotional CD-Rom which is sent out to all prospective foster carers. It includes footage of their foster carers speaking about their experiences, as well as other members of the team. The film has been really well received by people applying to their service and is inexpensive to reproduce. The CD-Rom has also been transferred on to the fostering website.

<sup>18</sup> Tapsfield R and Collier F *The Cost of Foster Care* (The Fostering Network and BAAF, 2005)

## case study

**South Gloucestershire Council – direct mail marketing**

A thorough analysis was undertaken by South Gloucestershire Council into their current foster carers and all people who had called up to enquire about fostering in the past five years. With the help of a geodemographic tool used to identify and understand the UK population by their postal code, 10,500 households were targeted for a direct mail campaign.

A letter and leaflet were sent to each household in envelopes marked with the council's logo. The council was pleased with the initial response from the mailing.

**5.2 Advertising in local media (including radio and TV)**

All but one of the fostering services that completed this part of the survey spent some of their recruitment budget on advertising in the local media.

Advertising in the local media can be very expensive, and any fostering service embarking on a relationship with a company should do their research first. It is essential to be clear about your reasons for choosing a particular publication or station and to have some expectations of the outcome. Will it reach your target audience? Any programme of advertising should form part of the recruitment strategy and there should be systems in place to monitor and evaluate its success (this can be as simple as asking initial enquirers where they heard about the fostering service).

*'If somebody wants to foster I don't think you are going to go in the local library. It is a job. We have got a good fee attached to it. So if you want a job you are going to look in the jobs section'*

marketing officer

Feedback from the survey showed that some fostering services do spend a considerable amount of money on advertising in the local press, on the radio and throughout the community on buses, bus shelters and billboards. Fostering services reported being constantly cold called by media sales companies trying to fill their advertising space. It is essential that any fostering service is fully aware of the target audience before making a commitment. It is also worth considering negotiating with the company to get better value for money and advertising as and when the fostering team is ready for an influx of enquiries and as part of a planned strategy.

## case study

**Cornwall County Council – negotiating with your supplier**

The council has developed a good relationship, and has managed to negotiate some great deals, with their local radio station. They were able to negotiate a 35 per cent discount by booking two years' worth of advertising in advance. This included a two-week slot in the run up to Christmas for no cost as the station was finding it hard to fill the slots. The council was apprehensive about whether or not it was worthwhile advertising at this time, being such a busy and emotive time of year, but ended up having a much better than expected response, and from suitable enquirers too.

## case study

### Leicestershire County Council – cinema advertisements

In 2005, Leicestershire County Council developed a 30-second advert which was shown at local cinemas as an alternative to posters and leaflets. It encouraged people to become foster carers. The film focused on what it is like to be a foster carer and highlighted the needs of children in Leicestershire who require foster families.

The council also managed to negotiate a discounted price with the cinemas, as social services was considered a good cause.

The team received a number of enquiries from people seeing the film or the publicity around the initiative.

## 5.3 Publicity events

Fostering services think up a whole range of innovative ways to publicise their need for foster carers. These range from balloon launches to tree planting to floats in a local carnival. Events such as these are a fun way to raise the profile as all the team can get involved, including looked-after children and the sons and daughters of foster carers.

Another way in which fostering services publicise themselves is by holding events to celebrate and thank their foster carers. As well as the much-needed raising of the fostering service's profile, they are a fantastic way to reward foster families.

***'By celebrating what they do, we bring other people into being foster carers. It is recognising what they do and saying thank you'***

team manager

## 5.4 Website

Year on year fostering services are finding that more and more prospective foster carers are contacting them through their website. Many fostering services have therefore spent time investing in the development of their internet presence, to make it as useful and informative to all visitors as possible.

Some local authorities have even invested in the building of new fostering websites separate from their main site. This has been very successful for some as they found that people were being put off by having to get in touch with the council because of all the other (not always pleasurable) reasons they might have to contact them.

Websites generally now include a basic enquiry form that visitors can complete. This usually requests their name, address, contact details and where they heard about the fostering service. Some fostering services have added more detailed forms so they can start assessing whether the applicant is suitable from this initial contact.

It is clear that prospective foster carers are doing increasing amounts of research and are keen to evaluate which fostering service is best for them before making the decision to progress with their enquiry. For this reason it is important that everything is done to promote the advantages of working for one fostering service over another, as well as being clear about what type of foster carers are actually needed.

*'What I have noticed in the last year is that people that ring up to enquire are shopping around. They don't just ring one agency; they normally ring maybe three or four. They will get the information together and sometimes they will even have visits from a couple of different agencies'*

recruitment officer

## 5.5 Information sessions

Only a minority of fostering services set aside significant amounts of money for the running of information sessions. The success of such events seems to vary significantly across the country. Those fostering services that have invested time into planning and preparing them, however, reported that they found them very useful.

Information sessions can be an extremely effective way to handle the initial stage of considering whether or not a particular prospective foster carer is suitable for the task. While individual initial visits take up between two to three hours of a social worker's day, one information session can inform up to 30 families about fostering, dealing with their initial thoughts and concerns. The attendees also have the opportunity to hear about the task of fostering from foster carers. All those who still want to continue can then be offered an initial visit before making a formal application to foster.

## 5.6 Pre-approval training course delivery

It is important that any recruitment strategy budgets for the number of training sessions planned for a year.

Pre-approval training sessions should be scheduled regularly and in advance for a month to six weeks after any big promotional push. It will make a good impression on applicants if a course is available almost immediately, and if they are not able to make this, that another is available in the not too distant future.

The standard of a pre-approval training course is a good insight into the nature of the fostering service. Applicants will be encouraged by informed trainers, enthusiastic foster carers and good quality workbooks and materials. Choosing to train in a comfortable venue with good quality refreshments, as well as providing additional support such as childcare, travel costs and any other special requirements should be budgeted for.

## 5.7 Assessment and panel costs

The cost of assessing any new fostering household is significant as it requires a large number of staff hours, from both the assessing social workers and other staff involved in the process. This cost should be identified as part of any recruitment strategy (even if it forms part of the fostering service's overall budget).

Before embarking on any assessment the fostering service needs to be as confident as possible that the applicant is suitable for fostering.

## 5.8 Incentives for foster carers to encourage friends and family

Feedback suggested that word of mouth is still the most successful way of recruiting foster carers. This being the case it may seem strange that so much money is being spent on promoting a fostering service's need.

Foster carers are wonderful advocates for fostering and their fostering service. They are also part of the community where the children live and are essential ambassadors in the school, the local swimming pool, the community centre and so on.

Many fostering services provide a financial reward to foster carers as a thank you if someone they have recommended is approved at panel. Financial rewards for foster carers who recommend their family and friends as foster carers are an incentive for them to encourage others to come forward. However, it is absolutely essential to ensure that foster carers are properly rewarded through allowances and fees and a variety of good training and support. A well looked after workforce is likely to be a powerful recruitment tool.

In conclusion, investing in recruitment can reap greater rewards over a period of time. The establishment of a clear brand and vision for a fostering service can take a few years. As a fostering service becomes more successful so does its ability to hone and streamline activity, allowing it to be more strategic and creative with what it tries.

### REMINDER - key findings

- A dedicated recruitment budget is key to receiving high levels of initial interest
- Identifying the level of funding available for recruitment is the first stage in prioritising how and where to best allocate resources
- The larger the recruitment budget, the greater the chance of attracting people – but not necessarily of the quality required

## 6. Turning enquiries into approved foster carers

### key findings

- Success at turning enquiries into approved foster carers relies on having staff available to allocate dedicated time to assessing them
- Fostering services need to be clear at the start of the process what their capacity is for recruiting new fostering households – this needs to be incorporated into the recruitment strategy
- There are critical stages in the process at which a decision must be taken on a person's application. It is uneconomical to process applicants through the assessment process if they clearly are unlikely to be suitable

This aspect of the study is one of key importance to all fostering services, and to date very little research exists to quantify best practice in providing effective and efficient ways to process enquiries through to approval.

One limitation of this study (and others) is that it has only been possible to ask fostering services to provide a 12-month window of statistics on their success at approving foster carers from initial enquiries. Already this may not be representative of what is being achieved in 2005-2006 and so on. For example:

- Fostering services nearing the end of massive restructuring to enable improved recruitment would be unlikely to see the effects in 2005-06, or indeed 2006-07
- Fostering services with relatively new approaches to recruitment and newly-implemented strategies would need time to monitor and evaluate success and developments with time, anticipating a year-on-year improvement
- The time taken to assess a new fostering household is still at least six months from application to approval. Therefore, it is likely that those approved during 2004-05 would have contacted the fostering service in 2003-04. It is not always appropriate to view recruitment in 12 month cycles, but advantageous to have a system that effectively tracks and monitors applicants through the whole process.

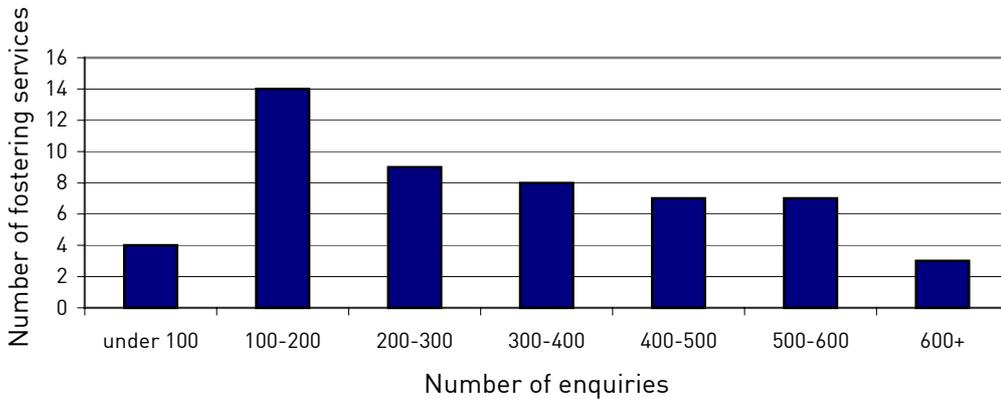
Fostering services are keen to bring down the ratio of initial enquiries to approved fostering households. It is clear that effective counselling out of unsuitable applicants needs to happen sooner rather than later – especially where levels of staffing are an issue and available staff time is precious.

Fostering services varied greatly in their ratio of approved fostering households from initial enquiries. This suggests that some fostering services were more effective at targeting their recruitment campaigns and supporting suitable applicants through the application process than others.

## 6.1 Handling initial enquiries

Fostering services received very different responses to their promotional activity, with initial enquiries ranging from 60 to over 700 in 2004-05.

### Number of enquiries received by fostering services, 2004-05



Initial enquiries were handled by a variety of different posts and some fostering services had contracted their service out to an external company.

### case study

#### Shropshire County Council – call centre

The external company that the council contracts to promote their need for foster carers also handles all initial enquiries. Interested people telephone the 0800 number and speak to staff who are briefed about fostering. The team also encourage callers to attend the planned information sessions.

The call centre informs callers about the task and identifies whether or not they would be suitable, counselling out any who are not in a supportive way. The contract states that the call centre needs to counsel out unsuitable applicants at this initial stage so that the ratio of enquirers passed on to the council become foster carers is at least one in six, much greater than was being achieved before.

Feedback from the focus fostering services suggested that nearly all enquirers received an information pack within the next one to two days. However, the study showed certain fostering services were beginning to consider whether everyone should really receive a pack.

***‘You do need to weed people out because it is a waste of resources, and it is a waste of their time and effort [if you don’t need them]’***

supervising social worker

Feedback from fostering services showed that a considerable amount of information was being taken at the point of this initial enquiry.

It was also been recognised that prospective foster carers were doing a lot more research into fostering and the fostering services they contact before making an initial enquiry. Therefore, it is essential to review the financial and support packages offered and make comparison with neighbouring fostering services to see where you may be missing out on attracting carers.

## case study

### North Yorkshire County Council – customer service

All prospective foster carers call the 0800 number which is publicised on all promotional materials and in media coverage.

Calls are answered by a dedicated team within the Customer Relations Unit, who have been fully brief about how to handle fostering and adoption enquiries. A checklist is used to take people through a series of questions but this is used purely as a prompt. All enquirers are sent an information pack and their details are passed on to the fostering managers in the relevant part of the county.

*'We do have an awful lot of enquiries. What we need to do is decrease the amount of work in the beginning and make sure that we get people through to the end'*

assistant team manager

## 6.2 Information sessions

Not all fostering services held information sessions (see 5.3.). Those that did considered them to be a really effective way of meeting and discussing fostering with a large number of prospective foster carers.

It is important to consider the best place and time to hold these events and to make sure that information sessions are well publicised and promoted to enquirers.

Information events can be a particularly successful way of developing links with certain minority ethnic groups and communities. Linking in with grassroots organisations in the communities from which you are trying to attract new foster carers can be very effective. They will be able to offer advice about the best way to promote fostering, and to help out with many aspects of the events, such as the hire of a venue.

## essentials

### What is needed for a successful information session?

- Time to plan and prepare a series of events throughout the year
- Good publicity and promotion of the event - in the local media and throughout the community
- A venue that is accessible and welcoming – consider using a community centre or working in partnership with a community organisation
- Good food and refreshments
- Knowledgeable and helpful staff and foster carers
- Foster carers talking about their experiences, and maybe even a short film about fostering

**case study**

**Thurrock Council – reinstating information sessions**

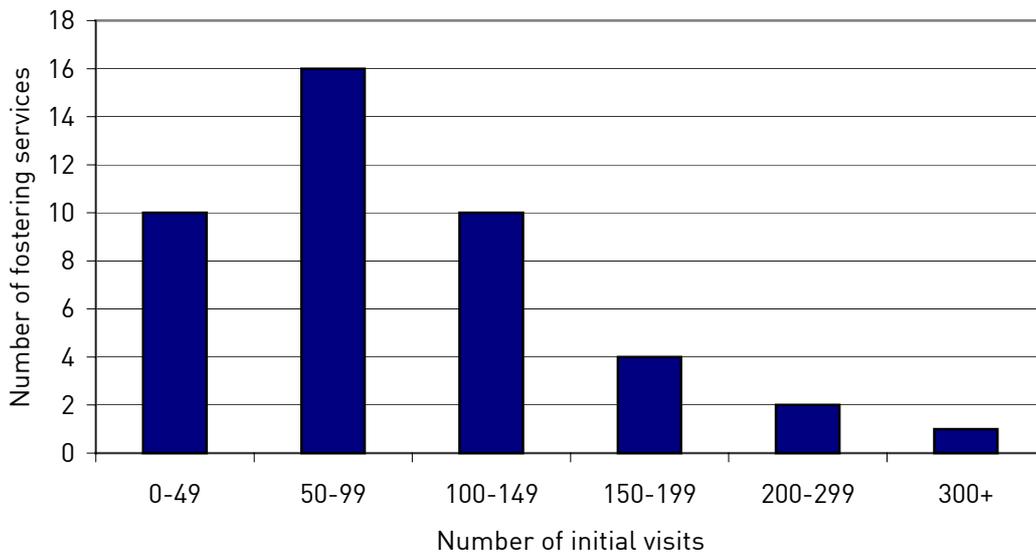
Thurrock Council used to hold information sessions but found that they were being too poorly attended to be an efficient use of staff and foster carers’ time. They ceased offering them for a while until they recently re-branded their fostering service.

Thurrock Fostering now holds regular information sessions that have proved very popular. They hold them at good quality hotels around the area and make sure there are plenty of refreshments for the attendees. The event is attended by foster carers so they can give a short talk about what it is like to foster.

**6.3 Initial visits**

Some fostering services managed to offer a large number of initial visits. Although admirable it is important to consider if this service was effective, and actually led to a high number of approved fostering households. In fact, in some instances the resulting number of applications was disappointing.

**Number of initial visits, 2004-05**



Initial visits are a point of some debate. For some fostering services they are seen as a right for anyone considering fostering, but for others some considerable investment has been put into improving their success in identifying prospective foster carers and counselling applicants out before the initial visit. The percentage of initial enquiries that received an initial visit ranged from about 20 per cent to 72 per cent (89 initial visits) in the case of one fostering service.

***‘I really only want people to be visited if it looks like they have got potential’***

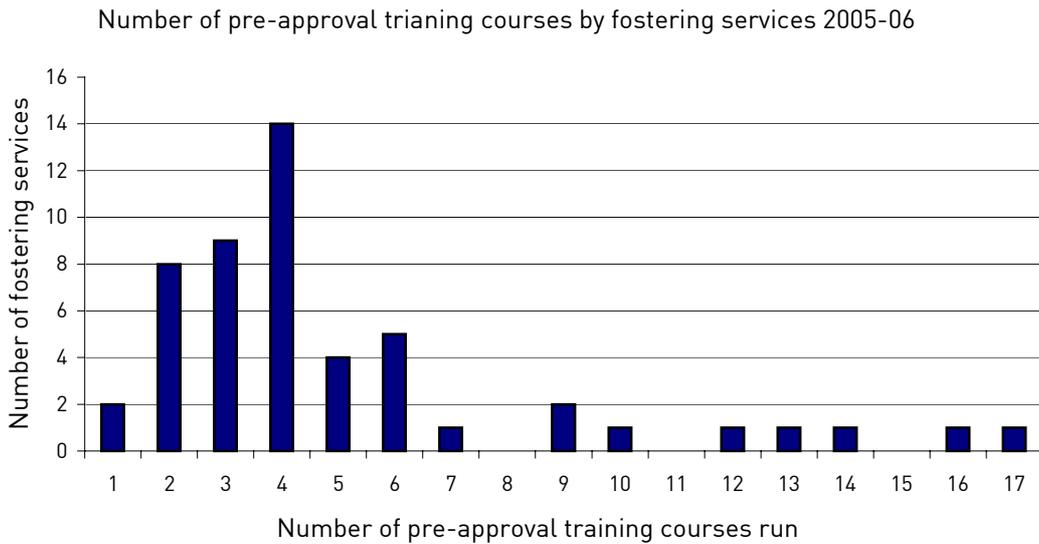
fostering manager

## 6.4 Pre-approval training

Fostering services offered a differing number of opportunities to complete pre-approval training. Some fostering services offered a rolling programme of courses and the flexibility to join other groups to enable prospective foster carers to complete the training as quickly as possible.

The length of time and scheduling of pre-approval training varied from one fostering service to another.

### Pre-approval training courses offered, 2004-05



*'We try to set [the process] out. This is when the adverts will go out, this is the time it will take to do the initial visits, now we have the training set up for that time and it is set up throughout the year . . . the rooms and trainers are booked, we know who is doing what'*

team manager

### case study

#### Fosterplus – weekend residential training

All of Fosterplus' applicants and their sons and daughters complete their pre-approval training over one residential weekend. Fosterplus has explored a variety of ways of delivering the training and this method has proved the most effective for them.

##### Benefits:

- The power and intensity of the course are maintained
- Discussions continue (voluntarily) into the evening and over shared meals
- Continuity is not lost by week long or greater breaks
- Activities such as horse riding and archery are arranged for the children
- Throughout the two and a half days the children complete their group work
- Social workers have the opportunity to see the whole family together over a sustained period of time and observe how the families interact
- Assessments are not delayed by applicants missing one or two sessions of the training.

For some smaller fostering services, with only a small target of new foster carers to recruit per year, working with neighbouring fostering services has proved an effective way to ensure that prospective foster carers do not have to wait longer than a few months until a course with enough participants can be run.

## case study

### West Midland local authorities – working together

Walsall Borough Council, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, Sandwell Borough Council and Wolverhampton City Council join together to offer *The Skills to Foster* training 10 times a year. Prospective foster carers can join in with the sessions that are most convenient for them and their other commitments. It helps to speed up the application process, as each individual fostering service is not waiting around for enough people to be able to run an effective training course.

- Sandwell and Dudley both do four Saturdays in a row
- Walsall offers six evening classes
- Wolverhampton offers three consecutive days

Representatives from each of the fostering services come along to train. At the end of the course the applicants meet with representatives from their prospective fostering service to hear about the support available to them.

**Over 90 per cent of fostering services used current foster carers to co-deliver the pre-approval training.**

***‘It is really valuable [having foster carers involved] because people can hear from the people who are actually doing the job themselves just what it is like, rather than hearing the theory from other people who are involved but not actually doing it’***

senior social worker

## 6.5 Assessment of foster carers

Fostering services were asked to identify how many of their foster carers had to wait longer than six months from application to approval as foster carers. It was encouraging that in the majority of instances most new foster carers were approved within six months. Reasons for running over six months included:

- Pace was dictated by applicants
- Heavy workloads
- Applicants moving house
- CRB checks and/or delay of references and/or medical references
- Availability of training
- Availability of panel members
- Internal and divisional restructuring
- Social workers’ caseloads

A key concern for most fostering services is the acute shortage of social workers throughout England. This of course has a significant impact on the available staff hours to complete the assessment process for any new foster carer.

## essentials

### **Advantages of dedicated staff for assessing foster carers**

- Clearly specialised and experienced staff undertaking the assessments
- Staff with time dedicated to the completion of a specified number of assessments, with dates agreed in advance for presentation at panel
- Reduction in workload or simplification of role of supervising social workers (and others), enabling them to focus on their role supporting placements and so on

In trying to increase the number of staff hours available to complete the assessment, fostering services had tried a variety of ways to speed up the process:

- Dedicated assessment teams
- Contracting with an external agency to supply social workers
- Sessional workers
- Administrative support chasing up references, CRB checks and so on

### **Over two in five fostering services used only their own supervising social workers to carry out assessments.**

In order not to delay applicants through the process, some fostering services had contracted with independent social workers and agencies. There are clearly pros and cons to these relationships. Some fostering services found them really advantageous. In one instance a fostering service had contracted with a local agency that tended to employ retired or part-time staff from their fostering service, who understood the culture and systems of the fostering service. Working with independent social workers has been less successful when they have not been fully aware or lacked the enthusiasm to be sympathetic to the organisation's procedures, policies and ethos.

Throughout the assessment process it is important that prospective foster carers are supported between stages. A crucial time is when their assessment has been completed and they are approved at panel and appointed their own supervising social worker. For some fostering services this is not a problem because the social worker assessing them will also be their supervising social worker.

## **REMINDER - key findings**

- Success at turning enquiries into approved foster carers relies on having staff available to allocate dedicated time to assessing them
- Fostering services need to be clear at the start of the process what their capacity is for recruiting new fostering households – this needs to be incorporated into the recruitment strategy
- There are critical stages in the process at which a decision must be taken on a person's application. It is uneconomical to process applicants through the assessment process if they clearly are unlikely to be suitable



## 7. The first year of fostering

### key findings

- The support package provided to foster carers is key to whether or not they decide to foster for any particular fostering service
- Getting it right will increase the chances of retaining foster carers longer
- Expectations regarding attending training following approval are very varied, as are the opportunities to attend training courses from one fostering service to another
- Fostering services offering mentoring schemes for new foster carers have found them a valuable addition to their package of support
- Keeping foster carers engaged and listening to their views can help with the successful development of a fostering service
- Fostering can at times make foster carers feel very isolated; it is important to provide opportunities for them to support each other and share their experiences

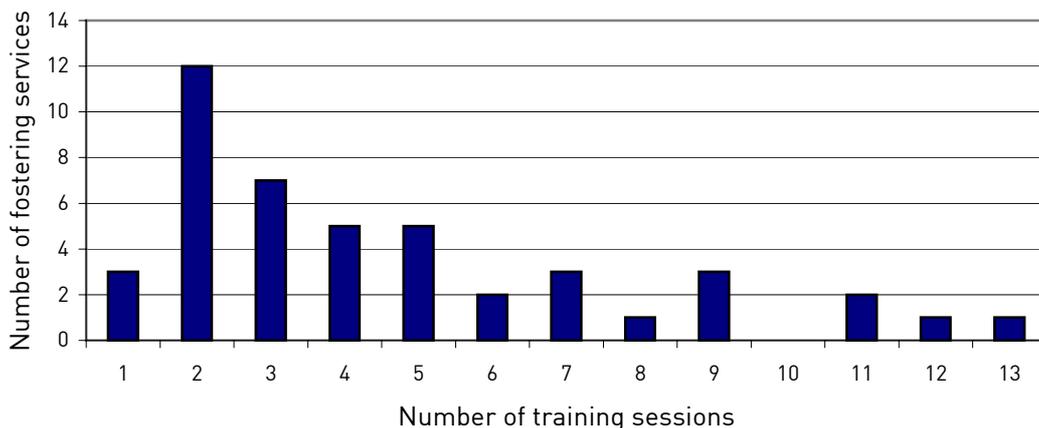
Fostering services were asked to detail how they supported their foster carers during the first year of fostering. Most recent major research studies refer to features of support which foster carers consider to be important: guaranteed respite; the availability of out-of-hours telephone help lines; realistic and well-managed payment systems; easy access to specialist help and advice; reliable working relationships with social workers; and opportunities for close collaboration with fostering services, including the availability of appropriate training. However, the results from fostering services showed that these elements of support are still not standard for foster carers across England, although there were some examples of good practice.

### 7.1 Post approval training

**Half of fostering services had a minimum number of training sessions for their foster carers to complete in the first 12 months post approval.**

The number and duration of these mandatory sessions varied from one fostering service to another.

#### Number of training sessions offered within first twelve months of fostering



There appear to be some standard sessions offered in the first 12 months to carers, such as first aid, contact and safer caring. However, new foster carers should have access, in consultation with their supervising social worker, to the ongoing training they need to undertake the role to the best of their ability.

**case study**

**Sunderland City Council – text alerts**

Sunderland City Council has developed a training programme and views participation as a very high priority for their foster carers. Foster carers, with their supervising social worker, identify the training courses that they need to complete over the next few months to a year.

There is an expectation that foster carers will attend training, and their attendance is monitored. The council is bringing in a new system where they can text their foster carers with a reminder that training is happening and that they are booked on to the course.

**case study**

**Nottinghamshire County Council – training programme**

The council has recently completed a full review of the training available to their foster carers. In consultation with their foster carers they have developed a 12-month programme of training, scheduled in advance and promoted in an attractive wall calendar sent out to all fostering households.

Foster carers are also encouraged to join training with social workers and other staff within the council where appropriate.

**7.2 Mentor support for new foster carers**

**Two out of five fostering services offered a mentoring scheme.**

Fostering services that had developed mentoring schemes for new foster carers found them a valuable resource. Advice and guidance from more experienced foster carers should not be undervalued.

However, feedback suggested that mentor support had grown up informally and there was little evidence of training foster carers to act as mentors. To make this a truly useful additional resource, fostering services must provide all their foster carer mentors with appropriate training, to ensure that they understand their role and its responsibilities, are aware of the need for confidentiality, and know how to signpost those they mentor to further information and support.

## essentials

### Areas to take into account when developing a mentoring scheme

- Provision of appropriate training and ongoing support to mentors
- Ways in which information is shared and the issues around confidentiality
- Record keeping
- Viewing mentors as part of the child care team
- Safe working – ensuring mentors understand their role and what they can and cannot do
- Opportunities for mentor’s wider participation, such as consultation in working groups and other areas affecting foster carers and looked-after children such as education and health

Mentoring should also be an option for those foster carers thinking of ceasing to foster, so that the fostering service can continue to use their knowledge and expertise. The skills obtained as a mentor may enable foster carers to develop their own career paths in and outside of fostering.

### 7.3 Support groups

In addition to one-to-one support, fostering services offered support groups, either run by themselves or their local foster care association. The frequency of support groups varied considerably from one fostering service to another.

Encouraging foster carers to take part in these groups, and to realise the importance of attending, is key to their success. However, it is unsupportive to run a group just because there is a commitment to holding one, without giving proper thought to its purpose, content and outcomes.

In developing support groups fostering services need to take into account the needs of their foster carers. Venues need to be accessible, ideally not too far away from carers’ homes, at suitable times, and with crèche facilities provided. Groups can be planned for a variety of reasons, perhaps for the type of care being provided or the age of children being cared for, so carers can share more relevant experiences.

#### case study

### SWIIS Foster Care (north west) – multiple support groups

SWIIS Foster Care holds two support groups each month one in the north of the area that they cover and one in the south. They also provide an opportunity for all of their foster carers to meet on a quarterly basis.

## 7.4 Foster care associations

**Just over half of fostering services had a foster care association for their foster carers.**

Foster care associations are organised by foster carers, with some financial support from their fostering service. They are an important link between foster carers and fostering services and are often highly vocal in lobbying for improvements from their fostering service.

They also provide a central point for foster carers to get together, either by organising support groups or less formally if the foster care association has space for foster carers to come along for a coffee and a chat.

**Just over one in 10 fostering services that responded to the survey had a foster care centre (or similar).**

Often their foster care association was based in the centre, and most had space to offer training, crèche and other facilities for foster carers.

### case study

#### Wolverhampton City Council – foster care centre

The council has a foster care centre right in the middle of Wolverhampton city centre. It is run by an independent board (mostly made up of foster carers) and financially supported by the council. All of the foster carers are encouraged to use the foster care centre, and most of their training is held there. There are also rooms set aside for contact with birth families, and foster carers are being trained to facilitate this.

The centre holds a variety of events, including a fortnightly ‘snack and chat’ event where guest speakers, from directors of the council to staff from education services, come along and talk about issues affecting foster carers.

During *Foster Care Fortnight*, and at other times throughout the year, the council sets up a recruitment stand outside the centre to encourage people to come in and find out about becoming a foster carer.

## 7.5 24-hour support

**Six out of ten fostering services offered a dedicated out-of-hours service to their foster carers.**

It is very important for foster carers to know that they are not alone and there is someone they can call for advice and support, or even to come around to the house at any time, night or day. Fostering services provided a variety of different models of 24-hour support for their foster carers:

- Standard out-of-hours duty team
- Foster carers on call on a rota basis
- Social workers from the fostering service on call

## case study

**SWIIS Foster Care – 24-hour support line (social workers)**

SWIIS Foster Care has a 24-hour support line staffed by supervising social workers who know the foster carers personally. They take it in turns on a rota basis. Foster carers are sent a list covering the contact details for the upcoming three months. This means that staff must commit to be on call once every seven weeks.

**7.6 Independent advice and mediation service**

Although the survey did not ask fostering services whether they offered an independent advice and mediation service, some fostering services reported that they had one. Those fostering services that did provide an independent support service to their foster carers (that is, in addition to the supervising social workers allocated to each fostering household) found this worthwhile and beneficial for their carers. There are a variety of models, including a service offered by the Fostering Network.

The Fostering Network's independent advice and mediation service is designed for foster carers and their families. In addition it provides information and updates on good practice to members of the fostering service's staff. The service seeks to complement rather than replace the support provided by the fostering service to the carer; the often isolated and sometimes vulnerable position of many foster carers means that they need access to an independent source of advice and support in addition to that provided by the fostering team.

Advice and mediation workers advise carers by telephone, letter, email or in person about any aspect of fostering that requires independent, confidential advice. Workers may accompany carers to meetings and help them interpret and respond to written material.

**'You don't want to fill people, who are interested in foster care, with fear and dread about safe care practices and what can happen to you with allegations etc. But the support offered at this time actually entices people. They know that there is back up and that they are not just left with nobody to contact'**

foster care service manager

## case study

**Cornwall County Council – independent support workers**

The council has appointed three independent support workers available to foster carers who have been subject to allegations of abuse and other issues. The posts were introduced as the result of a consultation with the local foster care network.

The three posts are sessional workers supervised through the psychology service. The local foster care network and council worked jointly to appoint and induct people who had relevant experience in terms of childcare and also legal matters.

In conclusion, offering foster carers an extensive package of support is an effective way of ensuring they feel valued by their fostering service. People considering fostering will be encouraged to see a plethora of services to help them as foster carers.

An essential part of any promotion of a fostering service should be the support package, from adequate allowances and fees to ongoing opportunities for developing skills by attending training or being involved in the delivery of an effective fostering service.

***'Yes it is important that they get the cheque that is due. But, it is also recognition that is important. It is knowing that there is support there, that they are going to get the training that they need and that there are these massive peripheral services'***

team manager adoption and fostering

## **REMINDER - key findings**

- The support package provided to foster carers is key to whether or not they decide to foster for any particular fostering service
- Getting it right will increase the chances of retaining foster carers longer
- Expectations regarding attending training following approval are very varied, as are the opportunities to attend training courses from one fostering service to another
- Fostering services offering mentoring schemes for new foster carers have found them a valuable addition to their package of support
- Keeping foster carers engaged and listening to their views can help with the successful development of a fostering service
- Fostering can at times make foster carers feel very isolated; it is important to provide opportunities for them to support each other and share their experiences

## 8. Learning from exit interviews

### key findings

- The value of exit interviews is still not realised by a surprisingly large number of fostering services
- The rate of foster carers leaving varies significantly between fostering services. Those fostering services with a high number of foster carers leaving should look carefully at the reasons for their departure
- Foster carers leaving the service are likely to express their reasons differently depending on who they are talking to

Although this study did not examine the retention of foster carers in much detail, the survey did ask about annual turnover. It is important that every fostering service monitors the number of carers who leave annually and identifies the reason(s) for their departure.

### 8.1 Exit interviews

**Only two-fifths of fostering services offered all foster carers leaving their service an exit interview as a required part of the process.**

The importance of an exit interview must not be undervalued. Those fostering services that offered exit interviews found them a valuable tool for helping develop their fostering service.

It is essential to hear the views of all those foster carers leaving a fostering service irrespective of the reasons for their departure. By asking foster carers to feed back a fostering service can explore ways to improve its provision in the future and develop less effective parts of the service.

There are a variety of different ways to ask for this feedback. For example, foster carers can be invited to respond to a short questionnaire about their experiences with the service, or a supervising social worker can carry out a short exit interview asking for feedback on a number of key areas. Team managers, panel members or the recruitment officer also carried out exit interviews for some fostering services.

### essentials

#### What to cover in an exit interview

- Foster carer's reason(s) for leaving the service
- Foster carer's views on the support provided by the fostering service
- Discussion about possible ways in which the foster carer might continue to be involved (depending on their reason for leaving)
- Any recommendations from the foster carer on the future development of the fostering service
- Opportunity for the carer to feed back further in writing

To get the most out of any exit interview it is important that the foster carer feels comfortable confiding in the person they are talking to. Even if they have had a generally positive experience with the fostering service it is still helpful if they feel they can speak candidly about their experience and that their views will be fed back to inform the future development of the service.

## case study

### SWIIS Foster Care – independent exit interviews

The fostering service employs an independent person to carry out their 'reviews'. The feedback is given to the managers of the service. This helps inform changes in practice.

## 8.2 Reasons for leaving fostering

Fostering services were asked to share the number of foster carers leaving their service in 2004-05. Only just over half detailed this information.

The number of carers leaving each service varied significantly. The most common reasons fostering services identified for foster carers leaving were either retirement or change in circumstances (such as becoming a grandparent). Of the 737 foster carers who left these fostering services, the reasons were given for 454 of them. In the table below are the reasons for those foster carers identified:

Reason for leaving	per cent
Change in circumstances	20
Retirement	19
De-registration due to allegation	8
Health reasons	8
Moved to another fostering service	7
Dissatisfied with service	5
Lack of placements	2
Other	31

Other reasons for some foster carers leaving a particular fostering service included:

- Moving out of the area to another part of the country
- Continuing to look after a child over the age of 18 and no longer having space for more foster children
- Divorce, separation or marital difficulties
- Adopting children and no longer having space for other foster children

***'The role of fostering is changing quite considerably with greater expectations about training - we lost some through that'***

assistant team manager

The numbers leaving any one fostering service did not appear great enough to cause alarm, as long as plans were in place to ensure the recruitment of a new fostering household in its stead. For one fostering service the reason for a quarter of those who left was that they had been de-registered (no information was given about the

reasons for de-registration). Two fostering services lost five carers each because they left to go to another fostering provider (feedback from these foster carers would be invaluable in identifying why another provider appeared more attractive).

Only 10 of the 454, carers with specified reasons for leaving, left because of a lack of placements. However, fostering services which do develop their pool of foster carers sufficiently to offer placement choice also increase the likelihood of dormant carers. Fostering services need to think of ways in which they can continue to keep these carers engaged and should offer them financial retainers between placements.

Most fostering services should have been able to anticipate the departure of most of these foster carers, assuming there was effective communication in place. It is important that fostering services carry out an annual (or more frequent) evaluation of their current pool of foster carers.

By identifying foster carers likely to cease fostering in the following 12 months, it is possible to identify where emphasis needs to be put on the recruitment of new foster carers. It will also be possible to plan the provision of placements better if there is a clear expectation of when a fostering household will no longer be available.

## **REMINDER - key findings**

- The value of exit interviews is still not realised by a surprisingly large number of fostering services
- The rate of foster carers leaving varies significantly between fostering services. Those fostering services with a high number of foster carers leaving should look carefully at the reasons for their departure
- Foster carers leaving the service are likely to express their reasons differently depending on who they are talking to



## 9. Improving effectiveness in foster care recruitment

This report forms part of ongoing work by the Fostering Network to identify good practice in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

The survey of 78 fostering services and the additional feedback received from the focus fostering services resulted in a number of **key findings** outlined throughout the report. Fostering services should consider the ways in which, through the **case studies** and **essentials**, they could develop their fostering service to become more efficient and effective at recruiting the foster carers needed for their looked-after children.

To summarise, the key areas which are critical if fostering services are to successfully recruit the foster carers they need are:

1. **A comprehensive strategy for the recruitment of foster carers to meet the needs of their looked-after children, including an audit of:**
  - the needs of the looked-after children population
  - the current pool of foster carers, that is informed by predictions regarding forthcoming retirements and that identifies the gaps in this pool, and so details the variety of foster carers who are needed;
2. **Analysis of the fostering service's need to inform planned recruitment activity over a 12-month period and beyond;**
3. **A dedicated post to develop and oversee the recruitment strategy and implement appropriate promotional activity;**
4. **An identified recruitment budget that fits the size and nature of the recruitment task;**
5. **A coherent and timely process that covers initial enquiry, through assessment, to approval;**
6. **A training and support package that meets the needs of foster carers in their first year and throughout their fostering career;**
7. **A mechanism, most usually through an exit interview, of learning from foster carers who leave the service.**



## Feedback

The Fostering Network welcomes feedback from all readers about the content of this report, and in particular would like to hear about ways in which fostering services other than those involved are working to improve their effectiveness at recruiting and retaining foster carers.

If you would like to tell the Fostering Network about what your fostering service is doing, or ask for advice and guidance please contact:

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## APPENDIX 1

### Survey sent out to local authorities and focus fostering services

This questionnaire was sent to all local authorities in England to obtain a national overview of the recruitment of foster carers. Slightly altered versions were sent to the focus fostering services to allow them to give a picture of the last few years of foster care recruitment within their service.

**Please answer questions by placing a tick (✓) in appropriate boxes and complete your answers using CAPITAL LETTERS**

#### RESPONSIBILITY FOR RECRUITMENT WITHIN FOSTERING TEAM

1. Does your fostering service have a recruitment policy, (i.e. practice/procedures)?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

2. Does your fostering service have a written recruitment strategy, (i.e. three-year plan)?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

3. Who has main responsibility for the recruitment of foster carers in your service?

**Name of person** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of post** \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is this position[s] a dedicated recruitment post?  **yes**  **no**

5. Does this post require a background in any of the following?  
 **social work**  **marketing/PR**  **recruitment**  **other** (please specify)

6. What are the responsibilities of this post? (✓ as many as apply)

	✓
Responsible for the recruitment of foster carers	
Responsible for the recruitment of adoptive families	
Writing, monitoring and evaluating the fostering service's recruitment strategy	
Developing and producing promotional materials	
Managing the recruitment budget	
Networking and outreach work with community organisations and groups	
Promoting the need for foster carers in local media and area	
Organising information sessions and other recruitment events	
Taking initial enquiries	
Carrying out initial visits	
Maintaining records of enquirers and tracking them through the recruitment process	
Other	

7. Is anyone else involved with the recruitment of foster carers for your fostering service?  
 **yes**  **no**  **don't know** If yes, please ✓ as many as apply

<b>Councillors</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Children and families social workers</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Director of children's services</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Panel</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Foster carers</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Fostering team manager</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Administrative staff</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Human resources department</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Supervising social workers</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Children and young people</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Marketing / PR team</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Local celebrity / sports club</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Others</b> (please specify) _____			

**RECRUITMENT BUDGET**

8. Who has responsibility for your fostering service’s recruitment budget? (Please specify name and post)

**Name of person(s)** \_\_\_\_\_

**Title of post(s)** \_\_\_\_\_

9. How much did your fostering service spend on recruitment in financial year 2004-05 (April–March) **excluding staff costs**?

**Under £10K**  **£10-20K**  **£20-40K**  **£40-60K**  **£60-80K**  **£80-100K**  **£100K+**

10. What percentage is this of the total annual fostering services budget (**excluding allowances and fees**)? \_\_\_\_ %

11. During 2004-05 please detail how much of your recruitment budget was spent on each of the following?

	£s
Promotional materials (including information packs and display stands)	
Advertising in local media (including radio and TV)	
Information sessions	
Publicity events	
Website	
Pre-approval training course delivery	
Assessment and panel costs	
Incentives for foster carers to encourage friends and family	
Other (please specify)	

**DEVELOPING A POOL OF FOSTER CARERS**

12. Please give the total number of **foster placements** (including family and friends) available in your fostering service on **1 April 2005**

**Respite**  
**Short term / intermediate**  
**Long term**  
**Family and friends**  
**Specialist** (such as remand)

13. What was the total number of fostering households in your fostering service on **1 April 2005**? \_\_\_\_\_ **fostering households**

14. Do you have a target for recruitment of foster carers in 2005-06?  **yes**  **no**  
 **don't know** If yes, please detail a breakdown of your target

**Respite Short term / intermediate Long term Family and friends Specialist** (such as remand)

15. Included in this target have you identified any need for new carers from specific minority ethnic groups that you need to recruit?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

**If yes, please specify** \_\_\_\_\_

16. Have you had / are you planning any targeted recruitment campaigns this year (2005-06) such as foster carers for teenagers?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**  
 (If yes, please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**TURNING ENQUIRIES INTO APPROVED FOSTER CARERS**

17. Could you please detail the number of enquiries and how many of them completed different stages of the application process during 2004-05 (April to March)

<b>Number of enquiries</b> (April 2004 to March 2005)	
<b>Number of initial visits</b> (April 2004 to March 2005)	
<b>Number of applications</b> (April 2004 to March 2005)	
<b>Number commenced pre-approval training</b> (April 2004 to March 2005)	
<b>Number of approved fostering households</b> (April 2004 to March 2005)	

18. How many times did you run pre-approval training courses during 2004-05? \_\_\_\_\_  
 **don't know**

19. How often do foster carers **co-deliver** the training  **always**  **often**  **occasionally**  
 **never**

20. Who is responsible for carrying out assessments (please ✓ as many as apply)?  
**Supervising social workers**  **Sessional workers**   
**Independent social workers**  **Team manager**   
**Other**

21. Of applicants approved during 2004-05, how long did their approval take from accepted application to decision?

	Number of households
<b>Under six months</b>	
<b>More than six months</b>	

22. Please detail some of the reasons for the length of approval being over six months

**THE FIRST YEAR OF FOSTERING**

23. Do you have a specified minimum number of days training newly approved foster carers have to complete in their first 12 months?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

If yes, how many days must they complete? \_\_\_\_\_ days

24. Do you offer peer support for foster carers?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**  
 If yes, what do you offer? (Please ✓ as many as apply)  
**Mentoring scheme**  **Out of hours dedicated support line**   
**Drop in centre**  **Foster Care Association**   
**Other** (please specify)

25. Do you alter the approval range of foster carers after their 12-month review?  
 **always**  **often**  **occasionally**  **never**

26. How many foster carers did you de-register after their 12-month review in 2004-05?

**WORKING WITH INDEPENDENT FOSTERING PROVIDERS**

27. Do you use Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs)  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

28. How many children and young people did you have in IFP placements on 1 April 2005?

29. How many new placements did you make with IFPs during 2004-05?
30. If you used IFPs, please detail the reasons for their use (please ✓ as many as apply)
- Planned specialist placement (such as for disabled children)**
- Emergency placement**
- Sibling groups**
- Other**
31. Do you have a strategy for commissioning placements with IFPs?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know** If no, are you planning to develop one?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know**

**LEARNING FROM EXIT INTERVIEWS**

32. How many fostering households left your service in 2004-05?
33. What were the reasons for them leaving (please estimate the number of instances by each reason)

<b>Lack of placements</b>		<b>Dissatisfied with service</b>	
<b>De-registered due to allegation</b>		<b>Moved to another fostering service</b>	
<b>Retirement</b>		<b>Change in circumstances- such as becoming a grandparent</b>	
<b>Health reasons</b>		<b>Other (please specify)</b>	

34. Do you give all foster carers an exit interview/review when they leave?  **yes**  **no**  **don't know** If yes, how long are the interviews/reviews scheduled to take? (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_ hours
35. Who carries out the exit interview? (please specify job title) \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 2

### Results from the surveys

Detailed in this section are some of the key findings of the survey

#### 1. Does your fostering service have a recruitment policy? (National Minimum Standard 15.2<sup>19</sup>)

	per cent
Yes	83
No	12
Don't know	5

#### 2. Does your fostering service have a written recruitment strategy? (National Minimum Standard 17.5)

	per cent
Yes	72
No	23
Don't know	5

#### 4. Do you have a post dedicated to the recruitment of foster carers?

	per cent
Yes	56
No	44

#### 5. Does this post require a background in any of the following?

	per cent
social work only	35
marketing/PR only	24
recruitment only	14
other/not given	12
marketing/PR and recruitment	9
social work and marketing/PR	4
social work and recruitment	3

#### 6. What are the responsibilities of this post?

	per cent
Recruitment of foster carers	91
Promoting the need for foster carers in local media and area	90
Developing and producing promotional materials	90
Organising information sessions and other recruitment events	83
Writing, monitoring and evaluating recruitment strategy	83
Networking and outreach work with community organisations/groups	81
Managing the recruitment budget	71
Maintaining records of enquirers and tracking them through recruitment process	67
Recruitment of adoptive families	59
Taking initial enquiries	53
Carrying out initial visits	29

<sup>19</sup> *National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services* (Department of Health, 2002)

**7. Is anyone else involved in the recruitment of foster carers for your fostering service?**

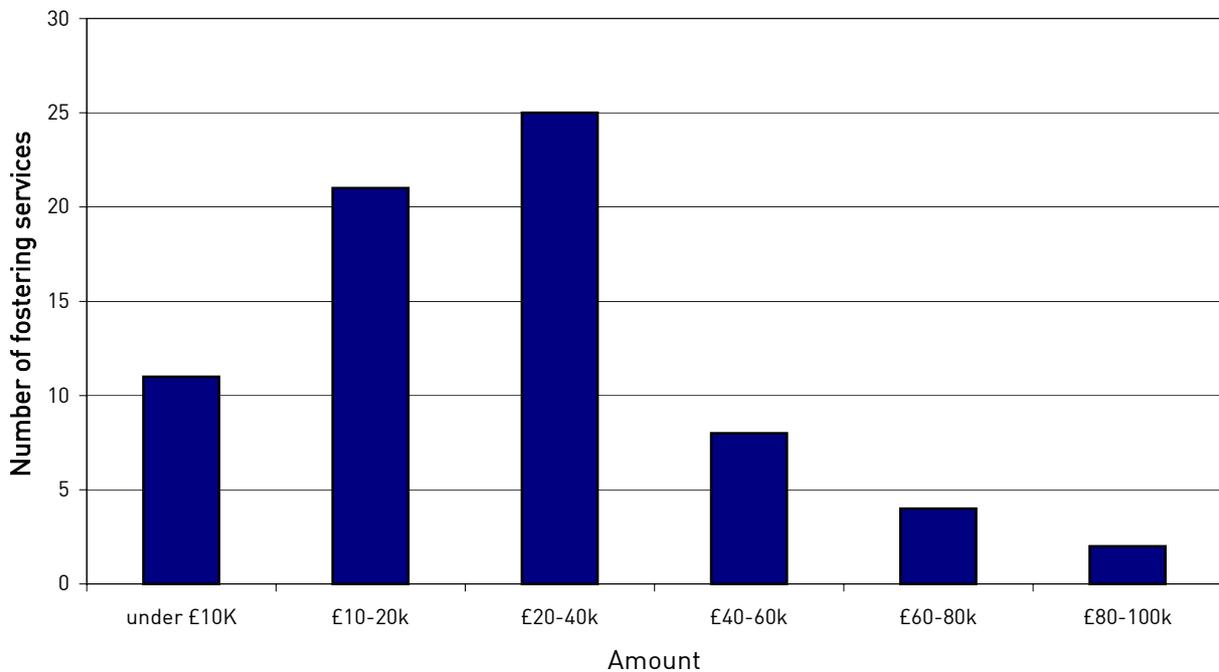
	per cent
Yes	86
No	3
Don't know	11

**If yes, please detail who else is involved:**

	per cent
Foster carers	87
Supervising social workers	68
Fostering team manager	67
Marketing/PR team	54
Administrative staff	51
Councillors	28
Children and families social workers	24
Director of children's services	21
Children and young people	17
Local celebrity/sports club	14
Panel	9
Human resources department	1

**8. How much did your fostering service spend on recruitment in financial year 2004-05 (April-March) excluding staff costs?**

**Recruitment spend**



**14. Do you have a target for recruitment of foster carers in 2005-06?**

	per cent
Yes	72
No	13
Don't know	15

**15. Included in this target have you identified any need for new carers from specific minority ethnic groups that you need to recruit?**

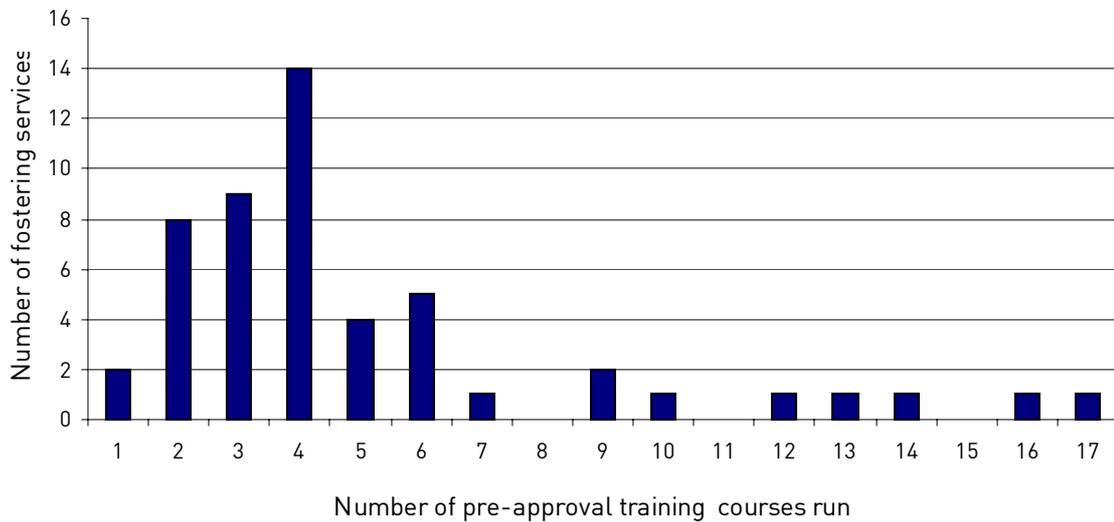
	per cent
Yes	49
No	28
Don't know	23

**16. Have you had / are you planning any targeted recruitment campaigns this year (2005-06) such as foster carers for teenagers?**

	per cent
Yes	74
No	13
Don't know	13

**18. How many times did you run pre-approval training courses during 2004-05?**

Number of pre-approval training courses offered by fostering services 2004-05



**19. How often do foster carers co-deliver the training?**

	per cent
Always	60
Often	15
Occasionally	18
Never	1
Not given	6

**20. Who is responsible for carrying out assessments?**

	per cent
Supervising social workers only	45
Supervising social workers and sessional workers	13
Supervising social workers and independent social workers	12
Supervising social workers, independent social workers and sessional workers	10
Supervising social workers and team manager	4
Supervising social workers, sessional workers and team manager	3
Sessional workers only	3
Independent social workers and sessional workers	3
Team manager only	0
Independent social workers only	1
Independent social workers, sessional workers and team manager	1
Not given	5

**23. Do you have a specified minimum number of days training newly approved foster carers have to complete in their first 12 months?**

	per cent
Yes	53
No	27
Don't know	20

**24. What peer support do you offer to foster carers?**

	per cent
Mentoring Scheme	42
Drop in centre	13
Out of hours dedicated support line	58
Foster Care Association	56
Other	25

**27. Do you use independent fostering providers?** (responses from the 74 local authorities)

	per cent
Yes	93
No	4
Don't know	3

**30. If you used IFPs, please detail the reasons for their use** (from the 69 local authorities that use IFPs)

	per cent
Planned specialist placement (such as for disabled children)	45
Emergency Placement	59
Sibling groups	52

**31. Do you have a strategy for commissioning placements with IFPs?** (responses from the 74 local authorities)

	per cent
Yes	44
No	24
Don't know	29

**31 If no, are you planning do develop one?**

	per cent
Yes	56
No	33
Don't know	11

**33. What were the reasons for fostering services leaving your service in 2004-05?<sup>20</sup>**

	per cent
Change in circumstances	20
Retirement	19
De-registration due to allegation	8
Health reasons	8
Moved to another fostering service	7
Dissatisfied with service	5
Lack of placements	2
Other	31

**34. Do you give all foster carers an exit interview when they leave?**

	per cent
Yes	41
No	59

<sup>20</sup> Information was only received for 454 foster carers

# Improving Effectiveness in Foster Care Recruitment

This interim report is the result of a study, undertaken in 2005-06 by the Fostering Network, into current practice regarding the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England. The majority of the study focused on the recruitment of foster carers. In addition it looked at the first year of a foster carer's career and asked what lessons can be learnt from exit interviews where these are undertaken. The aim of the study was to try and understand why some fostering services are significantly better than others at recruiting, and in some cases increasing their pool of, foster carers.

This report includes key findings from the survey, including case studies, and 'essentials' offering advice on how best to develop a fostering service's practices and systems. The interim report covers six key areas:

- *Responsibility for recruitment within fostering team.*
- *Auditing need to target recruitment.*
- *Recruitment budget.*
- *Turning enquiries into approved foster carers.*
- *The first year of fostering.*
- *Learning from exit interviews.*

This publication forms part of ongoing work by the Fostering Network to identify good practice in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. For further information, please see [www.fostering.net/england/akc.php](http://www.fostering.net/england/akc.php)

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The Fostering Network is the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in fostering. With a membership of more than 35,000 foster carers and almost all local authorities and health and social services trusts in the UK, as well as independent fostering providers and local foster care associations, the Fostering Network is uniquely placed to bring people and organisations together to improve the lives of children in foster care.

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