

Local Authority Fostering Services in England

performance benchmark report 2013/14



Department
for Education

The
Fostering
Network

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The Local Authority Fostering Service
benchmark is developed in partnership with



Summary of key findings

The findings from the Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark demonstrate:

- **11** per cent of enquiries proceed to approved foster carers.
- The journey to approval takes an average of **273** days.
- A third of enquiries are generated through the web, the most prevalent enquiry source.
- **65** per cent of children in foster care are placed with local authority foster carers.
- **31** per cent of local authority fostering placements appear to be under utilised.
- **12** per cent of foster carers left their service in the past year.

Executive summary

Foster carer recruitment and retention remains a significant challenge for fostering services throughout England. A skilled, competent and committed foster carer workforce is the lifeblood for all fostering services, and many carers are credited as the greatest positive influence on the life of a fostered child.

The Fostering Network has developed national insight on why foster carers care¹, and the approach required to engage different fostering audiences – a qualitative perspective as part of the Department for Education funded project to *Support Fostering Services to Recruit More Foster Carers*.

The Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark provides the quantitative analysis to complement this research.

First collated in 2013, the benchmark uniquely combines data collected through Ofsted and CIPFA with the addition of pertinent fostering performance statistics, giving participating fostering services an exclusive snapshot on performance compared with other local authority fostering services. The following report identifies the key headline statistics from the 2013/14 benchmark, providing analysis and comparison with the first collection last year. It also poses questions to encourage fostering services to interrogate local data further to identify opportunities to improve performance.

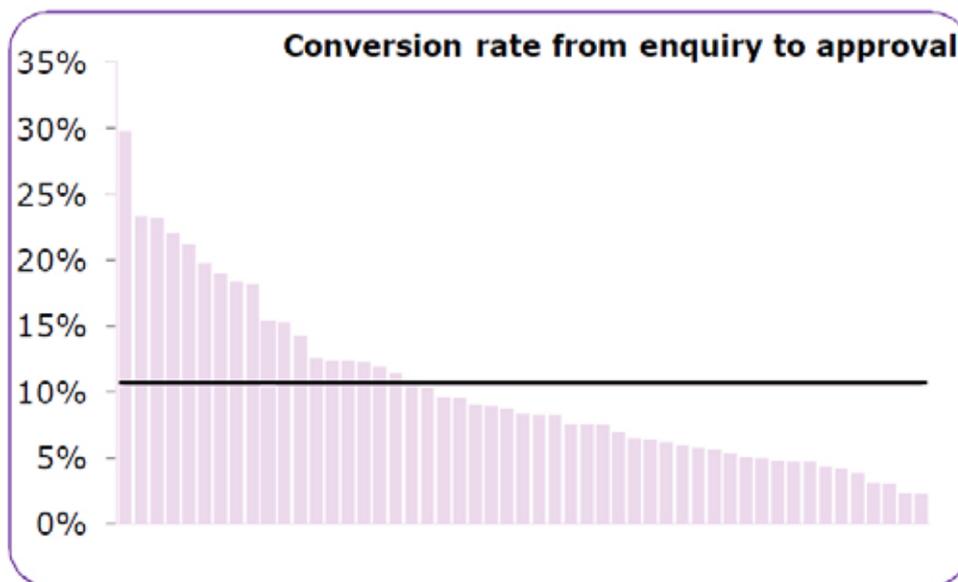
Fifty seven English local authority fostering services participated in this year's survey, comprising 16 unitary, 20 metropolitan, 18 county and three London Borough authorities. Fifty six per cent of participating authorities also completed the benchmark return in 2013. Each authority received a full, individual report on over 30 key metrics, providing a wealth of rich data to identify opportunities to improve.

The Department for Education project has provided a foundation to build on, and The Fostering Network wants to continue this collection and generate this highly valuable resource beyond the project end from April 2015. The report has the potential to compare performance and benchmark statistics for all fostering services to answer key questions across the sector. But it requires your continued commitment and participation to maintain a reliable level of data going forward. Contact The Fostering Network to enquire or register interest on behalf of your fostering service by emailing james.foyle@fostering.net

¹<https://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/why-foster-carers-care-report-v5.pdf>

Conversion

11 per cent of enquiries progress to approved foster carers



Eleven per cent of foster carers progressed from their initial enquiry to approval as a foster carer. This remains consistent with the figure reported in 2013².

Fostering services across England have made significant strides in improving their recording and defining of an enquiry, yet still only approximately one in 10 enquiries progresses through to approval. The simple question is why, particularly when the range across authorities is from one in 30 to one in three.

The first stage of the process sees only 31 per cent of enquiries on average progressing to an initial visit, down from 36 per cent last year. This may be a positive - due to an improvement in the initial screening process in Stage One of the assessment and making better use of assessing social worker resources.

Conversely, this may relate to individuals being ruled out on simple grounds, or choosing to defer their application. This requires a consistent definition of an enquiry sector-wide to ensure statistics are directly comparable. The quality of preliminary information and that provided at the first point of contact, be that over the phone or at an information event, is critical to help inform an individual's decision to foster. Similarly, having systems which adequately log initial enquiry details, the information requested and contact details provided is a basic requisite. All fostering services should also have a clear and communicated policy of the timescales within which an enquirer can expect a response.

²<http://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/benchmark-report-2013.pdf>

RECOMMENDATION

An enquiry to foster is defined as, 'An individual registering their interest in fostering by providing basic contact information including, name, age and address.'

Forty nine per cent of those who receive an initial visit progress to training. The reasons for around half of enquirers not progressing at this stage essentially fall into two categories, enquirer-led or service-led.



How do your systems record the reasons why enquiries do not proceed? Are trends identifiable? How do these feed back in to the recruitment process to inform communications to reduce the number dropping out?

An initial visit is an important opportunity to meet the prospective foster carer; have a discussion, view their accommodation and make an initial judgement on their suitability to progress to training. As the Values Modes research has identified, the majority of foster carers share a Pioneer set of values, a key trait of which is asking questions and having discussions face to face. First impressions will also impact on the potential to develop a trusting and professional relationship between the parties, which will influence an individual's choice of fostering service – just 20 per cent of foster carers approved since April 2013 did not consider an alternative agency when applying to foster, according to a recent survey by The Fostering Network³.

Yet initial visits are also a time-consuming exercise for an important and often limited resource. Clear messaging will mitigate against a basic failing which would make an enquirer unsuitable to progress, such as not having a spare room, before an initial visit takes place. A robust initial screening process and involving existing foster carers at the initial visit may improve outcomes and see more progressing through to training.



How do you qualify 'enough' information to be shared before having an initial visit, for example through information sessions, information packs or your online communications?

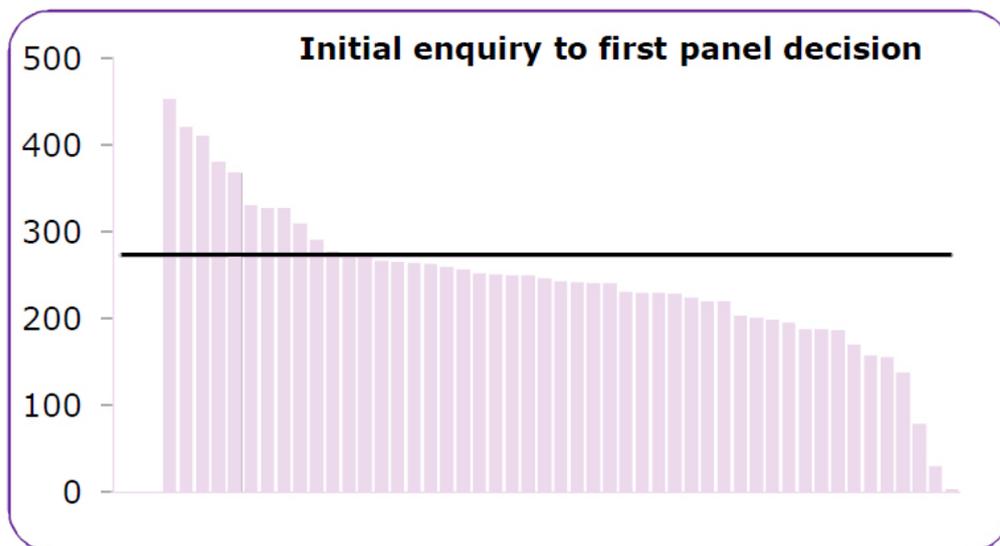
Some foster carers and fostering services anecdotally report significant delays between an initial visit and the enquirer starting training. Creating systems to maintain communication and crucially confidence in the process could again improve an applicant's transition through this stage as could the use of technology or identifying opportunities to share training resources across neighbouring services.



³www.fostering.net - due March 2015

Journey to approval

The journey to approval takes an average 273 days



Foster carers are on average waiting 273 days, approximately nine months, between their initial enquiry and reaching panel. This is a marginal improvement on the average 281 days reported in 2013.

In July 2013, the Department for Education published an amendment to the Children Act 1989 in relation to the assessment and approval of foster carers. The two stage process is designed to remove any unnecessary delay in a foster carer’s assessment.

Discounting those transferring from another agency, an initial enquirer is highly unlikely to request an assessment to be a foster carer at the outset; this is significantly more likely following discussions at an initial visit. Subtracting the average 24 days from enquiry to initial visit, the average foster carer takes 249 days between their initial visit and the first panel decision, approximately 8.2 months. Though not drastically exceeding the eight month Government target, work still needs to be done where possible to process assessments without delay.

There are clearly multiple variables involved: prospective foster carers may choose to delay the process due to a change in personal circumstances; contacting a previous partner may impede the assessment; there may be insufficient numbers to hold a training session or poor internal processes; losing vital pieces of information or poorly managed holiday periods may set the process back.

Foster carers are on average waiting 273 days, approximately nine months, between their initial enquiry and reaching panel.



How ‘joined up’ are your internal recruitment processes?

Foster carers wait on average almost two months from their initial visit to starting training, with the average for some services as high as five months.



**How does your fostering service respond to demand for training?
What systems do you have in place to trigger the need to run training?
Where are the opportunities to share or sell space on training with
neighbouring or other local services to ensure training can be delivered to
meet the needs of the applicant and the resources of the service?**

The assessment process remains the longest component in a foster carer's journey to approval, although now averaging 133 days compared to 144 days as reported in 2013. Research by The Fostering Network in summer 2013 identified a number of newly approved foster carers who were delayed in their application due to the availability of assessing social workers – sufficient staffing is a critical consideration when delivering a recruitment campaign. Many fostering services commission independent social workers for this role to manage caseloads, a decision taken locally to optimise the resource mix available.



**How do you plan resource capacity in conjunction to campaigns? What
is the ratio of assessments conducted inhouse to external? What are the
financial implications of outsourcing assessments?**

Positive relationships with local GPs, in terms of the timeliness and charge for medicals, will assist the recruitment process and resources, as will the speed at which references are gathered and verified.

All fostering services are under pressure either internally or externally to recruit more foster carers and offer broader placement choice. Some fostering services are seeking to speed up assessments into ever reduced timeframes. It is essential to the outcomes of fostered children that quality is not compromised and sufficient evidence is presented to enable local panels to make a confident judgement on an individual's suitability to foster. Furthermore, applicants should be able to influence the speed of the process, enabling them to feel confident, equipped and enthused for the task ahead.



**Do you survey foster carers for their feedback on all parts of the
application process?**

For a fostering service to have invested in completing the training and assessment for a prospective foster carer, the expectation would be that the final report is sufficiently detailed for the applicant to be approved. The benchmark reports that on average 79 per cent of assessments progress to approval. Yet around a quarter of respondents reported that 50 per cent or less of applicants were successfully approved following assessment.



**Once approved, how quickly were carers matched with their first
placement? Did that placement end as planned? Or are they still waiting
for their first placement?**

It is possible to identify efficiencies and improvements throughout the journey to approval process, and panel is no exception as the following case study from Tree House Care Fostering identifies.

Paperless Panels: Claire Rogers, Fostering Team Manager, Tree House Care Fostering

Tree House Care Fostering is an independent fostering provider, with just under 70 carers, covering Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, the midlands and the north west. During 2013 the service considered ways to make panel more efficient, while retaining confidentiality and data protection.

Recognising the high costs required to print panel papers, the service decided to explore the use of technology to implement paperless panels. The team identified Kindles as an appropriate tool and, working alongside colleagues in the IT service, ensured the device enabled compliance with safeguarding measures and data protection.

The technology was piloted with two panel members, gradually being rolled out to all panel members and the agency decision maker.

Feedback received from adopting the new approach has been extremely positive. The access and downloading systems have proven easy to navigate and have presented additional benefits of being able to store data in one place. The Kindle has also proved more accessible to and enhanced the confidence of the panel member representing looked after children, who has a number of disabilities.

Some panel members acknowledged the need to revise their approach to reading papers, but problems have not been insurmountable.

Cost has been a major deciding factor in the process. The initial investment in the Kindles will be offset by the printing costs within a short period, with subsequent savings on print. The security settings and systems within the device have also ensured data protection has been maintained.

Paperless panels have been a positive development for Tree House Care Fostering, ensuring security, quality and cost effectiveness.

The full case study is available in the Appendix of this document.



Enquiry sources

Significant research exists on how to attract people who may be suitable to apply and become an approved foster carer.

Technology has proven an enabler to this process in recent years. The 'web' was cited as the source of one in three (33 per cent) of all enquiries. Often submitting an online enquiry form is the last point of reference following other triggers – a bus back, a banner, a flyer through the door or a radio interview for example. Although a challenge, being able to identify marketing attribution in the recruitment process will help evaluate the success and cost benefit of a chosen channel. An additional bonus of online marketing is the advertising and page analytics available, which provide invaluable insight and are increasingly straightforward to interpret.

Social media is increasingly becoming an established element of the enquiry generation mix. Currently only three per cent of enquiries are attributed to social media but, as take up increases and advertising becomes more sophisticated, this figure is likely to increase in future years.

The main drawback with this channel is quality. A Facebook advertisement and page for example can only share basic fostering information. A direct enquiry received by a service from this channel increases the likelihood that the individual does not meet the basic qualities and requirements, or misunderstands the role they are enquiring into. Social media can and has been exploited to generate significant enquiry volume, however using this channel to direct those interested to the website or to sign up to an information session may be a better use of the resource available.

'Word of mouth' is accepted as a reliable and prevalent channel in generating enquiries; 16 per cent of enquiries on average can be attributed to recommendations through word of mouth.

*Why Foster Carers Care*⁴ puts into context the reasons why word of mouth is such a powerful channel, and many fostering services are having success by empowering and encouraging foster carers to 'recommend a friend' through reward schemes and incentives. The success of this route is often down to an individual's willingness to advocate on behalf of their service.

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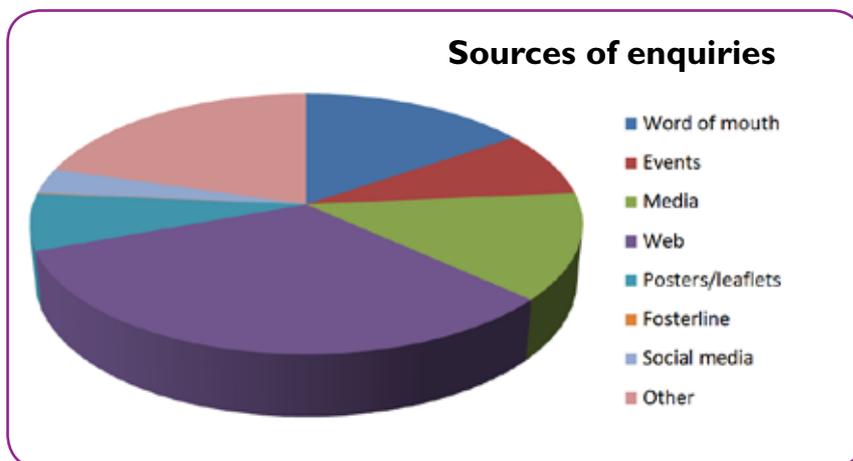


How do you engage with your foster carers beyond the fostering role?



In what innovative ways have you involved foster carers in your recruitment strategy?

⁴<http://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/why-foster-carers-care-report-v5.pdf>



Surveying your existing foster carers to identify whether they would recommend fostering for your service to a friend or family member, and how they would like to be involved in recruitment, will provide a powerful evidence base to investigate. The Fostering Network's *The State of the Nation's Foster Care* survey found around two thirds of foster carers would recommend fostering to others who may be considering it.

Tracking enquiries from source enables fostering services to evaluate the cost benefit of each channel. A radio campaign may for example generate a number of enquiries, but these may not necessarily translate into approved foster carers. Understanding your service's most productive channels for enquiry conversion as well as generation will assist in apportioning resources in future budget periods.



Do you know why some who enquire choose not to proceed?

Are you confident your systems record enquiries accurately as one instance if the enquirer has enquired through more than one channel or on more than one occasion?

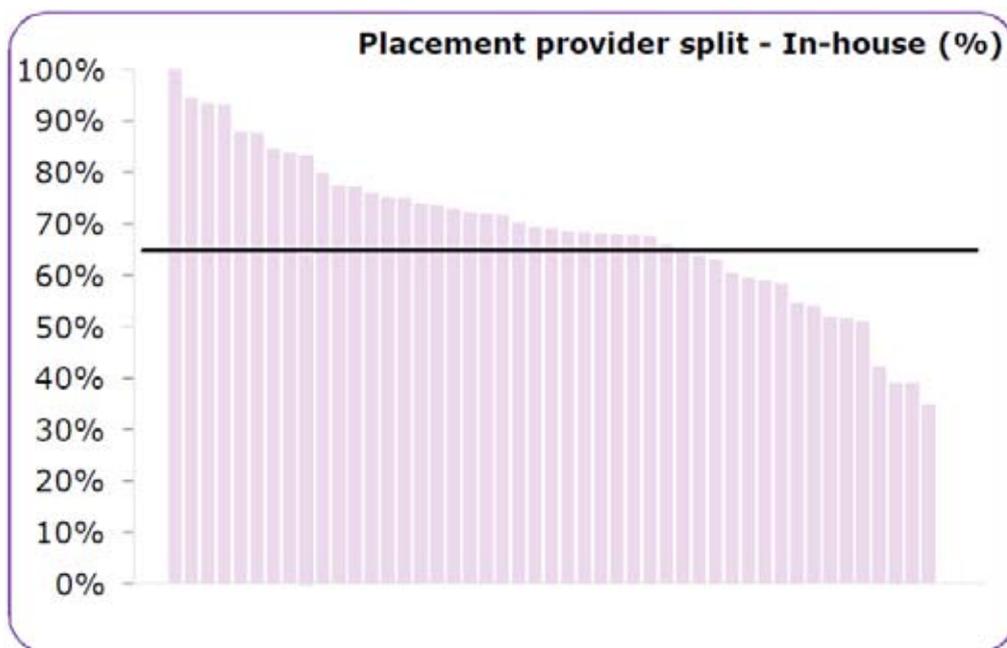
Do you know which channels generate the most approvals, not just enquiries?

Those responsible for foster carer recruitment are required to have a unique breadth of skills and understanding of both marketing and fostering standards and legislation to perform the role successfully. An accurate needs analysis, feeding data in from a number of sources including external agencies, is necessary to ensure recruitment is targeted and sufficient foster carers are retained. Completing the fostering service benchmark survey will further help to achieve this.

Innovative and targeted recruitment campaigns are one method to improve the recruitment of foster carers, but there are opportunities to look within the existing foster carer cohort to identify those who may be able to broaden their approval range to meet demand.

Placement provider split

Sixty five per cent of fostered children are on average placed with local authority foster carers, ranging from around 35 to 100 per cent, down from 69 per cent in 2013.



Local authority fostering services commission independent fostering providers to meet the placement demand they cannot meet in-house. Traditionally this was for children with highly complex needs, a sibling group or a disability for example. Commissioning frameworks exist across the country on a local or regional basis with the aim to meet demand strategically and provide effective matching for looked after children.

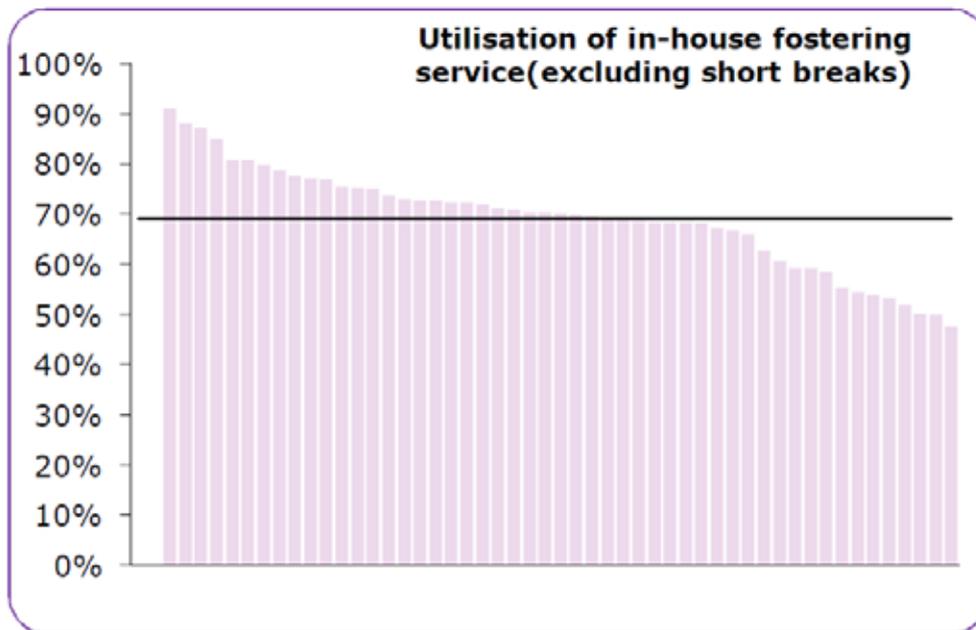
When the child is placed at the centre of the process, having access to a mixed economy that can provide extra specialist foster care placements is important to achieve positive outcomes for all children in foster care.

...an average 31 per cent of local authority foster services' in-house capacity appears to be currently underutilised.

While providing sufficiency is a legal requirement, it is all fostering services' duty to recruit responsibly for an identified need.

As the chart below illustrates, an average 31 per cent of local authority fostering services' in-house capacity appears to be currently underutilised.





Thorough local analysis may reveal the reasons why placements are vacant, including for example the number of foster carers on hold for a particular child anticipated to be coming into care, the need of a child currently in placement to be placed without other children resulting in additional bed space being unavailable, and/or temporary changes in family circumstances. Identifying the 'real' vacancy rate, plotting the length of time foster carers have been without placement or fully utilised, and referring to the foster carer's annual review, should inform the decision as to whether certain foster carer's approval status should be reviewed.

Many fostering services are looking within to meet placement demand, identifying foster carers who may be able to change or broaden their approval range to increase their utilisation potential. If the remaining foster carers are unable to do this, and it is unlikely that they will receive any placements in future, consider 'de-registering' them from your service for their sake and yours.

An additional factor in the ability to utilise foster care placements is staying put legislation, enabling care leavers to remain with their former foster carers beyond the age of 18. Staying put arrangements should be part of the care planning process, identified well in advance of a young person in foster care reaching their 18th birthday. The impact on placement availability should be projected and fed into the local needs analysis to inform the recruitment strategy.



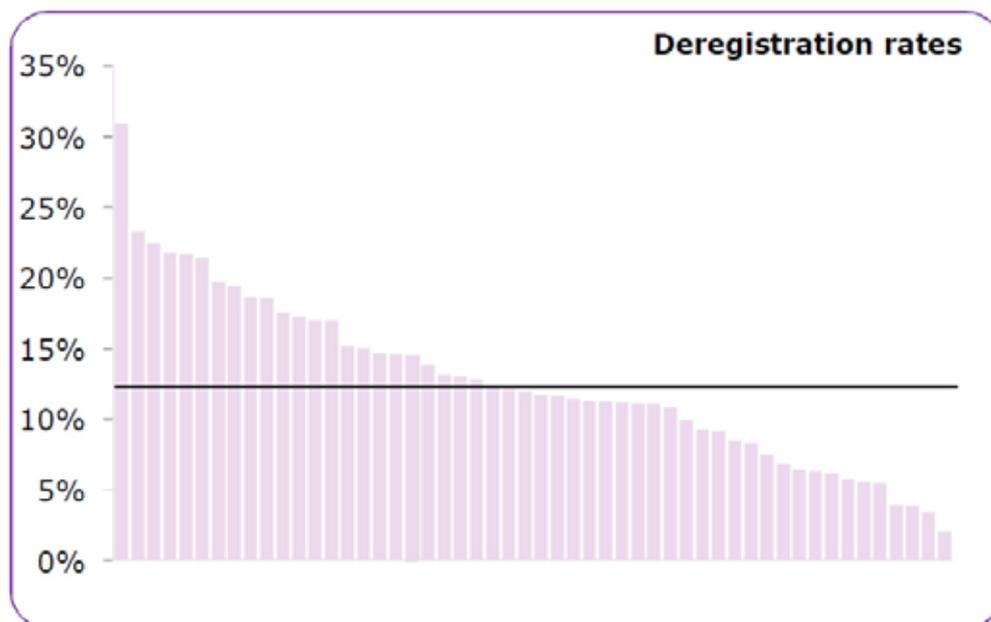
What is your service's 'real' vacancy rate?



How do you address the possibility of broadening your foster carers' approval range?

Deregistration

12 per cent of foster carers left their fostering service



Marginally fewer foster carers left in 2013/14 than in the previous year; an average of 12 compared to 13 per cent. One authority lost more than a third of its foster carer workforce compared with another which lost just two per cent of their foster carers.

An average 42 per cent cited a change in household circumstances as the reason for leaving their service, while 28 per cent retired with a natural or positive end to their fostering career.

Six per cent, around 360 foster carers, left due to a concern, complaint or an allegation.

Allegations are a very real concern for prospective foster carers, a topic many without extensive background knowledge of fostering will address in the process of training. Those who have the misfortune of receiving an unfounded allegation will inevitably suffer an emotional blow and will require significant support from other professionals in their team to continue fostering. A fostering service's conduct during an allegation is paramount in supporting a foster carer to continue, or, at the least, leave knowing their service has treated them fairly and with respect.

In addition to the matching of placements, it is also important for a fostering service to consider the matching of foster carers with their supervising social workers. The strength, trust and overall nature of this relationship can, and does, make or break the career success of the foster carer and their ability and confidence to care for a fostered child. The 'team around the foster carer', including the supervising social worker and an experienced foster carer mentor, will contribute to the support network and points of reference particularly for newly approved foster carers.



How are peer support systems utilised in your fostering service?

Ofsted's fostering quality assurance and data return for 2012/13 identified 4,328 unplanned endings between April 2012 and March 2013. A proportion of these will be attributed to a foster carer leaving the service. In the interest of placement stability and sufficiency, all fostering services should, where possible, identify those who may leave the service and plan accordingly how to replace them.

Exit interviews can prove invaluable to enhance knowledge of the fostering service's provision of support from a foster carer's perspective and identify opportunities for areas to improve. Analysing the length of time a carer fostered before they resigned will also give insight into their experience with the fostering service.



Conclusion

This year's Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark has provided unique insight into and comparison of local authority fostering services' performance. It has identified trends which will provide a foundation to identify and determine best practice for recruitment and retention in the sector, particularly with the potential addition of data from more fostering services next year.

Having identified the need to recruit, knowing which channels to utilise and the messaging to use to attract the right enquirers for the budget available will determine the success of a recruitment campaign. The web was cited as the source of one of every three enquiries. Similarly, 'word of mouth' remains a powerful channel, with 16 per cent having been referred to fostering services through this method. Incentivising and empowering existing foster carers to advocate on a fostering service's behalf can have positive outcomes for both recruitment and retention activity.

Conversion rates for the period remain consistent with the previous year at 11 per cent. This headline statistic only reveals part of the story; the journey to approval is made up of a number of stages with multiple variables. Improving the quality of enquiries from the outset through enhanced communication and messaging makes better use of the social work resources available to assess prospective foster carers. Staging regular information sessions and training opportunities at mutually convenient times, potentially in partnership with neighbouring fostering services, will maintain momentum within the process.

Fewer foster carers appear to be fully utilised, just 65 per cent compared to 69 per cent in 2013. This may not reflect the true vacancy picture, so further local analysis is required to identify the reason for vacancies. It may be necessary to review the approval status of some foster carers who are unlikely to have a child placed with them as retaining foster carers for statistical performance reporting only is poor practice, unfair on them and potentially detrimental to the service. Robust commissioning arrangements with the independent sector will help make better use of the fostering workforce and ensure all fostering services recruit only foster carers required to meet identified placement needs.

The combination of Ofsted, CIPFA and this benchmark-specific information provides a platform for all fostering services to scrutinise local performance and identify opportunities to improve underperforming areas. Participating authorities have received an individual report on these and other key metrics generated from the benchmark returns.

The benchmark survey has significant potential to continue beyond the funded Department for Education project to *Support Fostering Services to Recruit More Foster Carers*. It has proven an invaluable tool for services to plan and evaluate foster carer recruitment and retention activity. Independent fostering providers will be invited to participate in future collections to demonstrate sector-wide performance across an increasing number of indicators. It will only succeed if all fostering services contribute their data and take part to improve the sector and ultimately outcomes for looked after children in foster care.

To be part of the fostering service benchmark community, please email james.foyle@fostering.net

Appendix

Paperless Panels: Claire Rogers, Fostering Team Manager, Tree House Care Fostering – full case study

Tree House Care Fostering is an independent fostering provider, with just under 70 carers, covering Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, the midlands and the north west. During 2013 the service considered ways to make panel more efficient.

Background

Confidentiality and data protection are issues which are constantly at the forefront of all organisations that handle sensitive data. We needed to consider ways of passing sensitive information on applicants to independent panel members who work outside of the agency.

Paper panel packs are cumbersome, and use large amounts of paper and ink. Added to this is the cost of a worker photocopying prior to panel and shredding post panel. It is a costly, labour intensive and inefficient system.

Passing these large paper packs to panel members relies on panel members either coming to the office in a timely manner to collect, sending them in the post via special delivery, or a worker going out to deliver them. None of these methods is fully reliable or cheap.

Proposal

We considered a range of options to minimise the potential difficulties that could befall us. Our admin team were the instigators of the solution which was to move to paperless panels. In discussions with our IT service it became clear that the option of using new technology was more than just a possibility, and would dramatically decrease the risks of breaches in data protection. It could also prove to be a far more cost effective system.

The implementation

In April 2014 two panel members were each provided with a Kindle Fire. The Kindles had been encrypted and secured by our IT service, and could be linked to our internal shared drive. Being mindful of confidentiality, the link was only to access one folder on the drive, entitled 'Kindle'. In this folder all the electronic documents were accessible and clearly labelled. This mirrored the paper panel packs which other panel members were still using.

Gradually over the following months all panel members, and the agency decision maker received their own Kindle and password, encouraged by positive feedback from those already using them.

The process

The process starts when the supervising social worker, whose assessment or foster carer annual review is to be presented at panel, moves the relevant documents into the Kindle folder on the internal shared drive. Most of our paperwork is already electronic. Any handwritten documents are scanned and uploaded.

Each document is allocated a number; applicant/carers name and title, starting with '01 Smith Front Page', continuing, for example, '02 Smith Section A', '03 Smith Family Tree', and so on. This ensures that panel members can read the documents in the most helpful order.

Once the files are transferred the admin team is notified. Using a secure process provided by our IT service, they make the Kindle folder available to panel members who are notified by email or telephone. This process takes far less time than previously printing and collating all documents, and photocopying the packs.

Now our panel members click on THC connect on their Kindle (from home) and they are automatically taken to the Kindle folder, where they can download all the files for panel reading and preparation. An added bonus is that documents like DBS risk assessments or medical forms that should only be viewed by specific panel members can be set up so they require an additional password to open.

Immediately after panel each member deletes the documents, under the supervision of the panel minute taker, to ensure that nothing remains on the device. The minute taker then removes all the documents from the Kindle folder on the shared drive, ensuring that these can no longer be accessed. The documents are moved into a 'Packs Presented to Panel' folder so that there is an electronic record of the documents that were presented.

Early conclusions

We knew that the paper packs were exceedingly large and at times overwhelming.

Feedback received about our new paperless panels has been extremely positive, with panel members reporting that the Kindle is easy to read and use. The access and downloading systems are easy to navigate – even for those who are not as confident with more complex technology – and they are far easier to store to ensure confidentiality.

One panel member, our representative for looked after children, has dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Irlen Syndrome, and has stated that the use of the Kindle, with certain adaptations, has really worked for her. Previously her packs were printed on blue paper, and she needed to read the pack more than once to feel confident about the content. This is something she has found she no longer needs to do using the Kindle.

Our agency decision maker has provided favourable feedback, being able to navigate her way around the system with ease.

Some panel members initially found that the conscientious checking and cross referencing needed when reading an assessment pack on the Kindle requires the development of new habits, ways of reading and note taking. These have not been insurmountable difficulties, and those members have already risen to this challenge.

The initial outlay of the Kindles needs to be offset against the cost that would normally have been encountered through costs of overtime for admin to photocopy, scan (and shred) the packs, the huge amounts of paper and ink used in this process, and the distribution costs.

Cost has been a major deciding factor in moving to the use of electronic devices for panel, however we feel that the decrease in risks of confidentiality and data protection breaches are invaluable:

- secure systems for both the Kindle and our shared drive have been put in place by our IT service;
- all devices are encrypted;
- the agency controls the shared drive, including the Kindle folder; and
- we no longer rely on the postal service or panel members for distribution/collection of packs.

For Tree House Care Fostering paperless panels have been a positive step forward for security, quality and cost efficiency, and we have no plans to return to paper panel packs in the future.

Claire Rogers
Fostering Service Manager
Tree House Care Fostering

