Foster Care Fortnight 2011
Evaluation
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1. Highlights of *Foster Care Fortnight 2011*

*Foster Care Fortnight* 2011 took place from Monday 16 to Sunday 29 May. Here are some of the highlights from this year’s campaign:

- Three guides developed to support our members with making the most of Foster Care Fortnight – including one focusing on online opportunities to recruit foster carers (downloaded from our website over 1,000 times).

- Four workshops held to help our members prepare for the campaign in England and Scotland rated as either excellent or good by nearly all attendees.

- Media coverage in 355 outlets reaching an audience of 35 million.

- A record number of visits of over 50,000 to [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)

- Nearly all fostering services (94 per cent) that responded to our survey took part in this year’s *Foster Care Fortnight*.

- Quality media coverage generated by over 130 fostering services.

- Growing numbers of followers on twitter and high levels of engagement on our Facebook page.

- Successful events in Belfast, Cardiff and London run by or with the support of the Fostering Network.

- Hundreds of events planned by fostering services across the UK from award ceremonies to a giant zumbathon.

- 70 per cent of fostering services that responded to our survey reported that the campaign helped them to recruit more foster carers in May.

- Two out of five fostering services more than doubled the number of enquiries in May compared to April, and one in eight tripled their enquiry rates.

- The campaign received support from politicians and other decision makers across the UK.
2. Introduction

Each year the Fostering Network organises the annual awareness campaign *Foster Care Fortnight* to raise awareness of fostering and encourage more people to become foster carers.

*Foster Care Fortnight* 2011 took place from Monday 16 to Sunday 29 May. The Fostering Network encouraged all its organisational members to take part in the campaign and provided tools and guidance to help them make the most of the opportunity.

The following is a report based on feedback from 83 fostering services in the UK which completed a short online survey in July and August 2011. Of these, 46 provided contact details: 39 were local authorities (34 in England, three in Wales and two in Scotland) and seven were independent fostering providers.

3. Developing the campaign

The Fostering Network co-ordinates *Foster Care Fortnight* to raise the profile of fostering. This is achieved by working with the media throughout the UK, holding events and encouraging our members to get involved locally. It is a really positive time for fostering and as a result lots of fostering services choose to join in to make the most of the increased public awareness of fostering as a result of national and regional media work.

This year the Fostering Network’s media activity generated coverage which reached in excess of **35 million people**. Under the strapline *fostering: time to care* interviews, articles and editorial were secured which discussed fostering, the issues facing the sector and the need for more foster carers especially for teenagers and children under four. In total there were **355 pieces of coverage**. Over half (60 per cent) of coverage was in national and regional newspapers or magazines, with **213 print articles** being published. The campaign was mentioned a total of **50 times on radio and TV**. Over **90 online articles** accounted for 26 per cent of coverage.

Our main focus is to spread positive stories about fostering and encourage people to enquire to their local fostering service. As well as the Fostering Network’s main website [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net) we have a dedicated website for prospective foster carers [www.couldyoufoster.org.uk](http://www.couldyoufoster.org.uk). This year a **record number of people visited the main website topping 50,000**. On the websites they could find information about the campaign, the shortage of foster carers, how to apply, details of events happening in the area and access the contact details of local fostering services that are members of the Fostering Network.

The Fostering Network held events to help gain media coverage. In Northern Ireland the *Foster Carers of the Year* were announced at a special funday for foster families. In Wales we held an event at the Senedd to highlight fostering and the needs of the sector to the newly elected assembly members. In London we worked in partnership with the Greater London Authority to hold the capital’s first mayoral *foster carer recognition event with Boris Johnson*. 
With so much going on around the UK at the same time it can be a challenge keeping our members up to date with our activities. This year we tried a range of methods to keep people in the loop as well as showcase what other fostering services were doing to create a buzz. Aware that some organisations do not permit their staff to use social networking sites at work we did not just stop with Facebook and Twitter. A member e-newsletter was written and distributed to around 1,000 contacts four times during the campaign. We also encouraged fostering services to sign up to Google Alerts, which 19 per cent of the fostering services that responded to our survey did. We also kept a running list of the main pieces of media coverage on our website.

4. Supporting fostering services

Over the years the Fostering Network has developed a range of guides, materials and workshops to help fostering services make the most of the campaign. Currently we provide information in three guides:

**Making the most of Foster Care Fortnight**

Each year this guide is produced and updated with information and examples from the previous year’s campaign. It is printed and posted out to all organisational members as well as available to download from the members’ area of the website. It provides an overview of the campaign plan and ways to get involved. 85 per cent of fostering services that responded to the survey found this guide extremely useful or useful.

**Maximising media coverage**

This guide is designed for use by staff working in fostering services as well as their press office (if they have one). It provides advice and guidance for working with the local media to raise their profile by generating media coverage. 84 per cent of fostering services that responded to the survey found this guide extremely useful or useful.

**Recruiting foster carers online**

Following feedback from our members and a rising number of enquiries about online opportunities to recruit foster carers, a brand new guide was developed this year. Based on discussions held during specially designed workshops in January to March 2011, the guide explored the range of options available to fostering services wanting to improve their online presence. It was downloaded over 1,000 times from the Fostering Network’s website in the month it was first published. 90 per cent of fostering services that responded to the survey found this guide extremely useful or useful, although a further 10 per cent were not aware of it.
The Fostering Network also provided updates in the bi monthly e-newsletter *Attracting and Keeping Carers*, which 81 per cent of fostering services that responded to the survey found extremely useful or useful. **Workshops** to help prepare for the campaign in January to March 2011 were also really well received, with 59 per cent of participants who attended and completed an evaluation form rating the overall pace and content of the workshops as excellent, and a further 40 per cent rating them as good.

The Fostering Network also offered **advice and guidance** from a dedicated post (Helen Clarke) and the media team. 83 per cent of respondees rated the advice from Helen Clarke as extremely useful or useful and 63 per cent found the advice from the media team either extremely useful or useful (although 10 per cent were not aware of this particular service). None of the respondees from the survey found the advice and guidance unhelpful.

The Fostering Network also hosts an **online discussion forum** in the members’ area of its website which very few people currently use or are aware of. Further publicity of this service as well as improving the forum to make it more popular and useful should be explored.

### 5. Ways fostering services get involved

As a result of the activities listed above and the recognition by fostering services that *Foster Care Fortnight* is a great time to publicise a need for foster carers, many choose to take part. Of those fostering services that responded to our survey **94 per cent were involved in this year’s campaign**. In addition the Fostering Network has seen media coverage generated by over 135 fostering services across the UK in and around the campaign.

The main reason for not getting involved given by fostering services was a lack of resources. Others may choose not to get involved in the campaign as they have recruitment pushes at other times of the year which work for them.

The following explores the range of ways that fostering services got involved in this year’s campaign.

**Events and activities**

- Every year the most popular type of events are **information stalls** (71 per cent) or **information evenings** (49 per cent).
- Fostering services also organised **PR stunts** (18 per cent), activities for foster families (18 per cent) and **award ceremonies** for foster families (28 per cent).
- Many fostering services plan a range of events to make sure that they get out and about around the **whole community**, for example by organising a road show.
- 10 per cent of fostering services held an event with the support of a **local celebrity, sports club or organisation**.
Having an impact and getting people talking about fostering is essential to recruitment success in *Foster Care Fortnight*. This year’s campaign saw a flash mob descend on unsuspecting shoppers in a Blackburn shopping centre. The PR stunt organised by Blackburn with Darwen Council really got people talking. Filming the ‘fostering freeze’ and uploading it to Youtube helped their need for foster carers to go viral, and was a real hit with the local media too.

*Foster Care Fortnight* can be the ideal time to launch a new promotional campaign. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council did just this with their ‘Put yourself in the picture’ message. To get added publicity a special day was held for foster families at a newly opened local ice rink. Kent County Council also chose to launch their new campaign highlighting the range of people currently fostering in the area by using photographs of their existing foster families.

Bristol City Council made excellent use of *Foster Care Fortnight* as it provided the ideal opportunity to promote their new DVD which is available to loan from all of the city’s libraries.

Fun-packed events were the order of the day in parts of the UK. In London, Wandsworth Council’s foster families were treated to a special family fun day in Battersea Park and were joined by local MP Jane Ellison. Local people interested in finding out more about fostering were invited to attend the Jamboree. Foster carers were also treated to a pamper day during the fortnight, planned in partnership with the local foster care association.

It always helps to do something eye catching to get the interest of the local press and potential foster care recruits. Throughout the north east local authorities really made use of the theme *fostering: time to care* by holding information stalls under market clocks and in the case of Northumberland County Council and North Tyneside Council enlisting the help of a giant fob watch to announce the launch of their ‘pop up a poster’ partnership with the Co-operative Group. In Stoke-on-Trent the council’s fostering service took part in a local canal festival and decorated a barge to attract people.

Lots of fostering services celebrated their foster carers’ achievements, with awards ceremonies being held by Suffolk County Council and the London Borough of Camden where they were joined by celebrities Sinitta and Georgina Hale.
Bournemouth’s fostering lion

Bournemouth City Council looked to make a real impact with a giant zumbathon in the city’s main shopping area. In Northern Ireland to make a splash all five health and social care trusts held Care for Coffee - 15 simultaneous coffee mornings for prospective foster carers.

With so many information events happening during the campaign it can make all the difference to ensure they really stand out. To attract the attention of passersby the Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames handed out free copies of a recipe book comprising over 30 tried, tested and tasty culinary delights - a regular at the borough’s foster carers’ dinner table. The London Borough of Sutton also enticed people to their information stand with an array of cupcakes – 150 in total representing the current number of children in care. A gastronomic theme continued for Cheshire East Council with local school children being asked to decorate gingerbread men to spread the message that ‘happiness is homemade’.

Sports teams have again been supporting Foster Care Fortnight, with St Mirren, MK Dons, Glasgow Tigers and Gloucestershire Cricket Club all backing their local campaigns.

Southampton City Council enlisted the assistance of former Southampton and England footballer Matt le Tissier to attract people to their fostering roadshow around the city. Other fostering services including Wiltshire Council, Gloucestershire County Council, Bracknell Forest Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council, Families for Children, Bath and North East Somerset Council, Northamptonshire County Council, Fostering Solutions, Wokingham Borough Council, Staffordshire County Council (in Reggie their recruitment bus) and many more took to the road, holding information stands around their areas.

Independent fostering provider PACT set itself the challenge of meeting all the mayors across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, to get them to support the need for more foster families.

Bournemouth Borough Council got involved in a local public art event, Pride in Bournemouth, by sponsoring one of the lion sculptures. The fostering lion was released before all of the other ones and hidden in the town gardens. It was painted to be camouflaged to represent the role that foster carers play in the community, often unseen. The council based its media work around this.

Salford City Council’s foster carers stitched together a giant quilt with each square representing a foster family, and gaps were left to show the number of foster carers needed to come forward. It was exhibited in the local shopping centre.

In Jersey fostering and adoptive families took photographs to be displayed in an exhibition to give insight into their families, following workshops with a professional photographer who gave tips and advice. A range of images was
selected, enlarged and then framed in an exhibition at the local Art’s Centre in St Helier before it toured other locations, including libraries, coffee shops, book store, town hall, airport, cinema and a four-week exhibition in the Harbour Gallery, St Aubin. There was lots of media interest as a result in print, radio and TV, with social workers and foster carers from the fostering service being interviewed.

**Working with the media**

*Foster Care Fortnight* stimulates a lot of media interest. The national and regional coverage encourages interest at a local level and really helps to support fostering services’ activity.

- Nearly all fostering services (90 per cent) that responded to the survey issued a **news release** about their need for foster carers.
- Foster carers were offered for **media interviews** by 73 per cent of fostering services.
- 23 per cent of fostering services offered media the opportunity to interview **care experienced young people**.
- Half of fostering services that responded to the survey took **photographs** at events which they provided to the media for use.
- 43 per cent of fostering services invited the media to cover their **events**.
- Only 10 per cent wrote a **letter to the editor**.

The Fostering Network collated cuttings of media coverage generated by 135 fostering services in over 300 outlets, including more than 20 radio and 10 TV stations, reaching an audience of over 10 million.

**Leicester City Council** used *Foster Care Fortnight* as an opportunity to launch a six-month campaign with a local paper which they hope will be a successful recruitment tool. Others, including **Suffolk County Council** and **Swindon Borough Council**, also forged strong media partnerships with local papers.

**Advertising**

Every year fostering services spend a significant proportion of their budget for recruiting foster carers on advertising. *Foster Care Fortnight* is often a time that they choose to make a big splash in their **community** by advertising in a range of media.

This year has seen a real growth in the number of fostering services choosing to **advertise online** (a growth of nearly 15 per cent compared to 2010). This trend recognises the growing use by prospective foster carers of online searches to gather information about fostering and the rise in numbers applying online.

The following chart shows the types of advertising used by fostering services and the number during this year’s campaign:
Online opportunities

In 2011 the Fostering Network developed for the first time a guide to help fostering services improve their online presence to assist with recruiting more foster carers. The guide was produced in recognition of the growing number of people going online to find out more about fostering.

Fostering services were asked to share what they had done online in the run up to and during Foster Care Fortnight.

- 87 per cent of fostering services had uploaded content on to their website or web pages.
- 70 per cent had included information about *Foster Care Fortnight* on their homepage.
- Just over a third of fostering services used *Facebook* – a growing number of fostering services are setting up pages on the social networking site about their fostering service with some local authorities using the council’s page to post information about the need for foster carers.
- 15 per cent of respondees were improving their online presence by registering their website and content with major search engines.
- 17 per cent arranged for ‘pay per click’ advertising.
A small number of fostering services notified us that they had uploaded video or audio content and 19 fostering services were actively using Twitter.

This year the Fostering Network had both a Facebook page and Twitter account which we made extensive use of during the campaign.

6. The difference Foster Care Fortnight makes

Every year when we evaluate the campaign we see that Foster Care Fortnight leads to a rise in enquiries, and this year was no exception. 70 per cent of respondents reported that the campaign helped them to recruit more foster carers as part of their ongoing activity. Of the respondents to our survey only one fostering service stated that the campaign did not assist them in recruiting more foster carers.

The challenge every year is to measure the impact of the campaign in terms of the number of people who come forward and go on to be assessed and approved as foster carers. When we evaluate the campaign it is always too early to tell what happens to those people who move beyond initial enquiry and into the assessment process. Therefore, this year we have asked fostering services to provide us with quarterly updates on how people who enquired about fostering during May progress.

However, what we do know is for the vast majority of fostering services May is a very busy time for handling enquiries, as this chart shows:
The Fostering Network asked all fostering services that responded to the survey to provide us with their enquiry rates in April, May and June 2011. 57 fostering services shared this information and the following chart shows the monthly average for enquiry rates to fostering services:

NB this chart does not include data supplied by one large IFP as figures were not provided separately for their regional offices.

Of those fostering services that responded to our survey, two out of five more than doubled the number of enquiries in May compared to April, and one in eight tripled their enquiry rates.

The challenge for fostering services remains that not all those who enquire are suitable to foster. The quality of enquiries varied from one fostering service to another. As one respondent considers:

*I think Foster Care Fortnight generates a lot of emotional responses that are not very well thought through. Over half of the 88 were not enquiries that could be progressed. However, it has given us the opportunity to engage with individuals who may return in the next few years when the time is right for them. Foster Care Fortnight also acts as a reminder to those people who have been meaning to make an application but have just not managed to get around to it. We have had some very good quality enquiries.*
It will be useful to explore in follow up work with fostering services if we can learn ways to improve the conversion rates of enquiries to applications by carrying out more targeted work or by using particular promotional activities that are shown to be more successful, as this comment demonstrates:

We have found that as we have improved the level and accessibility of information available to enquirers the quality of enquirers has improved in that our drop-out rates have fallen. We do tend to find that a lot of Foster Care Fortnight enquirers come back to us several months later, FCF seems to help us identify enquirers earlier in their decision journey than enquirers who come to us themselves.

A few fostering services reported a growing trend in enquiries from people seeking employment and seeing fostering as an option, as this comment illustrates:

We have high quantities of enquiries but many do not progress due to applicants not having a spare bedroom or working full time. We have also seen an increase in referrals from the job centre - people who are struggling to find work are being told to enquire about fostering. Some of these enquiries are not appropriate in terms of the applicant’s motivation to foster as a result.

It seems as though economic factors are both motivating and deterring people from fostering:

I am wondering if the economic situation has an influence, which in [our area] is compounded by the high cost of housing.

These are all trends that the Fostering Network is keen to monitor and is encouraging its members to share experiences about on the online discussion forum in the members’ area or at events planned in the coming months.

Foster Care Fortnight has benefits other than recruiting foster carers, both for the Fostering Network and its members. It is both an opportunity for local authorities and trusts to raise the profile of fostering services internally and for independent fostering providers to raise their profile with local authorities.

• 72 per cent of fostering services see it as an opportunity to recognise the work of foster families.
• Just over half see it as a chance to celebrate the achievements of foster care.
• Nearly all (92 per cent) see Foster Care Fortnight as an opportunity to raise the profile of their fostering service locally and in some instances nationally.
• Just 16 per cent see it as an opportunity to work together with other fostering services.

One fostering service in the survey flagged up that it was a good time to engage current foster carers in the recruitment process and another sees the campaign as a way to forge relationships with external business partners.
7. What next for Foster Care Fortnight?

The Fostering Network is always looking for opportunities to develop its support services for its members. Assisting with the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a major focus of our work and we plan to continue similar levels of support as in previous years as long as funding remains available. As one respondee to our survey acknowledged:

*Keep concentrating on driving the national media strategy and we will keep filling in with a local media campaign and activities to drive results. The department works very closely with its local fostering association and holds several community activities during the spring, summer and autumn months to ensure maximum visibility of the need for foster carers. This is a very successful strategy that combined with timed and targeted information events and promotional advertising ensures a good pull through of enquiries. Our goal is to keep a steady stream of enquiries throughout the year to maximise the availability of social worker time to process new and ongoing enquiries through preparation and assessment.*

It is encouraging that the support already offered is valued by so many of our members, as the following comments show:

*It is good to have an opportunity to meet counterparts from across the county and explore the possibilities for such campaigns.*

*Any new ideas for recruitment - I find the Attracting and Keeping Carers publication is good for this.*

*Everything you do is always useful. Now that I have done this for a few years I don’t rely quite so heavily on the Fostering Network as I used to, but having fresh ideas is always helpful. I like hearing about what other services have done in their area. Having national and regional media involved is always helpful.*

*More opportunity to talk to other recruitment officers for free would be great as budgetary restraints now mean I am unable to attend the preparation workshops and forums which I found really helpful.*

However, this year’s evaluation included a lot of recognition of how tough it has become to find enough foster families. With rising numbers of children in care, budget cuts, reductions in staffing levels and the funding available to attend workshops ceasing for many it is proving a greater challenge than usual. We asked fostering services for ideas and suggestions of ways we can improve our support. Here are just a few:

A number of individuals were keen for **free workshops** to be offered focusing on a range of topics including:
• More advice on online opportunities.
• Using communication channels such as Facebook and Twitter.
• Networking – chance to meet colleagues, swap ideas and learn new skills.
• A dedicated workshop in the autumn focusing on ways to recruit foster carers for teenagers.
• More information on how other fostering services are successfully recruiting and how to effectively streamline the recruitment process to avoid delay.

Other requests included:

• Finding celebrities who will support local campaigns.
• A national television campaign.
• Image library.
• Nationally arranged discounts with billboard advertising companies which would enable more affordable local advertising.
• Quarterly press releases about the need for more foster families.
• To make the Foster Carers Recognition event hosted by the Greater London Authority an annual event.
• Assistance with collaborative working.
• More analysis to assist with the recruitment of foster carers.

One individual was ‘grateful for any support and advice available to enable us to expand our portfolio of foster carers’ and another simply requested ‘more of the same please...’
Conclusion

*Foster Care Fortnight* continues to be a popular and successful campaign for the Fostering Network and its members. It is encouraging that even faced with budget cuts and uncertainty over staffing, fostering services were still in a position to plan a wide range of activities and put on creative and inspiring events.

The Fostering Network is planning to continue to offer the same level of support as in previous years for next year’s campaign and is delighted to have received funding from the Department for Education to support this work in England. This includes supporting the work of the Fostering Network’s press office in planning and delivering the media campaign, the guides to assist fostering services with making the most of the campaign and the running of workshops in England. The Fostering Network will also be working closely with its members in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

It is also recognised that the recruitment of foster carers is an ongoing challenge for fostering services in the UK and we plan to continue to support improvements with sharing and encouraging good practice and assisting where possible with ideas for reducing costs by streamlining processes and exploring opportunities for collaborative working. This will be done in a range of ways including the implementation of the recruitment champions initiative (for more information visit [www.fostering.net/recruitment-champions](http://www.fostering.net/recruitment-champions)), further development of the online discussion forum, support of regional working and the commissioning of our consultancy service.

Planning for *Foster Care Fortnight 2012* (Monday 14 to Sunday 27 May) will begin in the autumn following an internal strategic review and evaluation.

The Fostering Network will keep its members informed throughout the process via *Attracting and Keeping Carers* and other membership newsletters and correspondence.

**Helen Clarke, campaign co-ordinator**
September 2011