



# Local Authority Fostering Service

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Benchmark report 2012/13

**i**MPOWER



Department  
for Education

the fostering network  
the voice of foster care



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### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Based on the information provided, on average local authority fostering services in England:

- Generate 0.7 enquiries per looked after child needing foster care.
- Convert 11 per cent of enquiries to approved foster carers.
- Utilise 69 per cent of their foster carers.
- Take 9.2 months to process enquiries through to approval.
- Lose 13 per cent of the workforce each year.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2013 the Fostering Network and our partner iMPower Consulting developed a performance benchmark for local authority fostering services across England as part of the work commissioned by the Department for Education to support local authorities to recruit more foster carers.

The benchmark collates key performance metrics to allow fostering services to compare their performance with others throughout the country. Sixty eight English local authority fostering services (45 per cent) participated in the benchmark survey, providing a rich data set.

The purpose of these calculations is to highlight, through this national report, the range of performance levels of participating authorities in five main areas:

- 1) Enquiry numbers;
- 2) Conversion rates from enquiry to approval;
- 3) Journey to approval;
- 4) Utilisation of inhouse foster carers; and
- 5) Attrition rates.

Each area represents an opportunity that, with support and further insight, can benefit at a sector level.

The research found that:

- Eleven per cent of those who enquired about becoming a foster carer were approved (ranging from just one per cent to 37 per cent across local authorities);
- Seventy five per cent of those who completed preparation training chose to continue with the assessment, and in 71 per cent of these cases the fostering service also agreed to continue the assessment. Only 62 per cent of those who continued the assessment following preparation training actually went on to become approved as foster carers;
- The average time taken for someone to progress from enquiry to becoming a foster carer was 281 days (ranging from 49 to 518);
- Local authorities utilise only 69 per cent of their foster care placements (ranging from just 32 to 95 per cent).
- Around 13 per cent of foster carers leave the workforce annually, ranging from one to 28 per cent.

By comparing local performance to the national benchmarks, fostering services can identify areas for improvement and highlight the case for investment to realise the potential to improve both foster carer recruitment and retention.

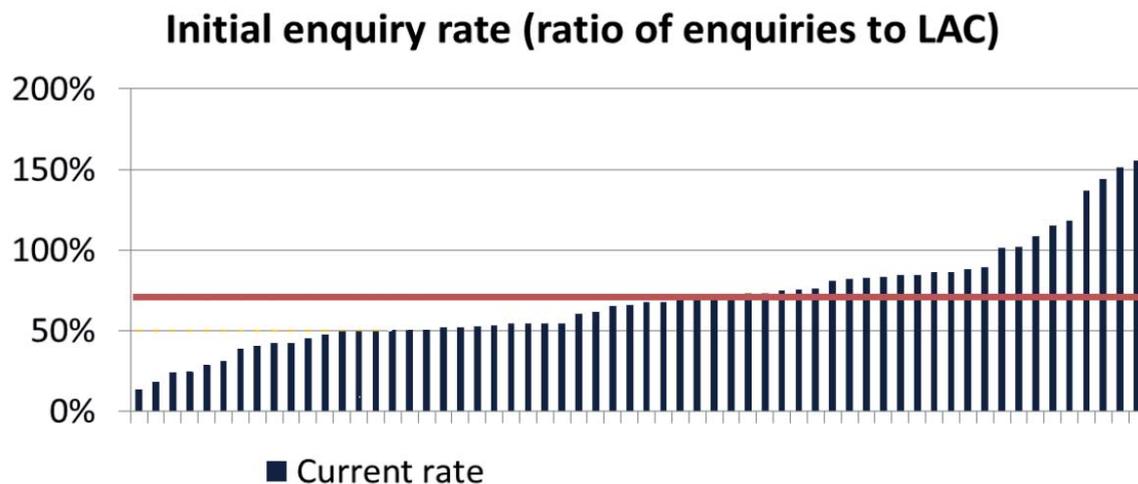


<sup>1</sup> [www.fostering.net/motivations-foster-toolkit-fostering-services](http://www.fostering.net/motivations-foster-toolkit-fostering-services)

<sup>2</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/fostercare/a00209484/research-about-fostering](http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/fostercare/a00209484/research-about-fostering)

## ENQUIRY GENERATION

**Fostering services generate 0.7 enquiries for every looked after child needing foster care**



**Fostering services should conduct thorough needs analysis to identify the number of children locally needing foster care and the number of current foster carers that can meet their needs, and then work to generate sufficient enquiries to recruit more foster carers to address the gaps**

On average fostering services generate 0.7 enquiries for every looked after child needing foster care, ranging from 0.1 to 1.55. Fifteen per cent of fostering services generate at least one enquiry for every looked after child.

The Children Act 1989 section 22G requires local authorities to, 'take steps to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children in their local authority area, otherwise known as the 'sufficiency duty'.

For fostering services that can demonstrate sufficient foster care placements, a relatively low ratio of enquiries to looked after children in the short term may be consistent with their overall recruitment strategy. However this may present a significant issue if the trend were to continue for an extended period.

As the report will go on to discuss, generating the 'right' enquiries is crucial for a number of reasons.

Fostering services should conduct thorough needs analysis to identify the current and projected number of local children needing foster care and their needs, and any gaps in the capacity of local foster carers to accommodate those children in a way that meets their needs. Recruitment and retention activities should be targeted to fill the gaps.

Recruiting foster carers who do not match the profile of current or future children needing foster care is poor practice. Despite their commitment to the process, these foster carers can be left without a placement which has the potential to impact negatively on their experience, the fostering service and potentially the wider sector.

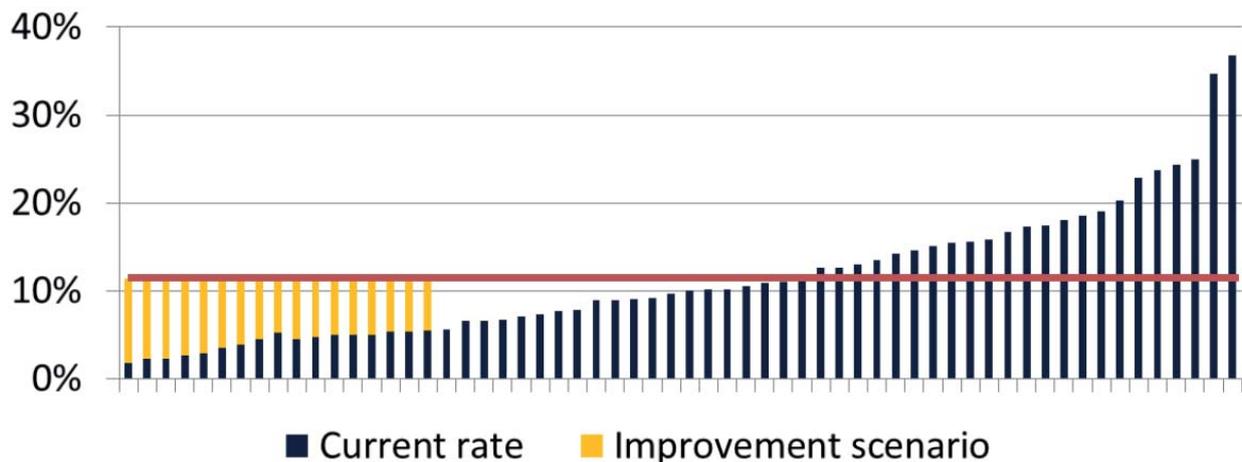
Resources are also increasingly limited. *The Cost of Foster Care* report<sup>1</sup> estimated the cost of recruiting a foster carer at around £11,500, a figure that has likely increased. Ensuring messages, processes and expectations are clear can increase the effectiveness of resources allocated.

<sup>1</sup> Tapsfield and Collier (2005), *The Cost of Foster Care*.

## CONVERSION RATES

11 per cent of enquirers are converted to approved foster carers

### Conversion rate from enquiry to approval



**Fostering services in the bottom 25 per cent should map out their local recruitment process to identify areas where performance can be improved to bring them in line with the current national average**

An average 11 per cent of enquiries to fostering services progressed through the entire recruitment process to be approved as foster carers. This figure is consistent with the 10 per cent reported in the Fostering Network's publication *Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future: a guide for fostering services* (2010).

Local authorities' performance on conversion rates range from one per cent (one approval for every 100 enquiries) to 37 per cent (approximately one approval for every three enquiries). There is clearly a significant difference here that cannot just be explained in terms of straightforward local variation.

A partial explanation rests in the fact that there is currently no single definition of a firm enquiry. There is no consensus as to whether an online request for an information pack or a request for an initial visit constitutes an enquiry to the service. Moreover, many talk of the 'drip drip' affect – those considering fostering often take a number of years until their personal circumstances are conducive to approach their chosen fostering service to progress their application. Clearly these will distort local figures – they will appear as an enquiry that did not progress, but may well progress at a later date – and could therefore negatively affect the perceived performance of the fostering service.

A conversion rate is a snap shot of a particular period. Those making an enquiry throughout the chosen period will not necessarily be approved in that same period. The benchmark recognised and addressed the issue by identifying the performance at the various stages of the recruitment process.

On average:

- 36 per cent of enquirers went on to have an initial visit.
- 48 per cent who had an initial visit progressed to training.
- 75 per cent completed the training and submitted an application.
- 71 per cent who submitted an application went on to be assessed.
- 62 per cent of assessments resulted in approvals.

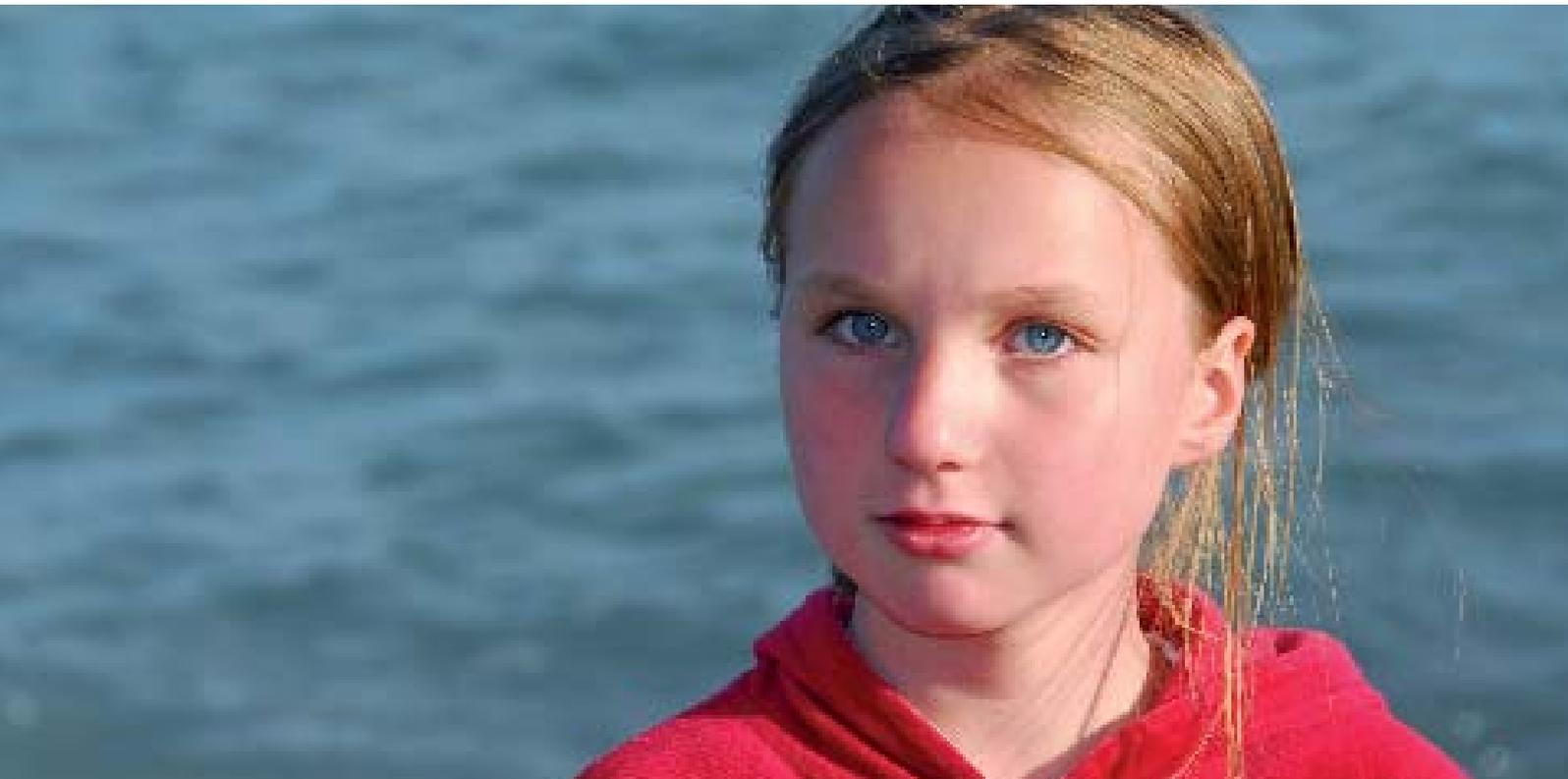
## Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark 2012/13

These averages will of course vary locally but on a national level at each stage there is an opportunity to improve performance.

Almost half of initial visits result in the enquirer ceasing their interest in becoming a foster carer at that time. The outcome of some initial visits may be that the enquirer decides it is not the right time for them, and they approach the fostering service at a later date, at which point they have an 11 per cent likelihood to progress to approval, or they may recommend fostering to someone they think suitable. If we consider the data linearly, however, it suggests on average 50 per cent of the budget allocated to initial visits does not immediately benefit the fostering service.

As we described in the *Why Foster Carers Care* report (2013), a significant majority of foster carers (73 per cent) have a pioneer values set. Pioneers have a strong internal sense of right and wrong, are concerned about society and have a strong desire for fairness, justice and equality. They value face-to-face discussions to inform their decisions which may contribute to the number of initial visits that do not progress. Nonetheless, the figures present an opportunity for fostering services to consider how initial visits are agreed and resourced, and how they can deliver a greater proportion of enquirers progressing through the process.

The main figure for interrogation nationally is that only 62 per cent of assessments result in approvals. Until recently practice left local authorities to determine themselves where the assessment starts, so there was variation in findings across local authorities which may be explained by differences in the start-point selected (the Department for Education has since introduced a two stage assessment process, from 1 July 2013, which makes clear that stage 1 of the assessment starts when a person enquires about being assessed to foster). Nonetheless, a 38 per cent drop out rate indicates clear scope for improvement. It is recommended that fostering services investigate through exit interviews the reasons behind applicants dropping out at various stages of the process. This will help determine whether there are information gaps or if there is sufficient support within the process to prevent losing applicants and the resources invested.



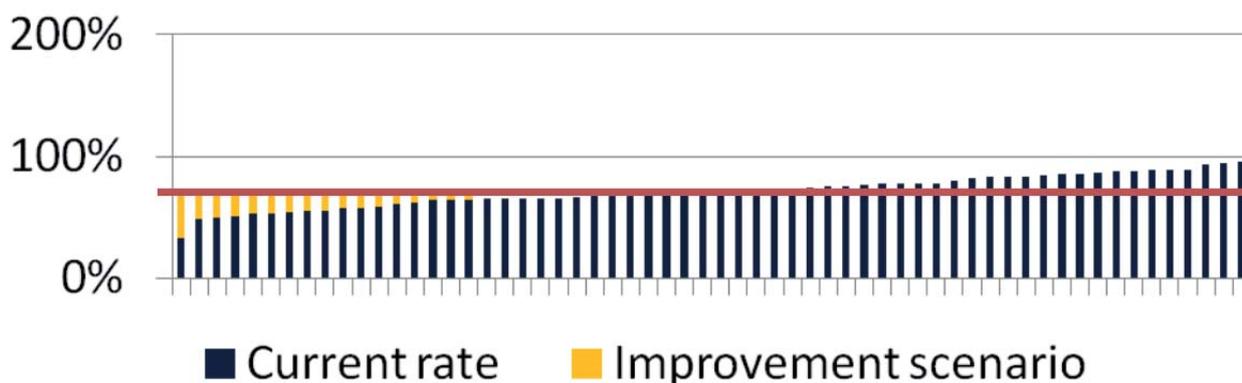
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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/fostercare/g00225430/assess-approv-foster-care>

## CAPACITY UTILISATION

Fostering services utilise 69 per cent of their inhouse foster carers

### Utilisation of inhouse foster carers (excluding short breaks)



**Fostering services in the bottom 25 per cent should investigate the reasons why their inhouse foster carers are currently underutilised when compared to the national average and identify actions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service**

Fostering services on average utilise 69 per cent of their inhouse fostering capacity, or alternatively 31 per cent of placements are vacant. Capacity utilisation ranges from 32 to 95 per cent. This metric has a number of implications for fostering services.

Firstly, while it is important to satisfy placement sufficiency and provide choice to enhance the likelihood of a positive first time match between a fostered child and a foster carer, excessive placement vacancies are potentially damaging to fostering services.

The benchmark aimed to record true vacancies only as there are a number of legitimate reasons why a placement may be vacant. For example, this may be due to a placement order stating a child cannot be placed with other children, placements may be held for a child the fostering service knows will be coming into care or a foster carer may be known to be retiring imminently.

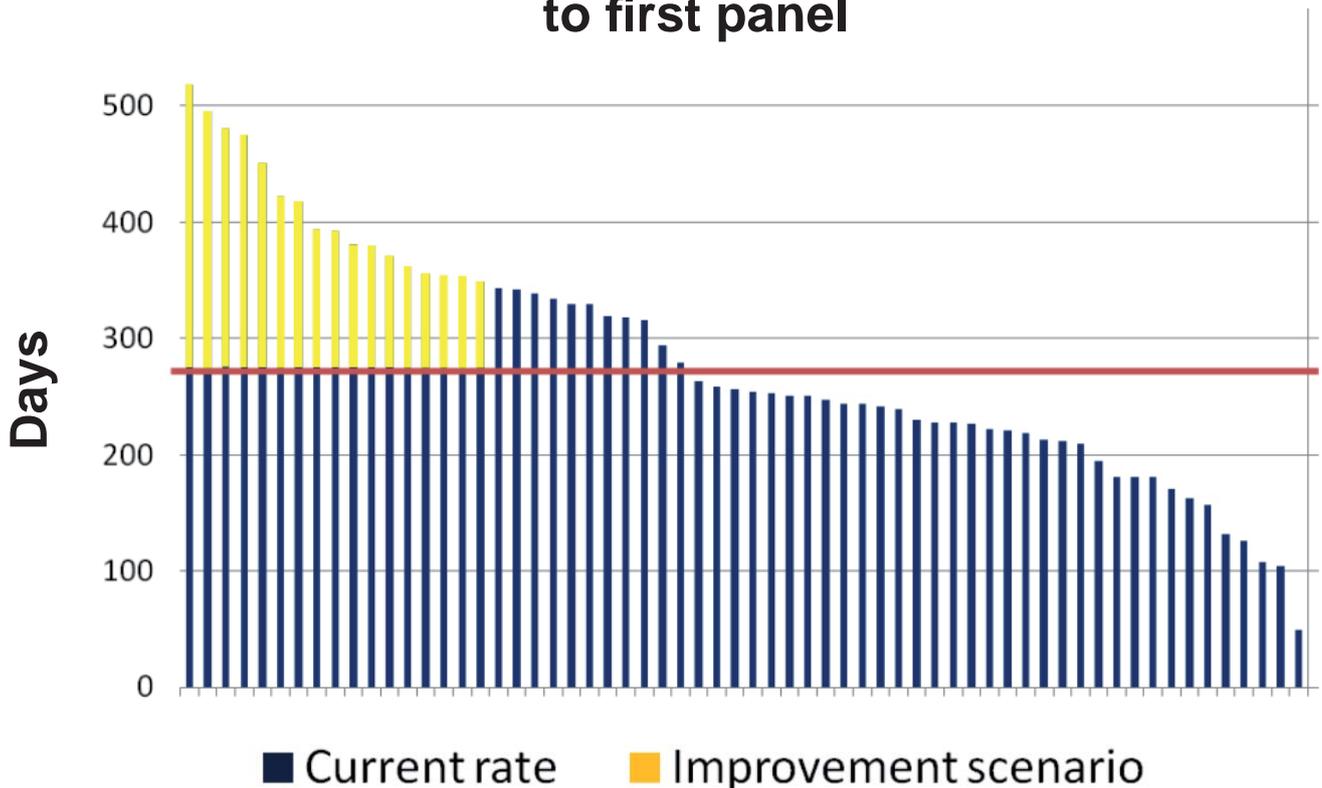
High placement vacancy rates may be due to a number of reasons, including a poor match between the foster carer workforce and the needs of local children requiring foster care. Where a foster carer is unsuitable to take placements, they reduce the capacity of the workforce and potentially tie up resources. Local authorities should therefore identify any such cases and address them.

Traditionally the independent sector supported local authorities to place children with complex needs such as learning difficulties and disabilities, sibling groups and older children. By working closely with the independent sector to identify the needs of the children and the gaps in the provision, fostering services can access the right foster carers for their children both inhouse and externally, and make the best use of the workforce.

## JOURNEY TO APPROVAL

281 days/9.2 months from initial enquiry to first panel

### Journey to approval from initial enquiry to first panel



**Fostering services in the bottom 25 per cent should identify any consistent blockages in the process to approving foster carers and implement change accordingly to improve efficiency and minimise delay**

Fostering services are taking on average 281 days (9.2 months) to take an initial enquiry through to being presented to first panel. Statutory guidance requires the assessment to be completed within a timescale that allows the fostering panel to make a recommendation on approval within eight months of the enquirer asking to be assessed

Again, the definition of an initial enquiry is not standardised which may contribute to the substantial range of between 49 and 518 days.

As expected, the bulk of this time can be attributed to the assessment phase, on average taking 144 days, ranging from 50 to 271 days. This is the part of the process where external dependencies are introduced in order to perform health checks with GPs and DBS checks for example. Developing and maintaining these relationships and creating clear policies for the obtaining of references are vitally important to ensure these checks and references are processed efficiently.

## Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark 2012/13

A further variable in this process is the timing, frequency and location of training. The applicant is a customer so, where the resources permit, should be provided with training options that will meet their needs, including time and location. This may be straightforward for fostering services that are smaller (in terms of geography and numbers of foster carers), but may be trickier for larger services with higher demand. Larger fostering services might consider addressing this challenge by running joint training sessions with other fostering services (and, further along the process, joint panels) in order to manage demand.

There are many examples of feedback that suggest speeding up the recruitment process would make the system better. There is though the potential that the opposite could occur – the process becomes too quick.

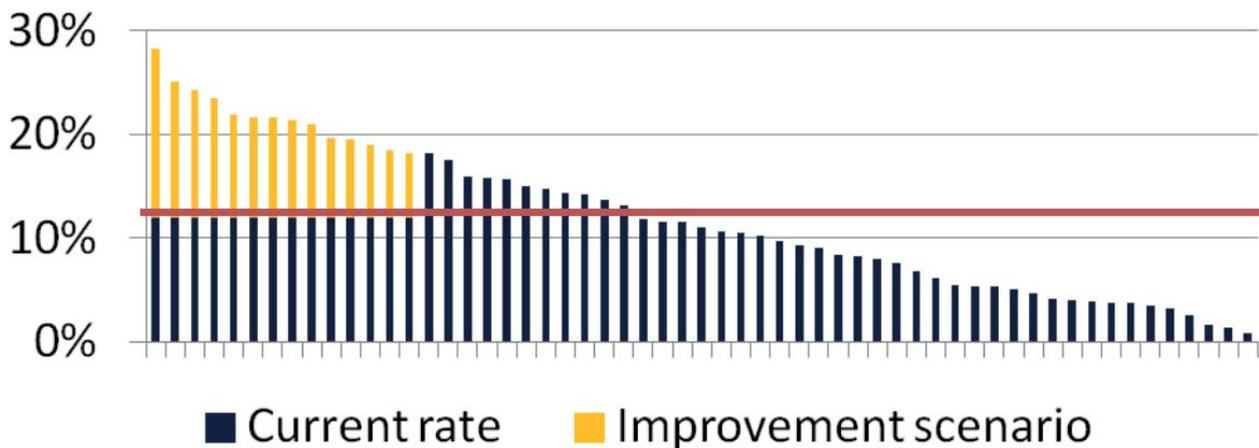
Becoming a foster carer is a life changing decision to not only the applicant but potentially their wider family and friends. Some applicants may appreciate a quick assessment but others may prefer a longer process with greater support and opportunities for discussion about what their role will entail. Moreover, foster carers are required to manage situations that many will not have previously encountered, such as facilitating contact and caring for children with highly complex emotional and behavioural issues. It is important the fostering service has an opportunity to assess the foster carer over a period of time to judge their temperament and reactions to challenging situations and therefore whether they have the skills and abilities to foster. Fostering services should aim to achieve a balance that equips their prospective foster carers with the requisite skills and readiness for the role, across the most efficient period of time.



## FOSTER CARER ATTRITION

13 per cent of foster carers leave each year

### Fostering service attrition rates



**Fostering services in the bottom 25 per cent should identify any consistent reasons for attrition rates and project trends to ensure foster carers are effectively supported and the service can provide placement sufficiency**

Foster carer retention carries at least equal importance to recruitment activities for fostering services.

The benchmark confirms the Ofsted data trend between 2009 and 2012 that just under 13 per cent of foster carers leave their fostering service each year, a figure which has remained relatively constant in each of the three years. The benchmark displays a range between one and 28 per cent for individual fostering services.

The recruitment activities of fostering services contribute to successfully recruiting foster carers to replace those who leave as well as to provide for the increase of children coming into care each year.

By conducting a needs analysis and formulating a recruitment strategy, fostering services should be better able to project how many foster carers they are likely to lose in a given period to inform recruitment targets.

According to the Fostering Network research, foster carers stay in their role for an average of seven and a half years<sup>4</sup>. Many leave due to changes in personal circumstances or at a natural point for their time as foster carers to cease. This is often retirement age as foster carers on average are aged 50-55 years<sup>5</sup>.

For some the resignation is not so amicable. Allegations, a lack of support, a breakdown in relationship with their own or the children's social worker, a lack of placements or not being treated as a professional are some of the reasons given by foster carers who leave.

Conducting exit interviews will allow a fostering service to identify and address any critical issues that are undermining retention.

Foster carers who resign after a significant period of time leave with a wealth of knowledge and experience that fostering services should attempt to capture or invest in mentoring schemes to allow them to transfer their skills to the next generation of foster carers.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke (2010), *Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future*

<sup>5</sup> Peake and Townsend (2012), *The Motivations to Foster: a toolkit for fostering services*

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the first time, this benchmark survey has brought together a range of local authority fostering service performance measures to provide statistical insight into foster carer recruitment across English local authorities.

A rich dataset has been achieved with thanks to the participation of 68 local authorities from a wide cross-section. These will each receive individual reports identifying their position locally across the metrics reported here and over 30 other metrics.

It is crucial that local authorities conduct a detailed needs analysis of the local looked after children needing to be fostered to provide sufficient foster carers to meet their needs. This report acknowledges the importance of collaboration between both the public and independent sector in fulfilling the sufficiency duty.

The data has reinforced previous knowledge around conversion rates but raised in turn raised questions on the definition of an enquiry.

The data shows how fostering services are utilising their internal foster carer cohort, providing a starting point for further local analysis of gaps in provision, the possibilities for retraining existing foster carers to bridge the gaps and the need to engage foster carers without placements or move them on.

A number of fostering services appear to be meeting the Government's target to bring prospective foster carers to panel within eight months of their request for assessment. There is a significant range in the time taken from initial enquiry to first panel across authorities. This presents an opportunity for further work to interrogate those fostering services at opposite ends of the range to quantify the impact on local recruitment and retention to inform national practice.

We hope that many more fostering services join and complete the benchmark in the years ahead to analyse local performance and realise opportunities for service improvements.



### The Fostering Network makes the following recommendations:

1. **Fostering services should compare these national averages with their own performance** to identify local opportunities for improvement to the efficiency and effectiveness of their foster carer recruitment and retention processes.
2. **Local authorities should conduct a detailed needs assessment.** This will identify gaps in the service provision and a framework for joint recruitment initiatives with other fostering services.
3. **As part of the needs assessment, fostering services should profile existing foster carers against needs.** Identify foster carers who can be retrained and those who should be moved on if they no longer meet the changing needs of the local looked after children population. The Department for Education recommend that local authorities should, as far as possible, consider their local foster carers in independent agencies as part of their needs analysis and use this information to consider how they might engage more strategically with the independent sector in order to secure sufficient foster carers able to meet local looked after children's needs.
4. **To improve the quality of enquiries they receive, fostering services should review their existing marketing and communications strategies** to ensure prospective foster carers are provided with the right information to inform whether they have the skills and qualities needed to become a foster carer.
5. **Fostering services should map out all stages of their recruitment process**, calculating the average time at each stage, to identify any consistent issues and opportunities to improve the customer journey.
6. **Fostering services should conduct exit interviews** to determine the reasons why foster carers leave their service and address any trends that can be resolved to improve retention.
7. **Nationally we need to create a single definition of an enquiry for all fostering services.** This will allow for more accurate comparisons across a number of metrics.
8. **The independent sector should be included in future benchmark surveys** where appropriate. Comparing conversion rates, journey times to approval and attrition rates across sectors will identify any performance differential and subsequent mutual learning to improve processes sector wide.
9. **The findings identify an opportunity to undertake further work on the assessment process.** As the benchmark has shown, the average length of assessment varies significantly. A focused study in this area could identify the blockages and innovative processes to mitigate against them.
10. **Fostering services should identify areas for collaboration.** Foster carer recruitment is a task undertaken by around 450 fostering services in 150 local authority areas. At various stages in this process – from developing marketing strategies to enquiry handling, assessment and panel – there are opportunities for services to work together to achieve efficiencies and improve the customer journey for the applicant.