



Independent Evaluation of Fosterline England

Final Report, March 2015

by Dr. Carolyn Blackburn, Centre for Research in Education, Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Birmingham City University

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Christine Shand, Senior Finance Officer, Birmingham City University provided invaluable support in the difficult task of calculating the Social Return on Investment for this evaluation.

Dedication

This independent evaluation is dedicated to all foster carers in recognition of the crucial work they do with children and young people by providing safe nurturing environments, love and stability.

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Research Fellow, Birmingham City University*



Foreword

On behalf of the Department for Education, I would like to thank FosterTalk for commissioning this invaluable Independent Evaluation on Fosterline, carried out by Birmingham City University.

Children in care are a Government priority. We're committed to improving the quality of care and stability of placements for looked after children whether in residential care homes or with a foster family, so all children can succeed in life. It is reported that over 50% of children in care have experienced serious abuse and neglect before being taken into care. A significant number have special educational needs and have been exposed to such traumatic experiences, not least including separation from their homes, families and friends.

Foster carers inevitably battle with sometimes complex, very sensitive situations and with some of the most vulnerable children and young people in England. If not supported properly, these children may be affected for life in terms of educational attainment, socially, physically and psychologically. We have a duty of care to provide them with highly skilled carers. It's refreshing therefore to see in this report that both existing foster carers and those interested in becoming foster carers quote their highest motivation for fostering as being "to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children and young people."

Foster carers do a sterling job and shouldn't feel they're doing this in isolation and without the appropriate support they need and seek. It's imperative therefore that the independent Fosterline support is accessible and effective and that Fosterline helpline advisors have the knowledge and expertise to support foster carers in their caring role. This report shows Fosterline helpline advisors skills are highly evident and regarded, and they should be applauded for the invaluable work they do:

Fosterline helpline has been the single most important service to me as a foster carer

The report proves Fosterline is a low cost, early intervention, invaluable service for both prospective and existing foster carers. Fosterline provides a quick response, immediate telephone support and friendliness of competent staff. The report highlights areas for improvement such as in relation to the communication triangle between foster carer, social worker and fostering agency. Government have an important function in the recruiting and retaining of foster carers in England and can take a leading role in improving working conditions for foster carers. The idea raised of a "team around the foster carer" approach is an interesting one to explore further. Fosterline has proved to be an extremely valuable service and one which the Government wishes to see continue into the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edward Timpson', written in a cursive style.

Edward Timpson MP, Minister for Children and Families

Executive Summary

Fosterline provides confidential, impartial, advice, information and signposting on the broad range of issues of concern to foster carers and those interested in fostering, in order to support them in their role, aid retention and encourage recruitment of foster carers. The number of children and young people in care is rising faster than the number of foster carers. This independent evaluation of Fosterline services aimed to identify the contribution that Fosterline makes to the important government function of recruiting and retaining foster carers in England.

The evaluation had three strands that included a brief review of relevant literature, a survey of existing and prospective foster carers and in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten existing and two prospective foster carers. The literature review focused on the social, educational and long-term outcomes for children in foster care, the impact of providing support for foster carers on their own well-being and that of children and the effectiveness of helpline support such as that provided by Fosterline. Survey and interviews focused on foster carers' motivation to foster, their experiences of fostering children and the support and advice received from Fosterline in their fostering role.

Key findings

Fosterline provides a low-cost early intervention service which has the potential to provide a

Without Fosterline there would be no future for a foster carer because it is the only service that supports the foster carer to find their way through the complexities that have been created in the foster care business!

high social return for children who are fostered. Identifying a value for the return on investment has proved highly challenging due to inconsistencies and gaps in statistical data about the recruitment and retention of foster carers as well as alternative types of placement for children in the looked-after system. This is a consideration for Government for future evaluations of early intervention services. An indication of the high return on investment for Fosterline services is provided in the appendices.

Foster carers are motivated to foster by intrinsic and altruistic drivers such as a desire to improve children's well-being and long-term outcomes as well as more practical drivers related to their own accommodation and financial resources. Some are motivated by personal life experiences and prior professional experiences.

Foster carers' aspirations for children are concerned with children's immediate social and emotional development as well as the influence of this on their future social inclusion, employment and family prospects.

The main challenges reported by foster carers in their fostering role related to communication and relationships with Local Authorities, Independent Fostering Associations and social workers as well as the communication between professionals within these organisations.

The range of concerns that foster carers contacted Fosterline for was wide and varied, but many were complex and sensitive and required knowledgeable, attuned helpline advisors who could listen and de-stigmatise foster carers' concerns.

Fosterline made the job more financially viable and we were able to obtain financial assistance for other foster carers in the area as a result of advice from Fosterline.

With help from Fosterline I knew where to go, which reports I had to write.. I won my case with the help of Fosterline, despite there being 15 people on the panel.. I knew I was good at my job, I love my job and Fosterline helped me to see that.

The majority of foster carers surveyed and interviewed preferred to contact Fosterline by telephone in order to obtain an immediate, private and in-depth response to complex concerns. Some foster carers also found the website useful.

Fosterline's role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers as reported by participants in this evaluation is to provide impartial and independent advice about a range of sensitive concerns and issues when foster carers feel they have no-one else to turn to. Sometimes when foster carers contact Fosterline they are at crisis point in terms of their fostering career and in terms of their emotional resilience to cope with the situation. Fosterline responds by listening,

encouraging, empowering and valuing foster carers perspectives and concerns in a way that enables them to act on the advice and support given.

The need and demand for Fosterline services is clearly demonstrated through analysis of the survey and interview data. For example 70.8% of existing and 85.7% of prospective foster carers received information and advice from Fosterline that enabled them to decide what to do next. In addition 81.2% of existing and 71.4% of prospective foster carers agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline is an independent advice and support service that enhances the support available to foster carers and is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers as reported by 77.1% of existing and 85.7% of prospective foster carers.

The impact and difference made to foster carers as a result of Fosterline intervention is highlighted by the survey responses, with 66.7% of existing foster carers reporting that they felt valued and supported after contacting Fosterline. Qualitative data from interviews highlighted that the influence of Fosterline in improving foster carers' motivation to continue fostering is important.

However, support and advice from Fosterline is only one factor of many that could make a difference and as such Fosterline's ability to influence foster carers' motivation is contingent upon foster carers feeling valued by social workers, Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Associations. This is an area where social work, Local Authority and independent

fostering practice needs to change in order to increase positive messages to existing and prospective foster carers about their value.

The way in which Fosterline could continue to play a fundamental role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers in the future is by continuing to provide a responsive, attuned advice and support service that is staffed by well-informed helpline advisors who understand foster carers' work, views and perspectives as well as the legislation that underpins this. In addition, a number of enhancements to the services that Fosterline provides have been suggested from survey and interview data and are highlighted in this evaluation. As an illustrative example, foster carers suggested that Fosterline could help to reduce bureaucracy by providing clarification of procedures, legislation and policies.

Implications for policy and professional practice are discussed within the evaluation. Foster carers are calling for a "new deal" in terms of working conditions and more effective communication between professionals, as well as a change in attitudes by professionals towards foster carers and children.

Further research could usefully focus on identifying reasons for foster carers leaving fostering; finding a more effective, collaborative and democratic way for social workers, Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Associations to communicate with each other and with foster carers and a fuller and more detailed evaluation of Fosterline's early intervention service. In addition a feasibility study into the possibility of the provision of fostering advice and support services to other countries, including neighbouring home countries such as Wales and Scotland as well as international countries using the successful model currently provided by Fosterline is recommended.

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Abbreviations

CAMHS	Child and adolescent mental health service
DfE	Department for Education
FASD	Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders
HA	Helpline Association
HP	Helpline Partnership
IFA	Independent fostering agency
LA	Local Authority
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
SEN	Special educational needs
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
SROI	Social return on investment

1. Introduction

Fosterline provides confidential, impartial, advice, information and signposting on the broad range of issues of concern to foster carers and those interested in fostering, in order to support them in their role, aid retention and encourage recruitment of foster carers. This independent evaluation of Fosterline services aims to identify the contribution that Fosterline makes to the important government function of recruiting and retaining foster carers in England.

2. Review of literature

This brief review of literature aimed to place this independent evaluation in the context of the impact of the services provided by Fosterline to potential and existing foster carers, children who are fostered and society. It focused on the social, educational and long-term outcomes for children in foster care, the impact of providing support for foster carers on their own well-being and that of children, and the effectiveness of helpline support such as that provided by Fosterline. The term child/children is used throughout this report to include children and young people.

2.1 Current context of foster care

As one of three types of care for looked-after children (adoption, foster care and residential care) fostering is reported to be ‘bursting at the seams’ (Harber and Oakley, 2012). Internationally, the number of children and young people in care is increasing faster than the number of foster carers (Rodger *et al.*, 2006). Understanding how to attract more foster carers is crucial (Sebba, 2012). In the UK, as noted by McDermid *et al.*, (2012), there was a 9% increase from 2007-11 of children and young people in foster care and a 2% increase in 2011-12. In England 68,840 children were in the care of local authorities (LAs) on 31st March 2014, compared to 68,060 in 2013. Of these, 75% (51,340) of children who were looked-after on 31st March 2014 were living with foster carers (www.baaf.org.uk). There is thought to be a shortfall of foster carers in England of approximately 7,000 currently (Higgs, 2013). While the number of foster carers is increasing, it is not doing so as rapidly as the increase in children who need foster care. Retaining foster carers can also be problematic as explained later. The reasons for high numbers of children being placed in foster care are discussed elsewhere (for example Harber and Oakley, 2012). It is noteworthy, however, that children being placed in foster care are not a homogenous group, their prior experiences, age, reasons for being placed in care and subsequent social, emotional, physical and health needs are extremely varied.

2.2 Policy context of children in foster care

The Coalition Government has placed looked-after children as a priority group in its policies to tackle inequality, disadvantage and social cohesion. In line with reforms to adoption procedures, the Government has committed to improve the quality of care and the stability of placements for looked-after children, be they in residential care homes or with a foster family, so that all children can succeed in life (www.gov.uk).

To improve children’s educational outcomes, Virtual School Heads will be responsible for ensuring that looked-after children receive appropriate support to improve their educational

progress and attainment. This includes ensuring that schools and non-mainstream settings spend the pupil premium funding for looked-after children they receive effectively.

To improve the quality of foster care, Government have developed a programme of work through discussions with over 300 foster carers, social workers, managers and professionals about what works, what does not, and how things can be improved with a focus on seven distinct but related areas:

- recruitment and retention of foster carers;
- commissioning of fostering services;
- the assessment and approval of foster carers;
- delegation of authority to foster carers;
- long-term foster placements;
- supporting children returning home from foster care;
- training and support for foster carers and social workers.

New Government 'staying put' regulations will allow young people to stay in foster care until their 21st birthday providing that LAs perceive this to be in the young person's interests. This is an area where Fosterline provides support to foster carers as noted in their annual report (2014) and quarterly reports to the Department for Education [DfE].

2.3 Social, educational and long-term outcomes for children in foster care

The DfE (2014), Trout *et al.*, (2008) and Scherr, (2007) agree that educational outcomes for children in care are a matter of concern. The DfE reported that for looked-after children (that is those in care for longer than 12 months) attainment gaps between children who are looked-after and those who are not looked-after (not in care or in care for less than 12 months) are narrowing in key stages 1 and 2. Nevertheless the percentage of looked-after children achieving level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics at key stage 2 in 2014 was 48% compared to 79% of non-looked-after children, highlighting an attainment gap of 31% which had widened by key stage 4 to 40.1 % (DfE, 2014: 8-10).

In considering the reasons for these attainment gaps, children's pre-care and in-care experiences demand attention. Although most children who are in care live safely, a small number do experience harm. There are a range of factors related to being in care which can place children at risk of abuse and neglect and adversely affect their social, educational long-term outcomes (www.nspcc.org.uk). For example over half of the children in care have experienced serious abuse or neglect before being taken into care (Jutte *et al.*, 2014). Research shows that children who have been abused or neglected in the past are more likely than their peers to experience further abuse (Proctor, 2012). In addition, separation from home and family is a traumatic experience. Trauma can impact on a child's development, attachment behaviour and functioning. Caring for children who are often traumatised and display challenging behaviour requires highly skilled carers. Many carers are not equipped to deal with these challenges and are unable to protect children from their own risk-taking behaviour (Beesley, 2011). A significant proportion of children in care move from placement to placement with little or no notice that they will be moved, and no say in where they are placed (Office of the Children's Rights Director, 2014). Regular moves can reduce a child's

ability to feel loved or form close relationships (Coy, 2008). A number of people are responsible for ensuring that the needs of children in care are met. Although it can be positive to have a network of support, it can also mean that children in care do not always have any one person to provide them with a consistent source of love and support. These factors are likely to affect children's ability to form and sustain relationships socially, educationally and throughout life impacting on their long-term outcomes.

Significant numbers of children who are looked-after have special educational needs [SEN] (66% of looked-after children compared to 17.9% of all children). The most common category of SEN for looked-after children in 2014 was social, emotional and behaviour difficulties (DfE, 2014: 11). In addition children and young people in care have consistently been found to have much higher rates of mental health difficulties than the general population, with almost half of them meeting the criteria for a psychiatric disorder (Luke *et al.*, 2014). Williams (2013) highlighted the high prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders [FASD] among children in the care system which also has implications for children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development and health needs, especially since professional knowledge about FASD remains inadequate (Blackburn, 2013). The long term effects of this are that one in four of the adult prison population has spent time in care, that adults who have spent time in care are more likely to end up homeless and to abuse alcohol and drugs. They are also more likely to have their own children taken into care, and at an earlier age, having been more likely to become teenage parents than their peers (Williams, 2013: 81).

Although it is difficult to disaggregate children's experiences before entering care from their experiences in care, caregivers responses to children's challenging behaviour can have an impact on children's educational outcomes (Briskman and Scott, 2012) suggesting that the quality of care given by foster carers is influential. However, currently we lack proven models for selecting, training, supervising and quality-assuring carers and staff in such a way that the quality of care is enhanced (Luke *et al.*, 2014). This is an area where Fosterline could provide consultancy and advice to the DfE as an independent body involved in the support of prospective and existing foster carers. Ensuring that they are equipped to signpost foster carers to professionals and organisations that can support them in this area is also important.

The transformative effect of foster care is noteworthy in the literature. Long-term, stable and consistent fostering can have a positive influence and transform lives (Williams, 2013). Sebba (2014) reported an association between children's social, educational and longer term outcomes, the length of time spent in care and number of placements experienced, suggesting that children perform better with prolonged time spent in care, and with fewer placements. Children experiencing only one placement per year were more than three times as likely to achieve five A* to C grades at key stage 4 than children experiencing more than three placements per year. This suggests an imperative to support foster carers in their role to ensure consistency and effectiveness of care. Especially effective as protective factors for poor educational outcomes are caregiver characteristics in particular aspirations, home-based involvement and support of the caregiver.

2.4. Perspectives of children in foster care

Research undertaken about the views of children who have been in care highlights the importance of children's relationships with foster carers, and the effect of this on their education and aspirations. In a longitudinal study exploring this (Broad, 2011), key findings included the importance of foster carers to a young person in care. The majority (96%) of young people identified their relationship with their current foster carer as being 'very important'. By comparison, 65% said the relationship with their birth mother was 'very important' and 43% said the same about their birth father. In addition, for children in stable placements, their experience of school can be extremely positive. When asked 14 questions concerning school with the opportunity to respond 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Average', 'Below Average' and 'Need more help' to each question, overall, 81% of children in stable placements responded with ratings of either 'Excellent' or 'Good' being given.

2.5 Impact of providing support for foster carers

The main motivators for entering foster care are reported to include intrinsic and altruistic drivers such as 'loving children' as well as extending the family/providing a sibling for a lone child, putting something back into the community, personal experience of being fostered or growing up with fostered children and wanting home-based employment (Sebba, 2012). The literature suggests that effective and timely responses to initial inquiries about foster care as well as ongoing support for existing foster carers are crucial to ensure a reliable and continuous wealth of available foster carers for the increasing number of children needing them.

Historically, responses to initial inquiries from foster carers have often been insufficiently prompt, leading to a major fall-off between these requests and progress to registration which potential foster carers report as being demotivating (for example Keogh and Svensson, 1999). Only half of those who request information about fostering express their intention to consider it further (Ciarrochi *et al.*, 2011) and 80% of enquiries about fostering do not result in an application (Triseliotis *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore failure to provide appropriate support for foster carers is a major source of dissatisfaction that may send negative messages to those considering fostering (Blythe *et al.*, 2012). There is an imperative, therefore, for prospective and existing foster carers to be provided with effective, timely and appropriate support such as the services provided by Fosterline in order to ensure recruitment and retention of foster carers. Lack of information and understanding about fostering in the general population is also a key issue. However, not enough is known about why foster carers who make initial inquiries do not follow through to assessment to be a foster carer (Sebba, 2012) and this is an area in which Fosterline could be involved. Already Fosterline receives nearly 5,000 calls to its telephone helpline and nearly 9,000 visitors to its interactive website with 11% of inquiries being handled by helpline advisors from potential foster carers (Fosterline, 2014). Identifying reasons for lack of follow through to assessment would contribute to the knowledge-base in foster care and enable Fosterline to enhance their current service provision in a way that would result in a positive outcome from inquiries where appropriate.

Conversely, meeting or knowing others who foster emerges clearly as an initial key motivator to foster from the international and UK literature (McDermid *et al.*, 2012; Peake and Townsend, 2012). This suggests that there is a role for independent agencies such as Fosterline to provide a peer-to-peer support service for foster carers as well as raising awareness amongst the general population about fostering.

In terms of retention, experienced foster carers are valuable, and satisfied foster carers will attract new ones (Social Care Institute for Excellence). SCIE (www.scie.org.uk) note that key factors in retaining existing foster carers include:

- training, support and the chance to meet and get support from other foster carers;
- being treated as a member of the team and the opportunity to work with social workers;
- adequate information about the child;
- good out of hours and general support, including access to specialist help and advice;
- guaranteed respite;
- good levels of remuneration, and realistic and well-managed payment systems, which ensure that they get paid on time - many local authorities have developed payments for skills schemes;
- foster carers who feel supported whether by social workers, their family, including their children, and friends, are more likely to provide successful placements.

Given the significant percentage of existing foster carers (86%) reporting high levels of satisfaction with services provided by Fosterline, they are ideally placed to promote the retention of existing foster carers by providing opportunities for training and peer to peer support.

Luke and Sebba (2013) reported that most foster carers derive great satisfaction from their role but day-to day-experiences of for example managing children's challenging behaviour can be stressful. Stress can damage the well-being of both foster carers and their foster child, affect the stability of placements and has been linked to people deciding to stop being foster carers. Support systems that extend beyond the more formal relationship between foster carer and supervising social worker are necessary to alleviate foster carers' stress and thereby potentially improve outcomes. In particular, training for foster carers in behaviour management can improve educational outcomes for children (Briskman and Scott, 2012), especially those which inform relationship-building, focusing on caregiver sensitivity and attunement, positive reinforcement, behavioural consequences and limit-setting (Luke *et al.*, 2014).

2.6 Effectiveness of and trends in helpline support

It is useful to locate the helpline service offered by Fosterline within the wider context of the purpose of helpline support. The Helpline Association (HA, 2011) noted that it was difficult

to give an example of a typical helpline as they spanned the breadth of social, welfare, health and education sectors. At one end of the spectrum, a helpline may be run as an independent activity whilst at the other the helpline may be only one of a myriad of services provided by an organisation. The variables in how they are staffed, where they are located and the extent to which they integrate with other services are wide. Despite all these variables, what all helplines have in common is that they are the door through which a service user may make initial contact with the organisation and its services. The following definition provided by the HA (2011: 3) is useful in considering their main function and key purpose:

Helplines...remotely provide reliable information/advice/guidance/support to meet the needs of individuals and organisations and contribute to their decisions.

The number of helplines across the UK is currently reported to be approximately 1,000 and increasing annually (HA, 2011: 5). The majority of these (92.1%) are organised by registered charities. Although helplines have responded to the introduction of new telecommunications channels by offering service users email, instant messaging, SMS and social media options, the quantity and complexity of telephone calls to helplines has increased. The Helpline Partnership (HP, 2014) (formerly the Helpline Association) reported volume increases of over 40% in the last year. The HA (2011) reported that the time spent by the helpline worker on phone calls has increased and that the nature of calls have become more specific, complex and detailed, requiring more expertise. This is corroborated by the HP (2014) who reported an increase in the number of callers with complex and multiple problems and further corroborated by Fosterline (2014) who reported an average call length of 33 – 36 minutes in 2014 compared to 17 – 20 minutes in 2013 and increasingly complex inquiries. This would appear to suggest that telephone helplines are seen as an effective method of gaining support for services users generally and foster carers specifically to the extent that they are described as “an essential part of the social fabric of the UK” (HP, 2014). It is a concern to note therefore that whilst 86% of helplines reported that calls to their helpline had increased in the past year, only 9% of helplines have seen their income increase over that time. Worryingly, 36% of helplines reported that their income had actually declined, and within this group, all the affected helplines had reported call increases (HP, 2014).

Another interesting trend for helplines is the increasing employment of volunteers who outweigh paid staff by a factor of 3:1 (HA, 2011: 24). Helplines are increasing their range of services to meet user demand and increasing their use of social media such as LinkedIn for professional networking. However, Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media sites used by helplines with 58% of helpline providers having a presence (HA, 2011: 58), including Fosterline who also are developing online forums and considering the use of ‘Apps’ and other social communications technology. Fosterline could consider also having a presence on bebo in line with other helplines in order to increase reach and impact.

This brief review of relevant literature sets the context for the evaluation objectives and methodology.

3. Evaluation objectives

The objectives of this independent evaluation were as follows:

- To identify the need and demand of the Fosterline services in supporting existing and potential foster carers in their caring role today and in the future;
- To establish what impact and difference is made to foster carers and their signposting agencies as a result of Fosterline intervention;
- To collate, analyse and synthesise qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate the role of Fosterline in recruitment of new foster carers and retention of existing ones;
- To utilise SROI (Social Return on Investment) as an impact mapping exercise to ascertain the cost: benefit savings that Fosterline creates for the state and society in real cash and in-kind terms.

4. Evaluation methodology

This independent evaluation was undertaken between January and March, 2015. It was agreed that the project would have three strands, including desk research, a survey and case study interviews with foster carers.

- **Strand 1** involved a brief desk study of current published literature that focused on the social, educational and long-term outcomes for children in foster care, the impact of providing support for foster carers on their well-being and that of children and the effectiveness of helpline support such as that provided by Fosterline.
- **Strand 2** involved an initial survey to existing and prospective foster carers who had used Fosterline services and signposting agencies.
- **Strand 3** involved twelve case study telephone interviews with existing and prospective foster carers across England. Case study participants were selected to provide a maximal variation of foster carers utilising the services of Fosterline including diversity of social, cultural and geographical variables.

The data from survey and interviews were analysed thematically and systematically to allow both common and discrepant themes to emerge, both of which are reported, in order to reduce any bias.

The conclusions of the evaluation have been drawn from triangulation of these data sources together with existing data held by Fosterline on key performance indicators to inform a SROI. SROI shows how social and environmental outcomes translate into tangible monetary value, helping organisations and investors of all kinds to see a fuller picture of the benefits that flow from their investment of time, money and other resources. This investment can then be seen in terms of the 'return' or the value created for individuals, communities, society or the environment. This is a powerful new way of viewing impact. It enables those who invest in, and have a stake in, social change to thoughtfully weigh which resources they use (New Economics Foundation, n.d.). This evaluation has utilised a key stakeholder approach to

assessing impact and SROI for the period June, 2013 to December, 2014. Potential stakeholders were identified as:

- Department for Education (DfE)
- FosterTalk
- Fosterline (staff and helpline advisors)
- Fostering signposting agencies (agencies who signpost foster carers to Fosterline)
- Foster carers
- Helplines Association (HA)
- Fostered children
- Ancillary services (such as website designers/hosts)
- Signposted agencies (general and specialist support services Fosterline signpost foster carers to).

In addition, LAs and wider communities and societies were considered to be interested stakeholders. From the literature review, foster carers, signposting agencies and funders were identified as key stakeholders in terms of improving children's social, educational and long-term outcomes. Given budgetary and time constraints, data collection focused on the identified key stakeholders of existing and prospective foster carers as users of Fosterline services. However, where possible, the perspectives of other identified stakeholders has been gathered from existing data, for example Fosterline reports and other published data (see stakeholder map Appendix A).

5. The evaluation team

Due to the time and budgetary constraints within the project, the evaluation team was small consisting of Dr. Carolyn Blackburn as Principal Investigator supported by Bharat Chauhan (Head of Department for Social Work), and Jas Bohagal (Research Administrative Officer) from the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University. In addition guidance and support was provided by Lindsey Lavender and Steve Stockley from Fosterline. The funders were not involved in the design of data collection tools or the interpretation of data in order to reduce any bias in the findings or conclusions. However, their expertise in supporting foster carers was fundamental to the validity and reliability of survey and interview questions. The strengths and experience brought collectively by the team to the evaluation included extensive research experience and experience of working with children who are fostered, foster carers and social workers as well as Local Authorities, charities and the DfE.

6. Survey

The main aim of the survey was to gather quantitative data on foster carers' motivation to foster, their preferred mode and frequency of contact with Fosterline, their experiences of contact with Fosterline, their evaluation of Fosterline services and the impact of the Fosterline independent advice and support service on their decision to either enter or stay in

foster care. A degree of qualitative data was also gathered in relation to foster carers' perceptions of Fosterline and any suggestions for improvement to the services they provide.

Three surveys were designed, tested and emailed to prospective and existing foster carers as well as signposting agencies. A total of 685 emails were successfully sent to current and prospective foster carers as well as 375 emails to signposting agencies informing them of the evaluation and inviting them to participate. There were 57 survey participants in total. Due to the proportionate number of responses, results for existing foster carers will be reported in percentages and prospective foster carers in whole numbers. The signposting agency survey was unsuccessful as explained in the results section.

For some questions, more than one answer could be given so not all numbers and percentages are equal to 100%. Demographic information is presented in appendices.

6.1 Results

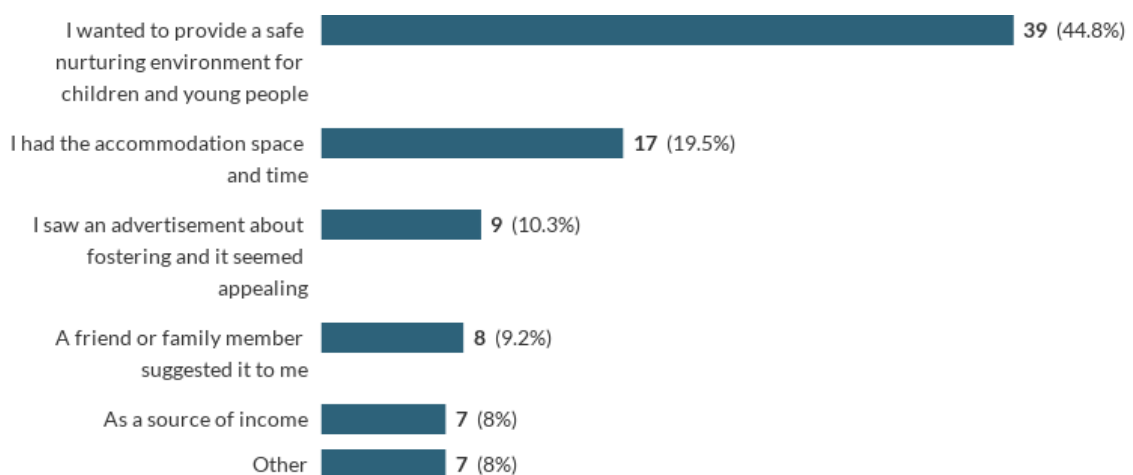
6.1.2 Results for existing foster carers

A total of 48 existing foster carers responded to the survey. Over half (54.2%) of these had a fostering contract with a Local Authority (LA) and the remaining 45.8% with an independent fostering agency (IFA). Demographic information for existing foster carers who participated in the survey can be found in Appendix B.

Motivation to foster for existing foster carers

Almost half (44.8%) of existing foster carers entered fostering in order to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children and young people. As can be seen from table 1, having the accommodation and space was also important to 19.5% of participants with a small number being influenced by factors such as seeing an advertisement, suggestions from friends or family or fostering being a source of income.

Table 1 Motivation to foster: existing foster carers



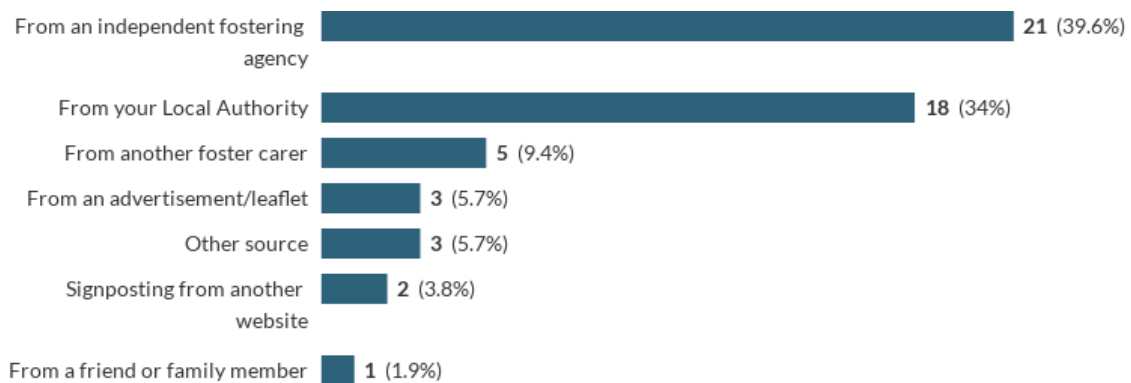
Reasons reported in the 'other' category included participants having been in the looked-after system themselves in childhood, personal experiences of the childcare profession motivating people to foster, foster carers being approached by social workers to provide emergency placement and previous adoption of a child providing the motivation to foster. For one

participant, her grandson was being placed in care which provided the motivation for her to foster.

Finding out about Fosterline for existing foster carers

The majority of participants had heard about Fosterline from their organising foster care provider. Over 9% had heard about Fosterline from other foster carers. Some had also seen advertisement/leaflets or been signposted from other websites. One had been signposted to Fosterline by family or friends as shown in table 2. Sources in the ‘other’ category included fostering membership organisations, social workers and foster care support groups.

Table 2: Finding out about Fosterline: existing foster carers



Just under half of participants (45.8%) said they were aware of other independent fostering helpline and support services, including:

- FosterTalk (fostering membership organisation)
- Fostering Network (fostering membership organisation)
- Fostering support groups
- British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
- Home for Good

Despite this, 70.8% of participants reported that they had not actually used any other independent advice and support services. Of those that had, only fostering membership organisations were mentioned.

Contacting Fosterline for existing foster carers

In terms of frequency of contact with Fosterline, 91.6% of participants had contacted Fosterline one to three times. Only 2.1 % had contacted Fosterline more than three times and 6.3% contacted them more than five times. The majority of contact was made by telephone (70%) with some contact by email (15%) and web inquiry form (10%). A small number of participants used online forums (3.3%) or voicemail (1.7%) to contact Fosterline. The most useful mode of contact was reported by participants to be the telephone helpline followed by email and web inquiry form.

The majority of participants stated they had never used the online forums for advice and support (77.1%). The reasons given for this mainly related to participants’ lack of confidence

with technology generally or online forums specifically. There was also the suggestion that when you have a problem, you need an intimate conversation with someone who understands your experiences and is able to provide immediate feedback, which is best achieved with a telephone call:

Our issues have been very specific and an advisor has in the past, and is now providing the support that we need. I don't find forums help unless it's a very generic query.

I needed urgent advice. I didn't have time to comb through others' experiences. And I didn't believe others had the same experience as I experienced.

Because fostering is complex, and there is so much paperwork already and most of it seems entirely inaccurate accounts of what happens in all the meetings. I wish to speak to someone in order to make clear what I am talking about. Fosterline Helpline has been the single most important service to me as a foster carer.

Some participants indicated that emails were most effective as this mode of communication allowed you to think deeply about what you wanted to say, allowing a helpline advisor to answer your query with a full response in their own time.

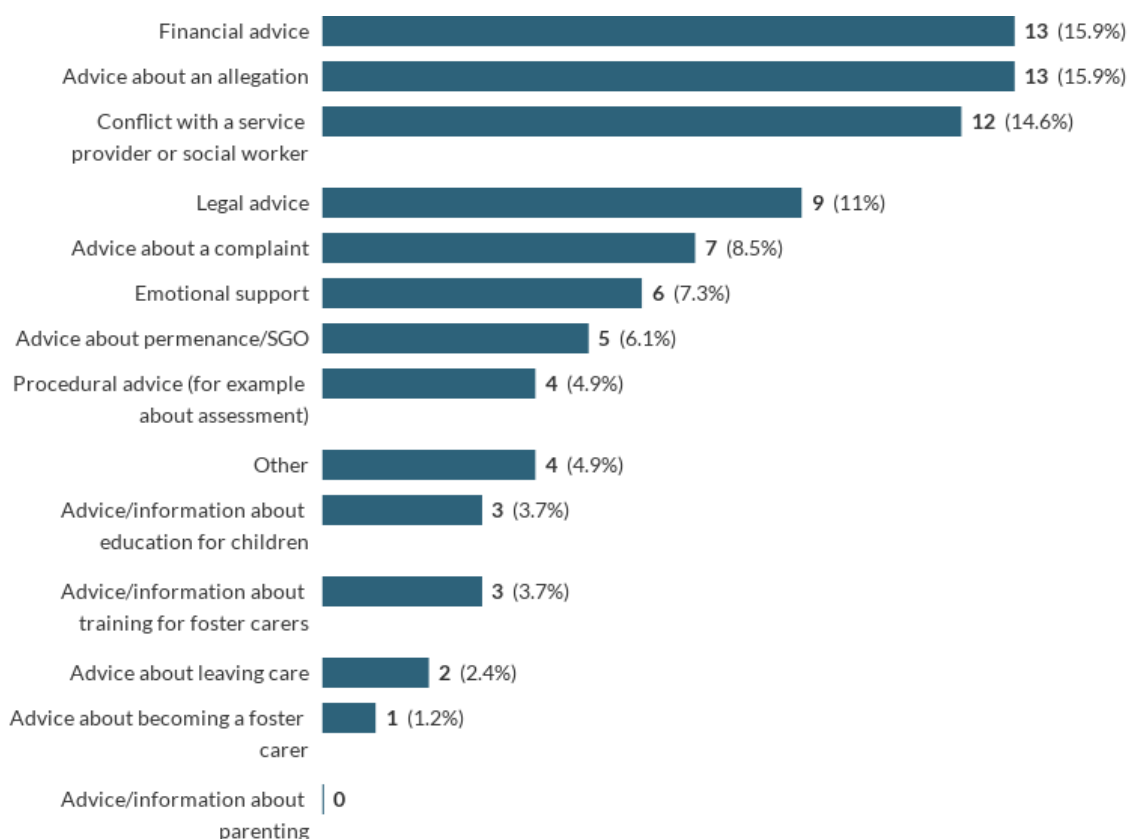
A number of participants expressed concern that online forums were not “private” enough for a discussion about sensitive issues and some were unaware of the existence of Fosterline’s online forums. One participant indicated that his lack of confidence was a “generation issue” suggesting that age might be a barrier. Another stated that they would experiment with the forums now that they were aware of them.

Where participants had contacted Fosterline more than once for the same issue, only 35.4% spoke to the same advisor on each occasion. Even so, 77.3% reported that the advice given was consistent and 85.4% reported that they were able to move the issue/concern forward.

Reasons for contacting Fosterline varied widely as shown in table 3. The main reasons related to foster carers seeking advice about financial concerns (15.9%), allegations (15.9%), conflict with social workers (14.6%), legal advice (11.0%), a complaint (8.5%) or emotional support (7.3%). Given the complex and sensitive nature of the issues being raised by foster carers and reported here, it is not surprising that telephone support was the preferred mode of contact by the majority of participants.

Reasons for contact in the ‘other’ category included advice about a gas safety check, how to work independently as a foster carer, allegations regarding ‘staying put’ arrangements and changes to contact details for siblings.

Table 3: Reasons for contacting Fosterline: existing foster carers

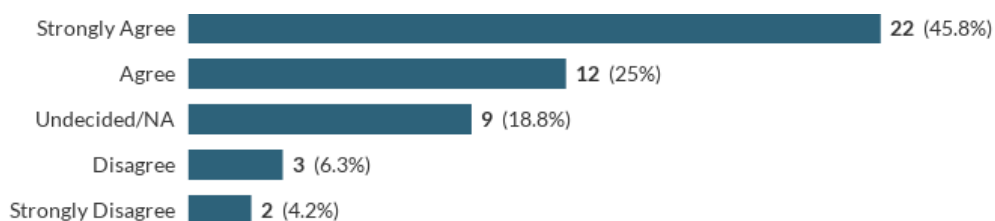


Effectiveness of Fosterline services for existing foster carers

Foster carers were asked to evaluate Fosterline services by indicating the extent to which they agreed with qualitative statements about them. Ranking options ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

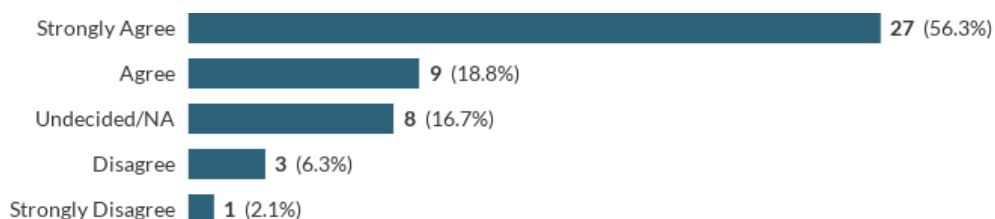
As shown in table 4, 70.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the advice and support they received from Fosterline was useful, whilst 18.8% were undecided and a small number disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 4: Whether the advice and support was useful: existing foster carers



A total of 75.1% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the helpline advisor was knowledgeable and helpful, with 16.7% undecided and a small number who disagreed or strongly disagreed as shown in table 5.

Table 5: Whether the helpline advisor was knowledgeable and helpful: existing foster carers



The majority (70.8%) of participants received information from Fosterline that enabled them to decide what to do next and 64.6% of foster carers agreed or strongly agreed that their problem was progressed after contacting Fosterline as shown in tables 6 and 7.

Table 6: Whether the information received helped foster carers decide what to do next: existing foster carers

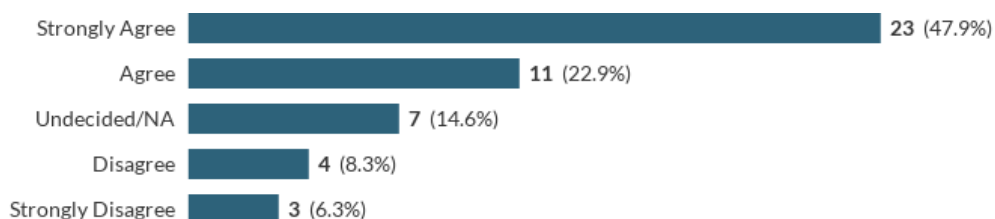
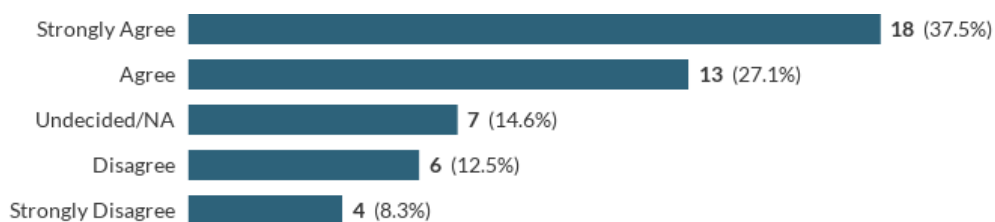
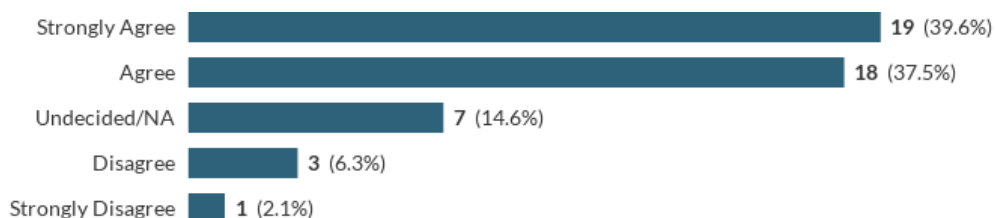


Table 7: Whether the problem was progressed after contacting Fosterline: existing foster carers



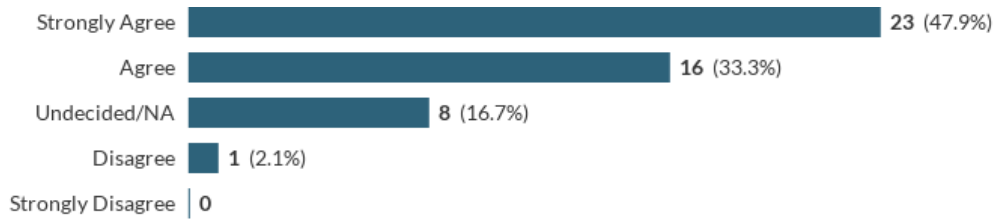
The majority (81.2%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that without Fosterline there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in England. Although 16.7% of participants were undecided on this issue, only 2.1% disagreed. In addition 77.1% agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline provides independent advice and support that is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England with 14.6% undecided and a small number who disagreed or strongly disagreed as shown in table 8.

Table 8: Fosterline is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England: existing foster carers



In addition, 81.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline is an independent organisation enhancing support available to foster carers from their fostering service providers as shown in table 9. Whilst 16.7% were undecided on this, only a small number disagreed.

Table 9: Fosterline in an independent organisation that enhances support to foster carers: existing foster carers



In the absence of Fosterline services, a wide variety of possible alternative sources of support were suggested by foster carers. Although some of these were fostering membership organisations, many were general advice services more suited to providing consumer advice on a wide range of topics than specialist advice to foster carers. In addition they were not necessarily independent and therefore impartial. These are shown in figure 1. Since some participants reported more than one source of support and some reported none, frequencies are reported.

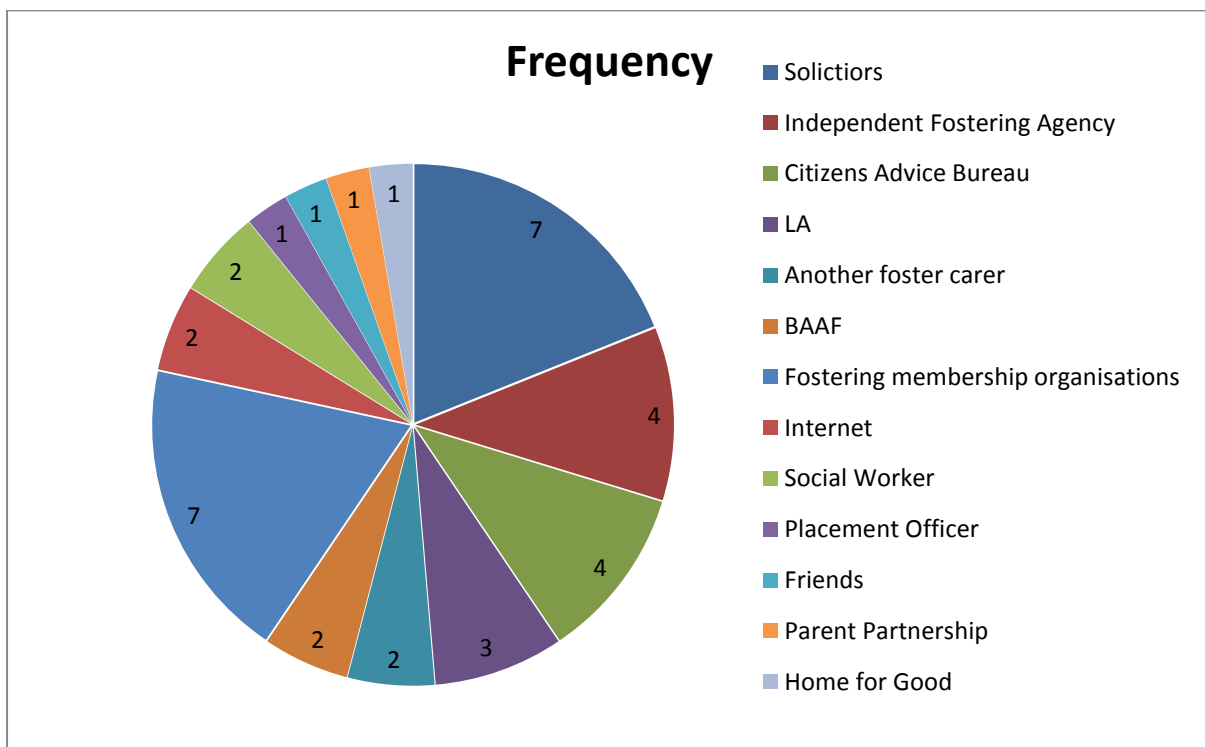


Figure 1: Alternative sources of independent advice and support reported by existing foster carers

However, 15 participants stated they did not know what they would have done had Fosterline not been available to them, demonstrating that when there are stressful and complex problems, specialist, independent advice is needed as exemplified by these statements:

Without Fosterline there would be no future for a foster carer because it is the only service that supports the foster carer to find their way through the complexities that have been created in the foster care business!

Foster care is a role like no other, it is incredibly stressful and other people cannot provide the unique support we sometimes need. But Fosterline does provide that support and it is a life line when we need it.

The participant above stated her disappointment in relation to the treatment of foster carers by LAs and IFAs which she expressed in quite strong terms, highlighting the difficult and complex nature of the support needed by foster carers.

Impact of contacting Fosterline on decision to stay in foster care

Before contacting Fosterline 33.3% of participants were considering leaving foster care. The reasons for this were not explored due to time and cost constraints. Of the 33.3%, 68.75% (22.9% of all 48 participants) stated that they decided to continue as a foster carer after contacting Fosterline. In addition, 66.7% of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that after contacting Fosterline they felt valued and supported as a foster carer and 58.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more empowered as a foster carer after contacting Fosterline. Furthermore, 60.5% of all participants decided to continue with their foster care career after contacting Fosterline and 50.0% agreed or strongly agreed that contact with Fosterline was an influencing factor in this as shown in tables 10, 11, 12 and 13.

Table 10: Foster carers feel valued and supported after contacting Fosterline: existing foster carers

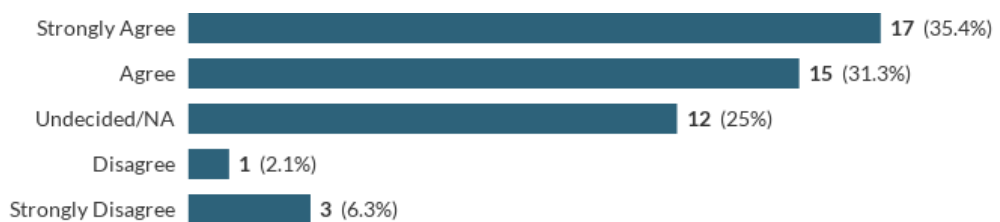


Table 11: Foster carers feel empowered after contacting Fosterline: existing foster carers

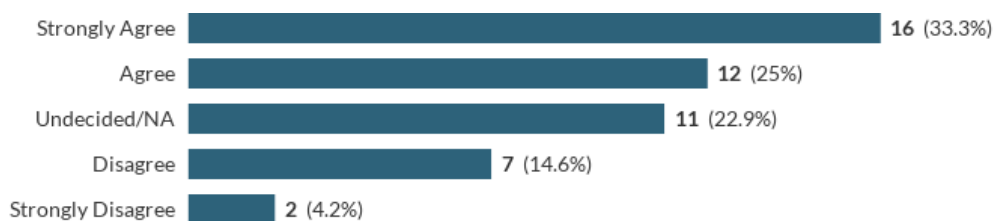


Table 12: Foster carers decided to continue as a foster carer after contacting Fosterline: existing foster carers

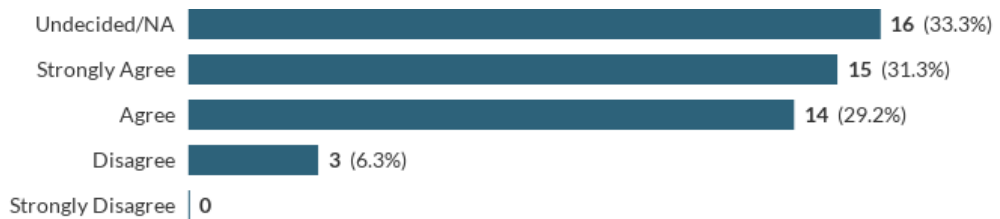
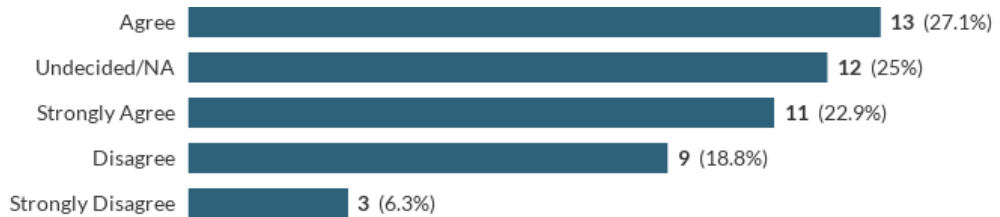


Table 13: Contact with Fosterline encouraged me to stay in foster care: existing foster carers



After contacting Fosterline 38.9% of participants contacted other services that were signposted by Fosterline. This included the education department of the LA, a Solicitor, financial services organisations, HMRC and fostering membership organisations. In addition 21.9% of participants contacted another service not signposted by Fosterline including the LA, the Tax Office, fostering membership organisations and their independent fostering service provider. Reasons given for contacting other services related to complaints about LAs and complaints about and conflicts with social workers:

I took further action and brought a complaint against the LA social worker, which my IFA did not support. My complaint against the LA Children's Services social worker is now with the Local Government Ombudsman. The IFA has asked us to resign but we did nothing wrong. But we are glad that we brought our complaint because there is too much corrupt practice in our IFA. The foster carer has no support. Only Fosterline.

Participants' perceptions on the best thing about Fosterline are shown in figure 2 organised in themes of staff, advice and services.

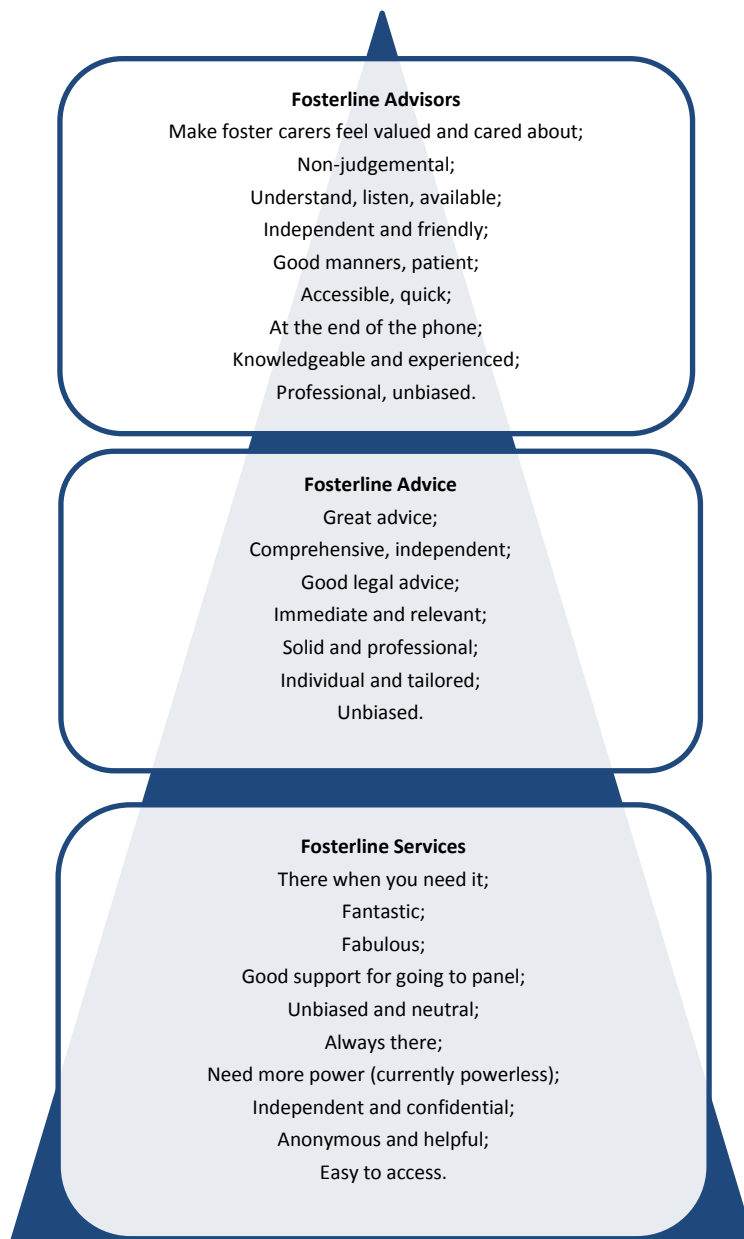


Figure 2: The best thing about Fosterline reported by existing foster carers

In terms of possible improvements to Fosterline services, the following suggestions were made by participants:

- Develop legislative powers, the ability to intervene on behalf of foster carers and the provision of an independent service to undertake investigations and attend difficult meetings as representatives of foster carers for example in allegation situations (suggested by seven participants);

Suggested by one participant each:

- Ensure that information and advice given is always up-to-date and accurate;
- Employ more staff;
- Ensure that people know about the full range of services offered and advertise more;
- Provide peer-to-peer support for foster carers that is independent of LAs and IFAs;
- Provide consistency of helpline advisor throughout a problem;
- Provide advice for IFAs on how to undertake an investigation;
- Provide more frequent newsletters;
- Follow-up callers' problems to see if they have been resolved;
- Campaign more on behalf of foster carers in order to change working conditions;
- Provide more practical support rather than being an information service.

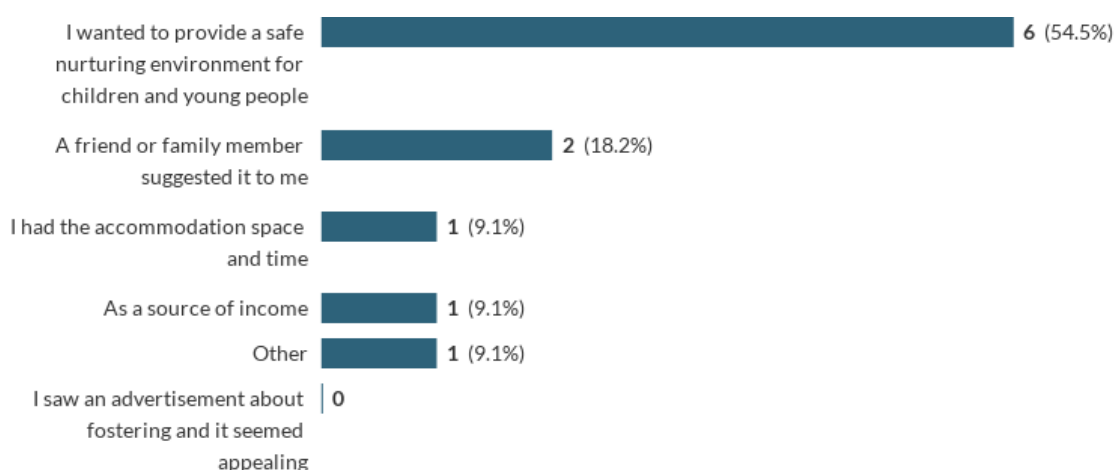
6.1.3 Results for prospective foster carers

Seven prospective foster carers responded to the survey. Four of these were applying or had applied for assessment with an LA and one was applying or had applied for assessment with an IFA. The remaining two had not applied for assessment. The demographic profile for prospective foster carer participants can be found in Appendix C.

Motivation to foster for prospective foster carers

The primary motivation to enter foster care for prospective foster carers was the desire to provide a safe, nurturing environment for children and young people (reported by six participants). In addition, two participants reported that a friend or family member suggested fostering to them and two stated that having the space and accommodation and needing a source of income were motivating factors.

Table 14: Motivation to foster: prospective foster carers



Finding out about Fosterline for prospective foster carers

Three participants had been signposted to Fosterline from another website, two had heard about Fosterline from another foster carer and one each had heard about Fosterline from a friend or family member and also had read about Fosterline in an advertisement/leaflet. Only

one participant had heard of or contacted any other independent fostering helpline and support services, which they stated was only available to them once they had been registered.

Contacting Fosterline for prospective foster carers

Six participants had contacted Fosterline one to three times during the last 18 months, whilst the remaining participant had contacted them more than three times. The primary mode of contact was the telephone helpline (six participants), although one person had also used the web inquiry form and one the email service. This was reflected in participant rating of most and least useful services, with the telephone helpline scoring as most useful and the forums scoring as least useful. The reasons stated for telephone preference related to preferring telephones as a mode of communication, the ability to explain problems in detail by telephone and the ability to receive advice instantly.

Despite this, three participants had used the online forums. For the other four, the reasons for not using them were that they were unaware of their existence, unsure how to use them due to inexperience of using this mode of communication or people just preferred to speak with a helpline advisor on the telephone. One participant suggested that the facility to have a “live chat” might encourage people to use the online forums.

The stated reasons for contacting Fosterline for all seven participants was advice about becoming a foster carer, followed by additional procedural advice for two, financial advice, legal advice, advice about a complaint, emotional support and advice about education for children for one participant each.

Where participants had contacted Fosterline more than once for the same issue, not all participants spoke to the same helpline advisor on each occasion. Most of them were able to progress the issue satisfactorily and the advice received was considered to be consistent. All participants stated the helpline advisor understood their foster care concerns/issues and provided relevant and useful advice and support.

Impact of contact with Fosterline on decision to be assessed as a foster carer

After contacting Fosterline, three out of seven prospective foster carers progressed their application to the next stage, but adjusted their plans (for example changed the age range of child). Of the remaining participants, three were still undecided about what to do next and one had decided that fostering was not right for her. Three participants had contacted other support services following their contact with Fosterline, one of which was signposted by Fosterline. These were not named. Three participants also contacted their LA or IFA for more advice following contact with Fosterline.

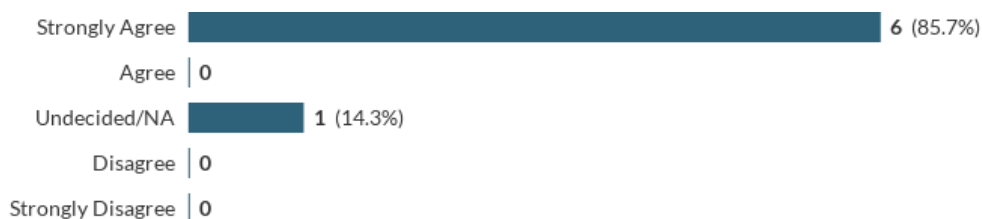
Three participants strongly agreed that Fosterline encouraged them to continue with their application to be assessed as a foster carer.

Effectiveness of Fosterline services for prospective foster carers

Prospective foster carers were asked to evaluate Fosterline services by indicating the extent to which they agreed with qualitative statements about them. Ranking ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

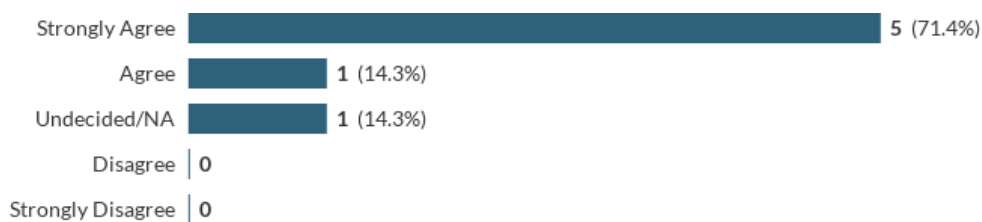
Whilst six participants strongly agreed that the advice and support they received from Fosterline was useful, one was undecided on this issue as shown in table 15.

Table 15: Whether the information and advice was useful: prospective foster carers



Six agreed or strongly agreed that the helpline advisor was knowledgeable and helpful, one was undecided as shown in table 16. Six participants confirmed that the information and advice they received helped them to decide what to do next, whilst one disagreed with this statement. Where contact with Fosterline related to a problem, five participants agreed or strongly agreed that contact with Fosterline helped them to progress their problem, with one participant undecided and one who disagreed with this statement.

Table 16: Whether the helpline advisor was knowledgeable and helpful: prospective foster carers



In the absence of Fosterline services, two participants said they would have turned to their LA for help. One said she would have searched on the internet for support services, whilst another said that Fosterline was the only impartial service available to her at the time she needed help. Six participants agreed or strongly agreed that without Fosterline there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in England, with the other undecided about this statement. In addition, six participants agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline services are crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England. Five participants agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline is an independent organisation enhancing support available from their fostering service providers, with two undecided about this statement.

The best thing about Fosterline was reported to be a “quick response” with “immediate telephone support” when needed and the “friendliness of competent staff”. It was thought that Fosterline could improve their advertising in order to increase public awareness of their services.

6.1.4 Signposting agencies

Only two responses from signposting agencies were received. Both of these were from one LA in London and the nature of the responses suggested that the participants were foster carers rather than IFAs or LAs. Therefore, these responses have not been reported in this

evaluation. Future consideration could be given by Fosterline as to how to elicit the views and perspectives of signposting agencies on the services they offer.

7. Interviews

The purpose of interviews was to provide in-depth qualitative data on foster carers' experiences of contact with Fosterline, their perceptions on the effectiveness of the service and impact of it on their foster caring role. The aim was not to compare experiences of foster carers, but to analyse the interview data thematically to address the evaluation questions.

The intention was to conduct interviews with a maximal variation sample of foster carers including existing and prospective foster carers. Of the 55 participants to the survey, 25 left contact details and expressed an interest in participating in an interview. All 25 were contacted by telephone or email, of which 12 responded and participated in an interview.

7.1 Results

As stated above, 12 foster carers participated in a semi-structured interview that involved 10 questions related to motivation to foster, challenges in fostering, contact with and impact of contact with Fosterline and other agencies, foster carers' goals and hopes for children and their perceived role in children's goals and hopes. Demographic details for the sample are shown in Appendix D and two detailed case study exemplars of foster carers' experiences are shown in Appendix E and F. Between them the participants had over 130 years of fostering experience and had fostered over 90 children as well as providing respite care to many more. Two were prospective foster carers and the remaining were existing foster carers. Of the two prospective foster carers, one had been assessed and was awaiting the outcome, whilst the other had discovered that her living accommodation was not suitable for fostering and had therefore not progressed her application.

Themes from the interview data have been organised in line with questions from the interview schedule.

Motivation to foster

Reported motivation to foster were varied and related to foster carers' personal experiences. For example for three participants, motivation was associated with an existing career in childcare or education. Some wanted to find a home-based career that would work with existing family commitments, whilst others were motivated by family situations, childhood experiences, a love of children or having the space and time that prompted an interest in fostering.

For existing foster carers, motivation included:

I was a teacher and wanted to improve things for children.. there was a lot of TV advertising about fostering at the time.

I was approached by a social worker for an emergency placement.. I like young people.

My wife was in childcare, so it seemed natural.. we have the space.

A life-changing experience caused us to re-think our life and friends recommended we tried fostering.

I wanted a home-based childcare job to fit around my family and was interested in social work... I like fostering.

My grandson was going to be taken into care.. we decided to foster at that point and discovered we liked it.

I wanted to give something back to looked-after children.

I wanted to help children and make a positive impression on their lives.

I had a baby at the age of 15 and I wasn't supported, then ended up in an abusive marriage. I wanted to improve things for babies and children.

For prospective foster carers:

I always wanted my own children, but it didn't happen, I wanted to provide care for children from my home base.

I was a childminder already, I like giving children a comfortable safe environment.

Challenges faced by foster carers

Challenges faced by existing foster carers included difficulties in communication with social workers reported by four participants and difficulties in communication with LAs/IFAs reported by two. Lack of effective communication between professionals was a concern raised by one participant who felt that this resulted in children and families receiving unsatisfactory care.

There is a disconnection between professionals, they don't communicate well and sometimes children don't get the help that they could. Children come to us with little information about them. We didn't know that the mother [with baby] we provided care for had been addicted to crack and the mother had tried to kill herself. We only found out at a review meeting. This was because of lack of effective communication between the mother's social worker and the baby's social worker. Also the focus seemed to be in finding a new home for the baby rather than keeping mother and baby together... the mother needed guidance, she'd been in care since she was 14 years old.

One participant felt that social workers lacked the skills to personalise their approaches to supporting children, treating them as a homogenous group without individual needs and personalities. He stressed the high professional status that social workers appeared to award to themselves and felt that “it is how you conduct yourself that makes you a professional, not your job title.” This was corroborated by another participant who felt that managers in agencies and LAs had more in common with each other than they did with foster carers or children. Also mentioned was a perceived “tick-box” approach to dealing with foster carers that had been adopted by professionals with one participant stressing that “you cannot render the complexities of human behaviour within the context of box ticking.” This comment related to reports of social workers communicating with foster carers in a regimented procedural manner that resulted in foster carers perceiving them as being unapproachable. One participant described the culture of social work as one of “bullying.” Another said that being involved in an allegation was the worst life experience she had been through.

There were also suggestions that keeping up with training and fostering trends, seeing yourself as a professional, being valued by agencies and social workers and not being part of the decision making process had been problematic. For one single foster parent this was related to the lack of available childcare facilities to enable her to attend training. Two participants said children's challenging behaviour could be difficult to cope with. One participant felt the most significant challenge was the need to place children in the right context so that they were comfortable with their immediate surroundings. A number of participants emphasised that the main challenges were related to social workers, LAs and IFAs rather than concerns over how to effectively support children. One participant illustrated this by saying their social worker had changed six times in five years and that sometimes the difficulties in dealing with managers of agencies were so extreme that they were unmanageable.

Prospective foster carers thought that challenges they might face would include difficulties with and bureaucracy in relation to social workers, lack of support, children's challenging behaviour and not knowing enough about children before they were placed in their care. One prospective foster carer felt the policies and procedures involved in being assessed for fostering was a barrier to fostering.

Mode of and reason for contact

The mode of contact was by telephone in all cases, with additional use of the website by one participant.

Reasons for contacting Fosterline rather than their supervising social worker, LA or IFA by existing foster carers mainly related to a perceived need to receive independent advice. This was because the issue they contacted Fosterline about was related to their LA or social worker for two participants or because they had already contacted these organisations in five cases and had been advised by them to contact Fosterline. One participant felt that their social worker was inexperienced and he needed to talk to someone who was knowledgeable, whilst another said “I needed to talk to someone who was on my side.” One participant felt that professionals had become institutionalised to the extent that they seemed out of touch with foster carers’ concerns or issues and therefore could not be trusted to receive information in a way that was helpful.

Prospective foster carers felt that Fosterline could provide them with independent advice about the type of fostering contract that would be most suitable with one saying she had searched the internet and could only find information that related to fostering abroad. The other said she had only wanted to foster babies and wanted independent advice about the feasibility of doing so.

Support given by Fosterline

For existing foster carers the support given by Fosterline related to an allegation or an investigation for four participants each. Other participants reported support related to payments, difficulties with the LA, financial issues and a dispute over a reported transgression of the rules. For prospective foster carers support related to “helping me to learn what fostering involves” and providing information about fostering a particular age group.

The impact of Fosterline on decision to enter or stay in fostering

For existing foster carers, the impact of Fosterline on their decision to continue with fostering ranged from none at all reported by two participants to having “a strong influence” reported by three. For one participant, more practical support was needed that went beyond what Fosterline could offer and in the absence of this, they have decided not to foster again. The following comments exemplify the impact of Fosterline reported by three participants:

Contact with Fosterline made the job more financially viable and we were able to obtain financial assistance for other foster carers in the area as a result of advice from Fosterline.

They [Fosterline] kept me sane.. the message they sent me was we’re here for you.

I knew where to go, which reports I had to write.. I won my case with the help of Fosterline, despite there being 15 people on the panel.. I knew I was good at my job, I love my job and Fosterline helped me to see that.

For others the impact of contact with Fosterline was reported as being useful as part of a support package from a range of sources; helping with the decision to foster older children; helping to de-stigmatise a very sensitive situation and “it has been useful to talk to someone that understands the concerns from a foster carers perspective” for one participant each.

For prospective foster carers, the impact of contacting Fosterline had a very positive effect for one participant who said “they [Fosterline] were very positive and encouraging which made me keen to continue” whilst for the other her lack of a spare bedroom meant that she was unable to continue with her application.

Support received from other agencies for existing foster carers was none for five, fostering membership organisations for two and one participant mentioned family and friends had been an enormous source of support. Two participants stated that local foster carer support groups, whilst being mandatory attendance, were of little value in difficult situations when the advice and support from Fosterline had been invaluable. For prospective foster carers, both participants reported they had contacted other agencies who were either unhelpful or did not respond at all.

Goals and hopes for children in foster care

Both existing and prospective foster carers shared very similar goals and hopes for children in foster care that could be categorised as short-term goals and hopes related to children’s immediate needs and long-term goals and hopes that were related to their well-being and future outcomes.

For existing foster carers, the following short-term aspirations for children were mentioned.

Short term goals and hopes:

- To be happy, confident, secure and to achieve, not bound by academic rules but in terms of where children stand;
- To not be stressed;
- To have social involvement;
- To have nothing to worry about when they sleep at night;
- To have a worthwhile education;
- To have good manners;
- To have acceptance from others of who they are;
- To have reassurance;
- To have secure attachments;
- To be valued;

- To have normality;
- To be able to have family holidays and the equipment that other babies have;
- To have self-worth.

Long-term goals and hopes:

- To break the intergenerational cycle of being in foster care;
- To be able to set their own goals;
- To grow up and succeed in life;
- To find the right way to do things for the future;
- To have skills for life;
- To reach their potential;
- To be able to live their own lives to the best of their ability;
- To have long-term foster care and consistency and continuity in social workers and foster care parents;
- To have families and be good parents.

For prospective foster carers short-term goals and hopes were described as children feeling a sense of belonging and settled and for them to have stability. In addition there was the hope that they would develop confidence in their own self-worth. In the longer term prospective foster carers hoped that children would find a permanent family placement, have as normal a life as possible and have the life they want to live and not be limited by adverse early experiences and having been in care.

The foster carer's role in meeting goals and hopes for children

Existing foster carers described their role in helping children to achieve their goals and hopes in the following terms:

- To help them achieve;
- To respond to their needs;
- To stay up-to-date with training and legislation;
- To improve through and learn from experience with children;
- To keep everything in perspective and focus on positive aspects of relationships and behaviour;
- To facilitate positive and long-term relationships;

- To provide acceptance and understanding;
- To equip children with values and skills;
- To be a constant parent and be available when things go wrong in children’s lives;
- To listen, provide direction, engender trust and to demonstrate how good life can be;
- To provide children with a sense of belonging and self-worth;
- To see them safely back through the door at night;
- To ensure that their aspirations about life are realistic;
- To give them a better life;
- To provide unconditional love and the foundations for trust over time.

One participant commented on the way in which foster care had changed. Whereas previously fostering had been perceived as a caring role for children, currently there was an expectation for foster carers to be extremely skilled and knowledgeable in the areas of trauma, attachment and professionalism. For prospective foster parents, the foster carer’s role was perceived to be in providing stability for children and supporting emotional issues by providing an “emotional foundation.”

Fosterline’s role in helping with the fostering role

Comments about Fosterline’s role in supporting foster carers are reported below under the themes of what Fosterline currently do well and future enhancements to their service that foster carers felt would make their role easier.

For both existing and prospective foster carers, Fosterline currently provides a service that is “impartial and invaluable” to the extent that one prospective foster carer could not see how foster carers could operate without this service. The positive attitude of helpline advisors was commented on as well as their up-to-date knowledge. A number of existing foster carers valued the re-assurance they had received from Fosterline that their problem could be overcome, would not result in long-term stigmatisation for them or the children they fostered and that someone could and would help them – that they were not alone. This gave them a sense of feeling listened to, valued, empowered and being in control. This was especially true in crisis situations such as allegations when Fosterline was the only service that was re-assuring to the extent that one participant said “they reminded me that I am good enough to do this job.”

One participant emphasised how difficult it could sometimes be to place a call to a helpline and discuss your problems to the extent that it sometimes felt as if she was betraying a child in doing so. The importance of receiving an instant reply to her call and an empathetic impartial response such as that provided by Fosterline was stressed. Another was grateful for the support of Fosterline in helping her to “work safely within the system” in terms of maintaining accurate records, describing Fosterline as “an invaluable service.” A number of

participants stressed that it was difficult to talk to family or friends about their fostering concerns especially when there were allegations and that having Fosterline available as a service that understood the concerns of foster carers was crucial.

In terms of enhancements, one prospective foster carer felt there was currently too much bureaucracy involved in fostering and wanted Fosterline to “be a voice” for foster carers in reducing that. This resonated with one existing foster carer who stated that foster carers needed “a new deal” in terms of more flexible self-employment that allowed them to register with a number of agencies. She felt that Fosterline could utilise their knowledge about fostering to advocate for foster carers’ rights in this regard. Another existing foster carer who had decided to leave fostering wanted Fosterline to have a more significant influence on policy at a higher level. Although she felt the service they currently provide was good, she would like them to operate at a higher level to influence change within the fostering system where she feels that social workers currently have “too much power” that is not necessarily used most effectively for children’s benefit.

Other enhancements suggested by existing foster carers included increased promotion of Fosterline’s services so that people know how useful they can be and providing periodic gatherings/meetings for members of fostering membership organisations to share experiences. One participant wanted Fosterline to gain legislative powers, to be able to attend panel meetings and to have a more significant advocacy role especially where there are allegations. Another wanted Fosterline to play a leading role in increasing the number of available foster carers.

8. Social return on investment

The full calculation for SROI is provided in Appendix H. In summary, Fosterline provides a very low cost early intervention service with many potential fiscal and social benefits. An indicative SROI for Fosterline services would be 1:199. However, this is based on very limited indicators and a very small sample size of participants and it is strongly recommended that further work is done to identify an accurate return on investment using a wider range of indicators and more reliable statistics.

9. Discussion

The sample of participants from survey (55 foster carers) and participants in interview (12 foster carers) in this evaluation was relatively small given that there were 42,490 fostering households in England in 2014 (OFSTED, 2015). Nevertheless, the sample in both cases included participants from across England and from a sufficiently broad demographic profile as well as a range of fostering experiences.

The literature review shows the number of children entering foster care is increasing and there is currently a need for more well-trained foster carers to support them. The literature also suggests that key to the recruitment and retention of skilled, knowledgeable, empathetic foster carers is effective and timely support that focuses on reducing the stress of caring for children with challenging behaviour and at risk of poor social, educational and long-term

outcomes. By contrast, participants in this evaluation reported that the main challenges for them in their fostering role related to communication and relationships with LAs, IFAs and social workers as well as the communication between them.

In line with the literature review foster carers are motivated to foster by intrinsic and altruistic drivers such as a desire to improve children's well-being and long-term outcomes as well as more practical drivers related to their own accommodation and financial resources. Some are motivated by personal life experiences and prior professional experiences, which might provide some insight as to particular groups of the population who could potentially be recruited as foster carers such as teachers, police officers, and individuals who have experienced care personally. Foster carers' aspirations for children are concerned with children's immediate social and emotional development as well as long-term social, educational and long-term success. The participants' perceived role in children's aspirations is to provide a secure base, boundaries, love and encouragement.

The majority of existing and prospective foster carers who participated in this evaluation preferred to contact Fosterline by telephone in order to obtain an immediate, private and in-depth response to complex concerns. Some foster carers also found the website useful. The range of concerns that foster carers contact Fosterline for is wide and varied, but many are complex and sensitive and require knowledgeable, attuned helpline advisors who can listen and de-stigmatise foster carers concerns.

Fosterline's role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers as reported by participants in this evaluation is to provide impartial and independent advice about a range of sensitive concerns and issues when foster carers feel they have no-one else to turn to. Sometimes when they contact Fosterline they are at crisis point in terms of their fostering career and in terms of their emotional resilience to cope with the situation. Fosterline responds by listening, encouraging, empowering and valuing foster carers perspectives and concerns in a way that enables them to act on the advice and support given.

The need and demand for Fosterline services is clearly demonstrated through analysis of the survey and interview data. For example 70.8% of existing and 85.7% of prospective foster carers received information and advice from Fosterline that enabled them to decide what to do next. In addition 81.2% of existing and 71.4% of prospective foster carers agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline is an independent advice and support service that enhances the support available to foster carers and is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers as reported by 77.1% of existing and 85.7% of prospective foster carers.

The impact and difference made to foster carers as a result of Fosterline intervention is highlighted by survey responses with 66.7% of existing foster carers reporting that they felt valued and supported after contacting Fosterline. Qualitative data from interviews highlighted that the influence of Fosterline in improving foster carers motivation to continue fostering is important. However, it is only one factor of many that could make a difference and as such Fosterline's ability to influence foster carers motivation is contingent upon foster carers feeling valued by social workers, LAs and IFAs and this is an area where both social work, LA and IFA practice needs to change.

The way in which Fosterline could continue to play a fundamental role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers in the future is by continuing to provide a responsive, attuned advice and support service that is staffed by well-informed helpline advisors who understand foster carers' work, views and perspectives as well as the legislation that underpins this. In addition a number of enhancements to the services that Fosterline provides have been suggested from survey and interview data and are highlighted below under implications for Fosterline practice.

10. Implications for policy

Implications for policy arising from this independent evaluation relate to the way in which fostering is currently organised in terms of foster carers' relationship with social workers, LAs and IFAs. Government can take a leading role in improving working conditions for foster carers. Immediate concerns relate to the way in which foster carers are treated in allegation and conflict situations, their ability to register with more than one agency and the provision of childcare facilities for single foster carers to attend important training. The need for provision of funding for the services of Fosterline as an independent advice and support service is demonstrated in this evaluation. Foster carers' reports of serious situations such as allegations suggests that such situations make them feel isolated, especially when social workers, LAs and IFAs do not communicate with them or each other in a way that foster carers find helpful. This has the potential over time to impact on the motivation of individuals to enter or stay in fostering and foster carers have called for a "new deal" in terms of working conditions and advocacy. Perhaps a 'Team around the Foster Carer' approach might be helpful that operates in a similar way to the Team around the Child approach for children and young people, with the team providing the independent, impartial advice and support described by participants in this evaluation from Fosterline. In such an approach, foster carers would need to be treated as equal professionals to social workers and professionals from LAs and IFAs with Fosterline providing advice and support to foster carers as well as advocating for their rights and advising Government on legislative frameworks and working practices as shown in figure 3.

Further considerations for Government relate to the collection and analysis of statistical data about the recruitment and retention of foster carers and alternative types of placement for children in the looked-after system that would enable a comprehensive calculation of social value and return on investment for early intervention services such as those provided by Fosterline. In addition, long-term and sustained funding for Fosterline services would enable them to plan long-term and plan for suggested enhancements and engagement initiatives to meet some of the suggestions identified in this evaluation. Future evaluations of early intervention services would ideally provide a longer timescale and suitable funding and budget considerations.

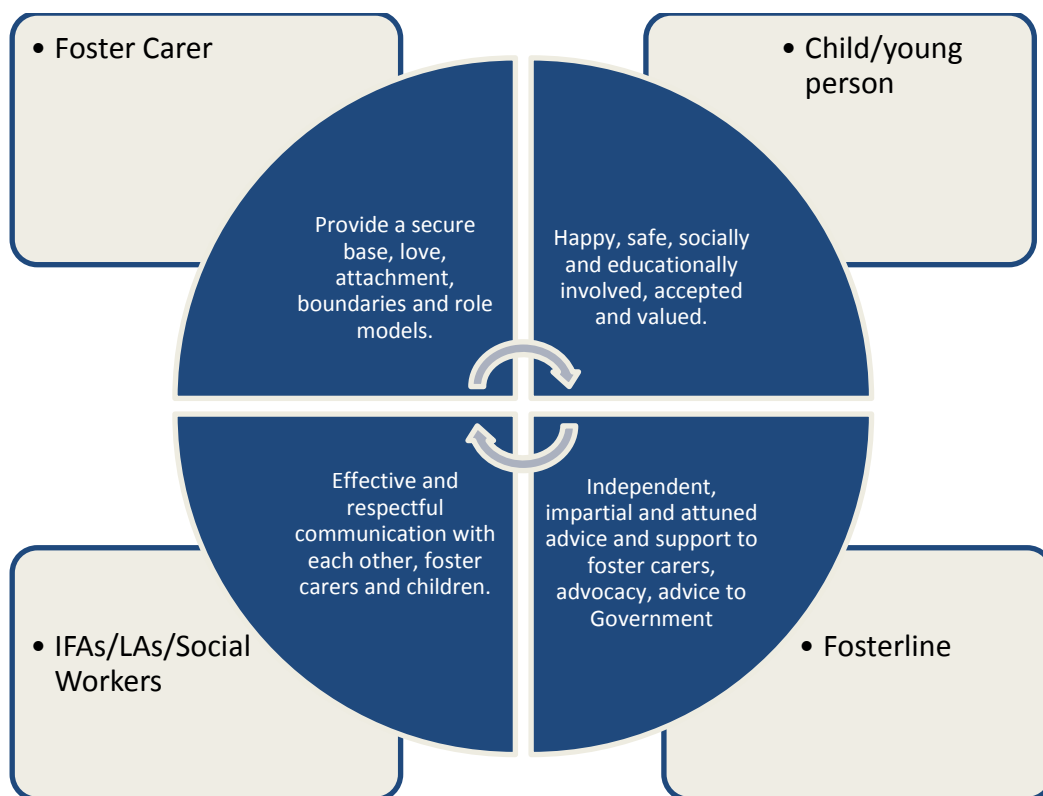


Figure 3: Team around the foster carer approach

11. Implications for interdisciplinary practice

Implications for interdisciplinary practice relate to the manner in which professionals in social work, LAs and IFAs communicate with each other and with foster carers. Currently foster carers report these factors as the most challenging issues in their role and this has the potential over time to influence foster carers' decisions to enter or stay in fostering.

12. Implications for Fosterline's practice

Recommendations from participants for Fosterline's practice include:

- Helping to reduce bureaucracy faced by foster carers in dealing with social workers, LAs and IFAs by providing guidance and clarity;
- Obtaining legislative powers in order to advocate for foster carers at meetings and reviews;
- Providing an advisory service to IFAs and LAs on how to undertake investigations would also be welcome;
- Other significant suggestions were for Fosterline to employ more staff (although it was not stated why this was perceived to be needed), ensure that one helpline advisor guides a foster carer through a problem, increased promotion of Fosterline services, facilitate peer-to-peer support, provide newsletters more frequently (although it was not stated how

regular these should be) and follow-up of foster carers' concerns to ensure they have been resolved.

In addition, it would seem beneficial for Fosterline to have a presence in training for social workers, LAs and IFAs in relation to foster carer assessment.

It should be stressed that not all of these recommendations are practical or desirable. For example providing legislative powers to Fosterline would remove the impartial and independent characteristic of the service that foster carers have rated so highly in this evaluation. In addition, providing consistency of helpline advisor might prove impractical given the working patterns of helpline advisors and the need for flexibility of staff to enable the service to be delivered at such a low cost as shown in the SROI in Appendix H. The purpose and function of a helpline also needs to be considered and as already suggested in the literature review, there are practical limitations as to what can realistically be achieved. At the same time, evidence from participants in this evaluation suggests that considerable advice, support and reassurance is achievable and this is a particular strength of the Fosterline helpline service. The context of Fosterline's services must necessarily be impartial and independent with a reporting and formal representation function to the DfE.

A number of engagement initiatives have been suggested from the literature, including:

- Designing models for selecting, training, supervising and quality-assuring foster carers and fostering staff in such a way that the quality of care is enhanced;
- Providing consultancy and advice to the DfE as an independent body involved in the support of prospective and existing foster carers;
- Fosterline could ensure that they are equipped to signpost foster carers to organisations that provide training and advice for foster carers as well as making links with general and specialist inclusion and disability agencies;
- Provision to prospective and existing foster carers of effective, timely and appropriate support in order to ensure recruitment and retention of foster carers. Lack of information and understanding about fostering in the general population is also a key issue and Fosterline could be involved in raising awareness through social media campaigns and its interactive website.
- Given the significant percentage of existing foster carers (86%) reporting high levels of satisfaction with services provided by Fosterline in their annual report (Fosterline, 2014), they are ideally placed to promote the retention of existing foster carers by providing opportunities for training and peer to peer support;
- Fosterline could consider also having a presence on bebo in line with other helplines in order to increase reach and impact.

13. Future development and research opportunities

A number of areas for future research and development demand consideration following this evaluation, including:

- A number of foster carers indicated they were considering leaving foster care before contacting Fosterline. Future research could usefully explore the reasons for this as well as exploring where foster carers go for independent advice and support at times of crisis and how effective they are in retaining foster carers.
- A more comprehensive and detailed evaluation of Fosterline's advice and support services including a full SROI would help to identify the full benefits to a wider group of stakeholders involved in Fosterline's early intervention service. This would ideally include a much larger sample of prospective and existing foster carers as well as signposting agencies.
- A study into more effective, collaborative and democratic ways for social workers, LAs and IFAs to communicate and work with foster carers.
- A feasibility study into the possibility of the provision of fostering advice and support services to other countries, including neighbouring home countries such as Wales and Scotland as well as international countries using the successful model currently provided by Fosterline.

14. Conclusion

This independent evaluation has drawn together findings from a brief literature review, a survey of prospective and existing foster carers and interviews with a sample of them. It represents a significant amount of work within a brief timescale with an extremely limited budget. This has placed limitations on the inclusion of a more statistically reliable sample size and exploring wider factors that would have enabled a thorough SROI to be undertaken. However, an indicative return on investment has been provided.

The findings show there is a clear need for an independent, impartial advice and support service to enhance the services offered by LAs and IFAs to foster carers and assist government in the important role of the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Provision of long-term funding for the services that Fosterline offer so competently will enable them to plan for enhancements and developments to their core service in line with those suggested by survey and interview participants and existing empirical literature.

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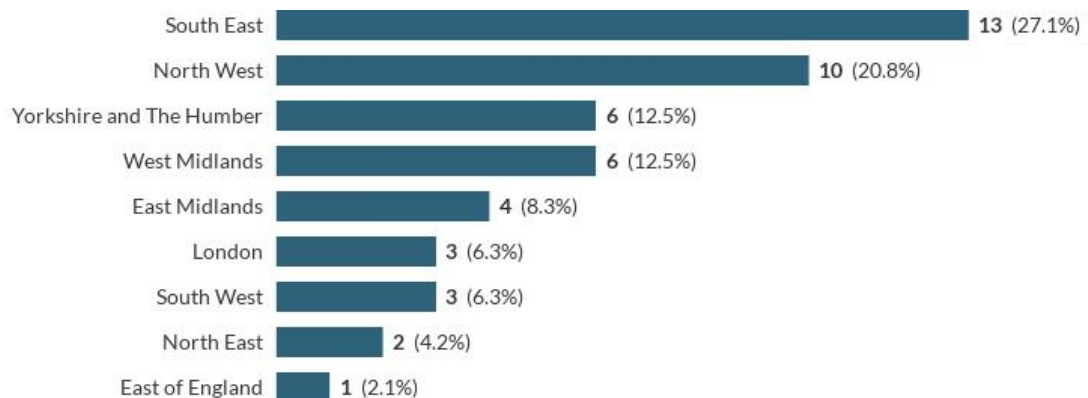
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Appendix A: Stakeholder map

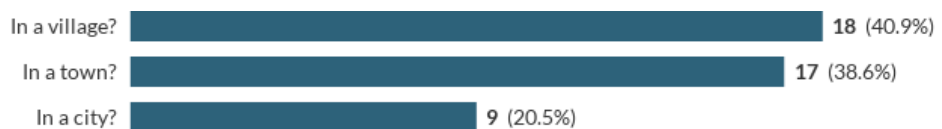
Stakeholder	Indicator	Objectives	Source of data
Fostered children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children in the looked-after system; Children who are fostered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consistency and quality of care; Secure attachments and sustainable relationships; Safe, nurturing environments; Engagement with and attainment in education; Improved social, educational and long-term outcomes; Employment and participation in society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature; Survey and interview data
Foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing foster carers; Prospective foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent and impartial information, advice and support about becoming or being a foster carer; Providing quality of foster carer; Providing consistency of foster carer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey and interview data; Literature
Fostering signposting agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent fostering agencies; Local authorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent and impartial information, advice and support about becoming or being a foster carer for the individuals that they signpost to Fosterline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fosterline report
Fosterline staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FosterTalk Managing Director FosterTalk Head of Service Development FosterTalk Professional Advisor Fosterline Helpline Advisors Fosterline Task Force (formerly Steering Group) Fosterline Coordinator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuation and expansion of Fosterline services; Continuation and expansion of funding provision for Fosterline services; Expansion of Fosterline services where necessary to meet service user demand; Quality of service provision; Reliability of service provision; Effectiveness of service provision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fosterline reports
Funders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department for Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment and retention of foster carers; Commissioning of fostering services; Assessment and approval of foster carers; Delegation of authority to foster carers; Long-term foster placements; Supporting children returning home from foster care; Training for foster carers and social workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature; DfE information; Fosterline report.
Signposted agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide range of general and specialist support services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness of their services; Supporting service users. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumed
Agencies providing services to Fosterline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ancillary services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment; Provision of quality service to Fosterline Altruistic objectives – e.g. supporting a charity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumed
National government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department for Education 	As above under funders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature; DfE information.
Local government and national health service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heads of virtual schools; Specialist support and SEN service; Adoption and fostering service; Care leavers service; Child and adolescent mental health services; Safeguarding board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children and young people engaged with education; Reduced number of children needing specialist support services, SEN and inclusion services, CAMHS services and safeguarding measures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assumed
Communities, neighbourhoods and society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools; Employers; Social groups; Society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looked-after children engaged with learning; Better educated and skilled workforce; Responsible, engaged citizens and reduced societal costs that result from disaffected children and young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature

Appendix B: Demographic details for existing foster carers

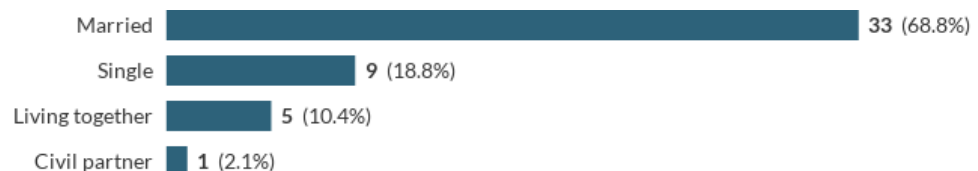
Geographical area



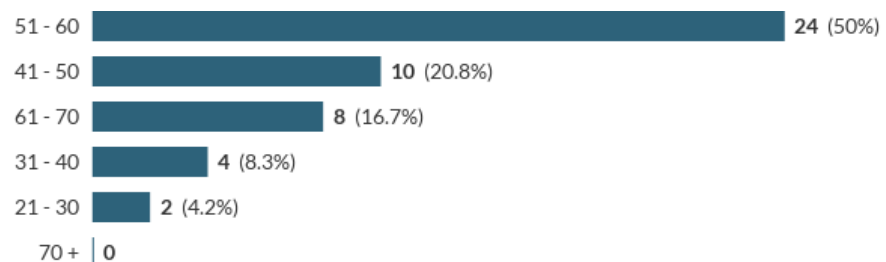
Type of location – where participants live



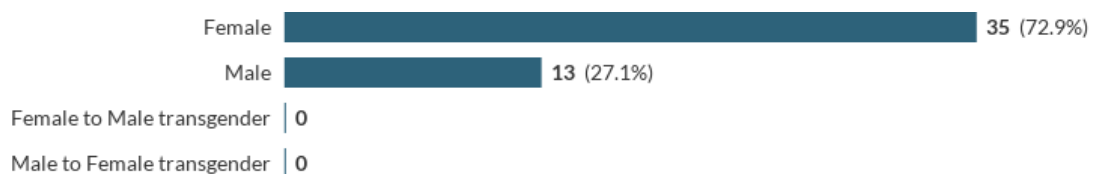
Marital status



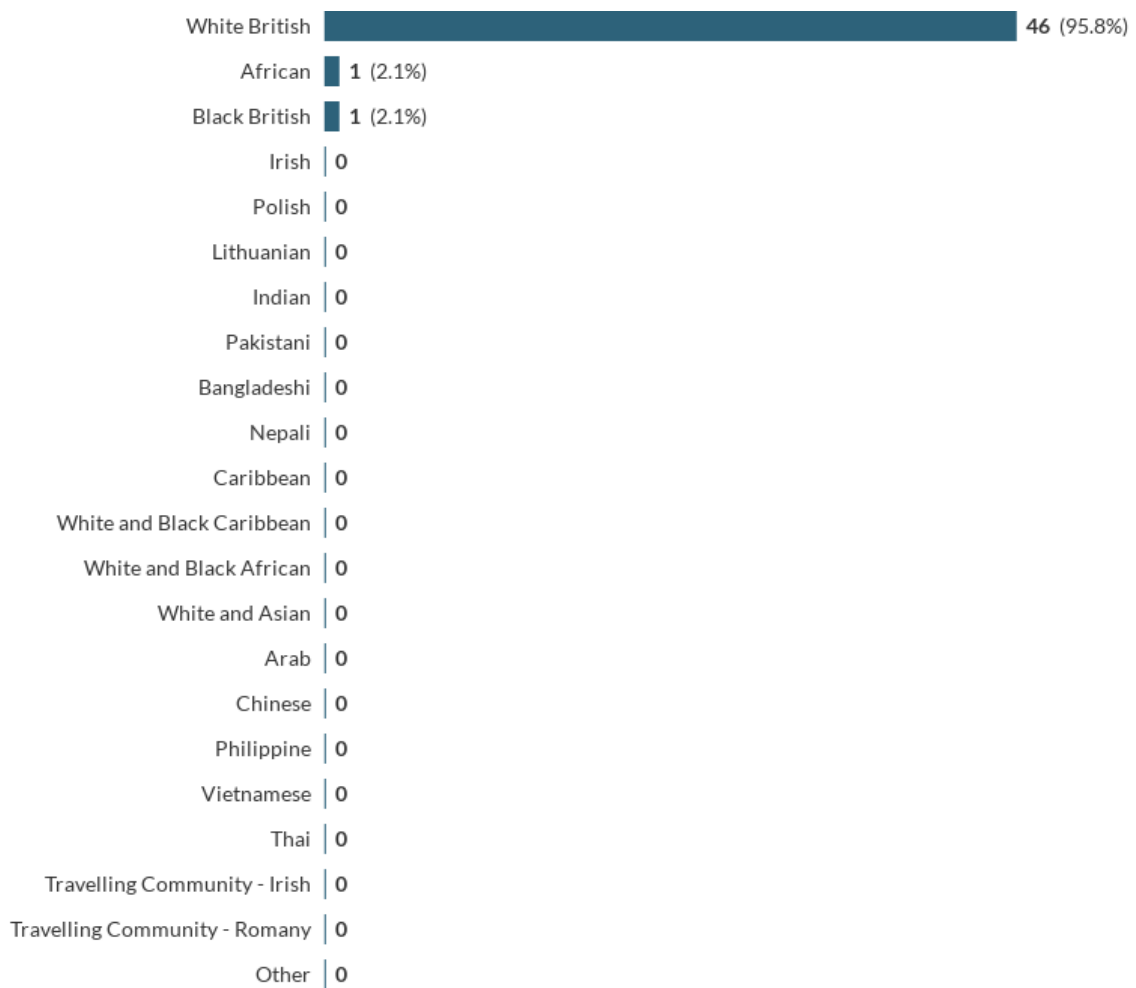
Age



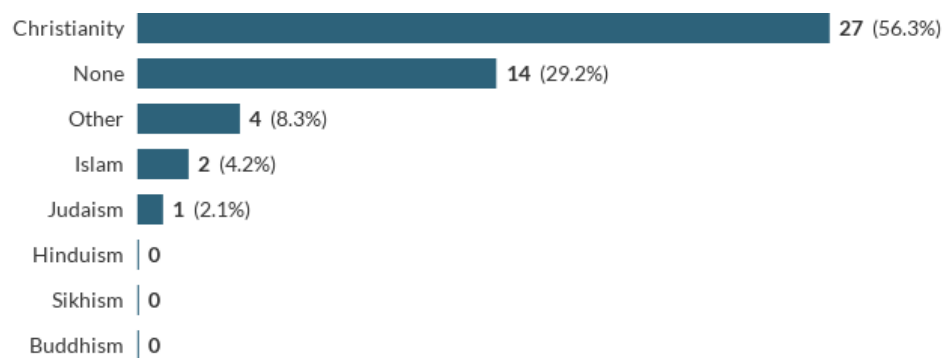
Gender



Ethnicity



Faith



In addition there was one participant each who stated the following faith

- Catholic
- Roman Catholic
- Church of England
- Quaker

Member of LGBT community

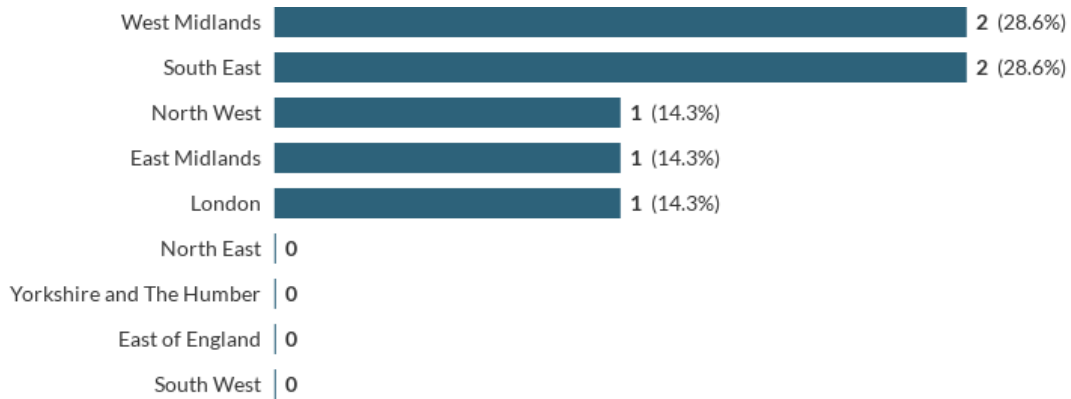


Disability

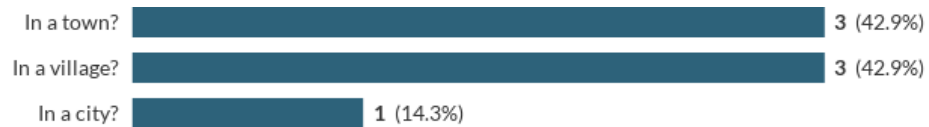


Appendix C: Demographic details for prospective foster carers

Geographical area



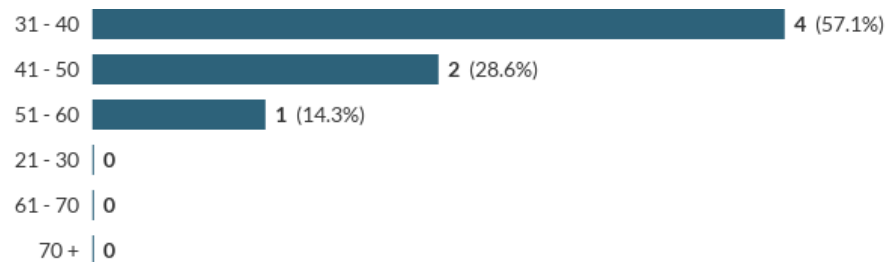
Type of location



Marital status



Age



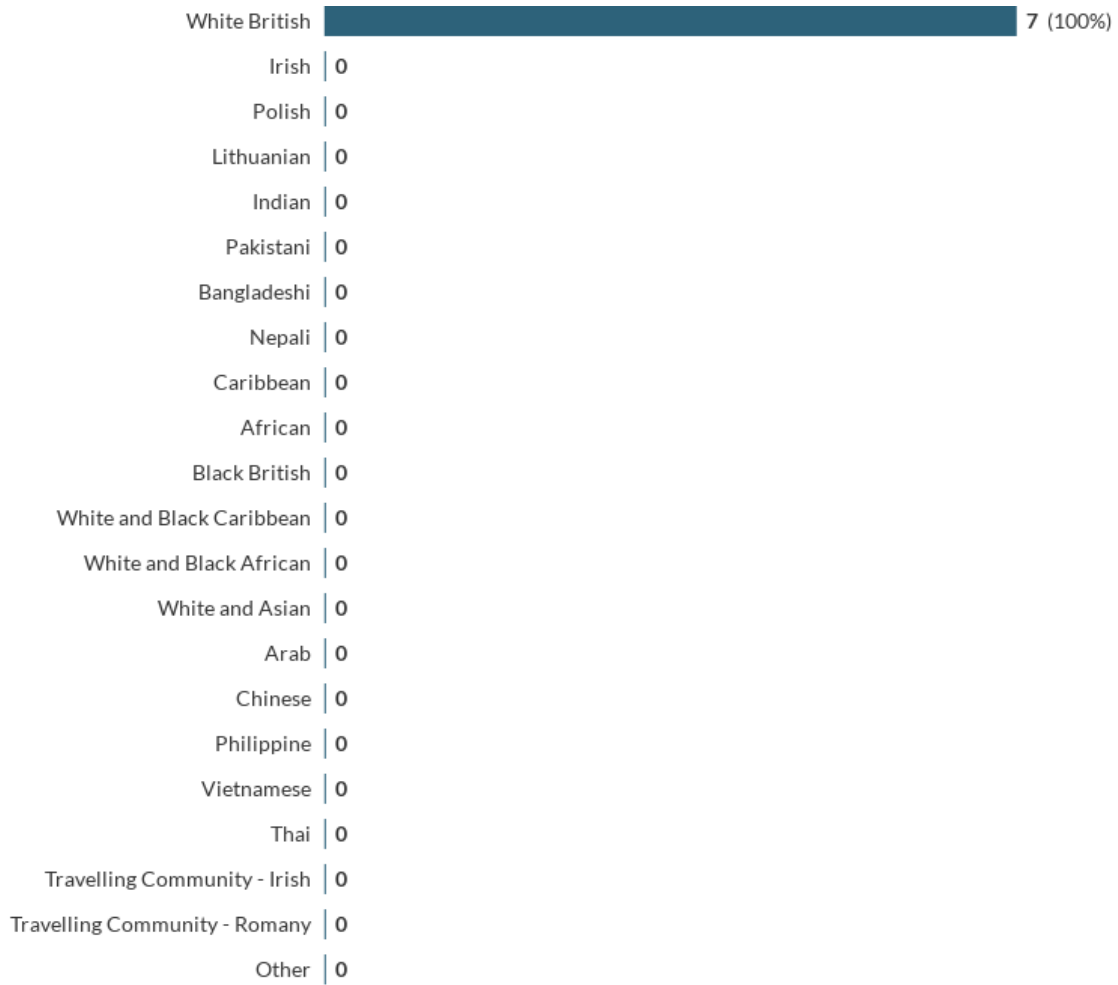
Gender



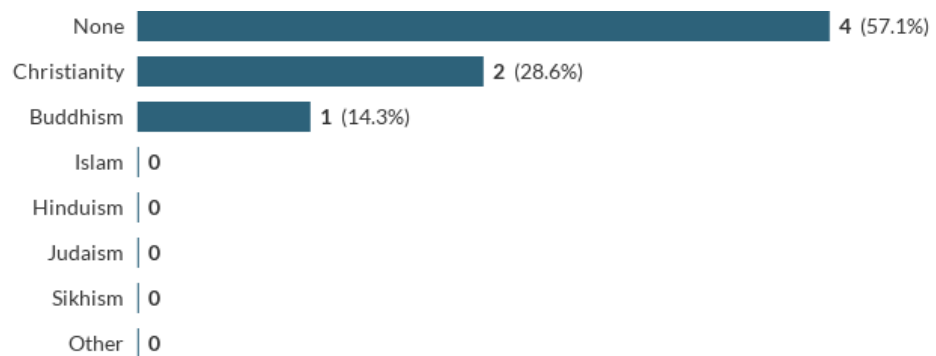
(Dis) ability



Ethnicity



Faith



LGBT



Appendix D: Demographic details for case study interview participants

	Existing/ Prospective	Gender	Age	Geographical Location	Marital Status	Ethnicity	Faith	Type of contract
1	Existing	Female	41- 50	North West	Single	White British	Christianity	LA
2	Existing	Female	51- 60	West Midlands	Married	White British	Christianity	IFA
3	Existing	Female	51- 60	South West	Single	White British	None	LA
4	Existing	Male	51- 60	West Midlands	Married	White British	None	IFA
5	Existing	Male	51- 60	North West	Married	White British	None	LA
6	Existing	Male	51- 60	West Midlands	Married	White British	Christianity	LA
7	Existing	Female	51- 60	East Midlands	Married	White British	None	IFA
8	Existing	Female	61- 70	North East	Married	White British	Christianity	LA
9	Existing	Female	61- 70	South East	Married	White British	Christianity	IFA
10	Existing	Male	61- 70	Yorkshire and the Humber	Married	White British	None	IFA
11	Prospective	Female	31- 40	West Midlands	Married	White British	None	NONE
12	Prospective	Female	31- 40	South East	Single	White British	None	LA

Appendix E: Case Study 1 – Existing Foster Carer

Interview participant number 5 is a married White British male aged between 51 and 60. He lives in the North West of England and his fostering contract is organised by an LA. He has been fostering for nine years during which time he and his wife have fostered seven children.

His main motivation to foster was the desire to provide a safe nurturing environment for children and young people. In interview he said he wanted to “give something back to looked-after children”. This was due in part to his recognition that given some basic life skills, vulnerable children can bring their lives back together. He was motivated by altruistic drivers to give children the skills they needed for successful adulthood. He had been a community policy officer and had witnessed children in care working hard to improve their lives. In addition his wife had been motivated to work with children who had SEND.

His aspirations for children were that they have social involvement, are happy, settled, not stressed and are able to sleep free from worry. He sees his role in these aspirations as setting examples and measuring children’s success from where they stand, which is not always determined by academic criteria. Sometimes it can be measured in terms of young people having a family of their own.

One of the young people that we fostered as a child now has a family of her own. We see her happy and settled, and that is wonderful.

He felt it was also important for foster carers to respond to children’s needs, and to be positive through constant reflection and training.

He stated that the main challenges for foster carers were in dealing with inadequate support from the LA. As far as children were concerned, he stated that regardless of the challenges children presented foster carers with, he and his wife provided fostered children with unconditional love and accepted that the fostering role was “tough” but worthwhile.

He had heard about Fosterline from his LA and contacted them for emotional support, legal advice and advice about an allegation or a complaint on more than five occasions in the previous 18 months, mainly by telephone. The LA had advised him on one occasion to contact Fosterline due to a reported ‘transgression of rules.’ He was advised that Fosterline would provide them with independent, accurate and up-to-date information and this proved to be the case. With the advice and support offered by Fosterline, he was able to go back to his LA feeling better equipped to deal with the situation in hand.

The advice and support received from Fosterline had “played a big part” in his decision to stay in fostering. Although he and his wife had not seriously considered leaving fostering, he stated that it was reassuring to know that Fosterline is there, describing them as a “safety net” when foster carers are involved with their fostering contract organisation in an allegation situation.

Appendix F: Case Study 2 – Prospective Foster Carer

Interview participant number 12 is a single White British female aged 31-40 who lives in the South East of England and has applied for assessment with a LA. She was expecting a decision regarding her assessment imminently.

Her main motivation to foster was the desire to provide a safe nurturing environment for children and young people. In interview she said that she had wanted children of her own but this had not happened. She was therefore motivated to provide care for children from home having already been a nursery teacher. In interview she stressed that her aspirations for children and young people in foster care were for them to:

...feel valued, to have as normal a life as possible and ultimately to be confident in their own self-worth in order to live the life they want to live.

She sees her role in these aspirations as developing secure relationships with children in order to address any emotional or behavioural problems. This she described as teaching emotional foundations by providing long-term foster care. She was particularly interested in observing how children react when they are safe and happy.

She perceived the main challenges in fostering might be children's challenging behaviour and bureaucracy involved in social work and fostering organisations.

She contacted Fosterline by telephone in order to obtain independent, impartial advice about the most appropriate form of fostering contract to suit her situation, whether she would need to change her living accommodation in any way and for general advice about social work. She had looked on the internet but could only find advice about American fostering systems. She had also contacted another fostering membership organisation who stated they were unable to advise her unless she was a member.

The impact of contacting Fosterline on her decision to continue with her fostering application was very positive. She described how "wonderfully friendly" the staff were, how their positive and encouraging advice helped her to learn what fostering involves. She described them as "honest" and "invaluable" to the extent that she found it difficult to see what prospective foster carers would do without them.

Appendix G: Impact Map

Stakeholder	Inputs	Activity	Outputs	Outcomes
Fostered children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children in the looked-after system; Children who are fostered. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time spent in foster care; Involvement in education; Involvement in social activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qualifications and skills assessed by teachers and examinations; Improved social skills; Participation in society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved social, educational and long-term outcomes; Improved social behaviour; Improved relationships; Improved mental health; Improved employment prospects; Reduced likelihood of exclusion from school, society and anti-social or criminal behaviour; Increased likelihood of reducing the intergenerational effects of being in care.
Foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing foster carers; Prospective foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide safe, nurturing home environment; Provide consistency of care; Support children in their education; Support children with social activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entering or staying in foster care; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved social, educational and long-term outcomes for children; Improved social behaviour for children; Improved relationships for children; Reduced likelihood of entering institutional care; Improved mental health for children and foster carers; Improved employment prospects for children; Reduced likelihood of exclusion from school, society and anti-social or criminal behaviour for children.
Fostering signposting agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent fostering agencies; Local authorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision, assessment of and training and support for foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment and retention of foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retaining existing foster carers; Increased likelihood of providing consistency of care for children; Reduced cost of recruiting new foster carers.
Fosterline staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FosterTalk Managing Director; FosterTalk Head of Service Development; FosterTalk Professional Advisor; Fosterline Helpline Advisors; Fosterline Task Force (formerly Steering Group); Fosterline Coordinator. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of independent advice and support to foster carers; Feedback to DfE; Signpost to other agencies; Establish links with relevant organisations who can also support foster carers in their role; Raise awareness of the need for support of foster carers and the impact of this on children who are looked-after; Advocate on behalf of foster carers; Legislative influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prospective foster carers decide to enter foster care; Existing foster carers who were considering leaving stay in foster care; Foster carers feel supported and empowered; Improved relationships between foster carers and children; Improved relationships between foster carers and social workers or agencies; Improved knowledge of Fosterline services, fostering and the needs of children and foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased number of long-term placements for children; Increased number of foster carers; Improved wellbeing of foster carers; Improved wellbeing and outcomes for children.
Funders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department for Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of independent advice and support for foster carers through funding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> See impacts for FosterTalk/ Fosterline staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved social, educational and long-term outcomes for children; Improved social behaviour for children; Improved relationships for children; Improved mental health for children and foster carers; Improved employment prospects for children;

Signposted agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of general and specialist support services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of further advice and support for foster carers within specialist areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative sources of support for foster carers; • Enhanced knowledge for foster carers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced likelihood of exclusion from school, society and anti-social or criminal behaviour for children. • Recruitment and retention of foster carers; • Improved wellbeing of foster carers.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ancillary services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of interactive website (for example) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved and alternative method of communication with foster carers and referring agencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice and flexibility of communication mode for foster carers.
Agencies providing services to Fosterline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department for Education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding; • Policies; • Policy guidance; • Enforcement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment and retention of foster carers; • Commissioning of fostering services; • The assessment and approval of foster carers; • Delegation of authority to foster carers; • Long-term foster placements; • Supporting children returning home from foster care; • Training and support for foster carers and social workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in long term costs of number of children with challenging behaviour, SEN, poor mental health, high number of foster placements; • Increased number of foster carers by recruitment and retention of foster carers; • Reduction in anti-social and criminal behaviour.
National government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heads of virtual schools; • Specialist support service; • Adoption and fostering service; • Care leavers service; • SEN and inclusion service; • CAMHS; • Safeguarding board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of support for children in the looked after system and those leaving care based on their social, emotional, educational needs, SEN and mental health; • Provision of safe, nurturing environments for children in the looked-after system; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children and young people engaged with education; • Reduced number of children needing specialist support services, SEN and inclusion services, CAMHS services and safeguarding measures; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved social, educational and long-term outcomes for children; • Improved social behaviour for children; • Improved relationships for children; • Improved mental health for children and foster carers; • Improved employment prospects for children; • Reduced likelihood of exclusion from school, society and anti-social or criminal behaviour for children.
Local government and national health service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools; • Employers; • Social groups; • Society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of schools and education; • Provision of employment opportunities for care leavers; • Provision of social activities; • Understanding and empathy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked-after children engaged with learning; • Better educated and skilled workforce; • Responsible, engaged citizens; • Reduced societal costs that result from disaffected children and young people; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in societal cohesion; • Reduced costs for taxpayer in terms of costs of disaffected youth and criminal behaviour.
Communities, neighbourhoods and society				

Appendix H: Social Return on Investment (SROI) for Fosterline Independent Advice and Support Service for the period June 2013 to December 2014¹

Breakdown of alternative placements for children in the looked-after system	Total number of children in different types of placement	Cost of different types of placement per annum	% of children in each type of placement	Cost of service per child per annum	Savings/Reduction per child for the 18 th month period June 2013 to December 2014
Fostering services	50,900	£1,377,3000.00	75%	£27,059	£56,249 (£37,499 per annum)
Other types of placement (includes secure units, children's homes and hostels, residential schools, placed for adoption, placement with parents, other placements in the community, missing, other placement)	17,200	£1,110,400,000.00 (children's homes and other looked-after children's services)	25%	£64,558	0
Total number of children in the looked-after system (predicted for 2013/2014)	68,100 ²				
Source of data	House of Commons (2014: 7, table 3) Harker and Heath	House of Commons (2014: 7, table 3) Harker and Heath	DfE Statistical Release (DfE, 2014)	Calculated	Calculated

¹ It has been challenging to identify indicators and associated deadweight figures in the absence of published data relating to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England, the alternative types of placements for children in the looked-after system and a lengthy and more comprehensive evaluation of Fosterline services that would allow for engagement with a wider range of stakeholders. The small sample size of foster carers who participated in this evaluation is recognised as a limitation to the possibility of generalising the findings more widely. However the sample of participants is socially, culturally and geographically diverse.

² Although there are accurate statistics for the number of children in the looked-after system from the DfE, for purposes of consistency the predictive figures from the House of Commons statistics were utilised. DfE statistics suggest there are 68,840 children in the looked-after system.

Appendix H: (continued) SROI Calculation for Fosterline services for period June 2013 to December 2014

Inputs:

Income for June 2013 to December 2013	£87,173
Income for January 2014 to December 2014	£224,154
<i>Total income for period June 2013 to December 2014</i>	<i>£311,327</i>

Benefits created

Cost per saving per child for placement in foster care versus other types of care	£56,249
Number of Fosterline prospective and existing service users for the period	6,000
Number of Fosterline service users who are existing foster carers	4,800
Number of children who benefit from cost saving of being placed in foster care and benefit from Fosterline advice and support service indirectly through their foster carer ³	4,800
Number of foster carers who said they were considering leaving foster care from this evaluation	16
Number of foster carers who said they were considering leaving foster care from this evaluation and who also stated that after contact with Fosterline they decided to stay in foster care	11 (22.9% of respondents)
<i>Social value for 22.9% of 4,800 children based on a cost saving of being in care of £56,249 per child 1,099.20 children x £56,249 (extrapolating 22.9% for the 4,800 existing foster carers who are Fosterline service users)</i>	<i>£61,828,681</i>
SROI (£311,327 divided by £61,828.681)	1:199⁴

³ Assumes one child per foster carer (service user of Fosterline) over the 18th month period

⁴ Ideally a deadweight value would be subtracted from the social value. This would be based on how many foster carers decide to stay in fostering after considering leaving, but who do/did not contact Fosterline for advice and support. However, this data was not available.

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