The Recruitment of Foster Carers: Key messages from the research literature

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Introduction

This paper is a summary of the key messages from research about foster carer recruitment. In a report for Barnardo's in 2004, Sellick et al. concluded that "There is a lack of evaluative research into the effectiveness of strategies aimed at recruiting and retaining carers." Little has changed since then, and almost no research has been conducted on the recruitment of specialist carers. The relative weakness of the research base in this field should therefore be taken into consideration when reflecting on the findings. It is hoped that learning generated through the evaluation of the DfE Safe Accommodation Project will make a valuable contribution to this field of practice.

Summary

1. There is a general shortage of foster carers, particularly for older children, those with emotional/behavioural problems, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds - although Independent Fostering Providers may find it easier to recruit carers than local authorities.
2. Carers with more resources and those in the helping professions may be most willing to foster children with emotional/behavioural problems.
3. Of the external barriers that prevent people from becoming carers, it is those related to fears and misconceptions about fostering which can be addressed by agencies, who must nevertheless present a realistic picture of children's' needs.
4. A personal connection to other carers is a significant recruitment channel, and can build confidence in potential carers.
5. Although it may not be the primary motivating factor, higher levels of pay and support can help to recruit and retain foster carers.
6. The use of media to emphasise the professional aspects of becoming a foster carer should be supported by a coherent and well-resourced recruitment strategy.

Implications

The challenges faced by Barnardo's in recruiting specialist carers are not unique. By paying more and offering higher levels of support the organisation may well be better placed to recruit specialist carers as an Independent Fostering Provider than a local authority. However this may be balanced against the specific challenges of recruiting carers for those who are teenagers, who offend, who have emotional/behavioural difficulties, or who are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Young people affected by sexual exploitation/trafficking are highly likely to fall into at least one of these categories and often many.

Research suggests that the use of existing carers is a positive and effective recruitment tool. As well as affirming the skills of any existing specialist carers, it can help to de-mystify the challenge of care for sexually exploited and trafficked young people. It may be fruitful for Barnardo's to target the friends and families of existing carers of sexually exploited and trafficked children. In this respect it may also be worth identifying any specific barriers that families encounter when it comes to supporting trafficked or sexually exploited young people, and the fears that may dissuade then, in order to address these in further campaigns.

Sellick (2006) reports that successful recruitment is associated with targeting particular groups (e.g. older women). The current strategy of targeting those in the 'helping' professions is therefore supported by the somewhat limited research in this area, which also suggests that it may be worth targeting religious organisations to raise awareness of the need for foster carers.

Finally, campaigns can address fears and misconceptions about caring for vulnerable young people, but other barriers may still prevent someone from caring until they are ready. This provides a strong rationale for the design of ongoing local campaigns that keep fostering in the public eye.

1. There is a general shortage of foster carers, particularly for older children, those with emotional/behavioural problems, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds - although Independent Fostering Providers may find it easier to recruit carers than local authorities.

Challenges in the recruitment of specialist foster carers in the UK should be seen within the context of a world-wide shortage of foster placements (Colton, Roberts and Williams, 2008), and subsequent problems with carer availability, over-use of emergency placements and unsuitable and untrained carers (Triseliotis et al., 2000). Although most fostering providers are able to replace the 10% of their workforce that leave every year, they do not increase overall numbers, and face specific shortages for carers of teenagers, children with disabilities, and minority ethnic children (Fostering Network, 2009). In addition to these, an earlier study of foster carer recruitment found that children who offend and those presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties were also more likely to remain unplaced, (Triseliotis et al., 1999). This may be the result of a lack of early intervention, whereby more expensive specialist care pathways are only used as a last resort after multiple placement breakdowns, and are therefore associated with high instability and the accompanying poor outcomes for young people (Ward and Holmes, 2007). An increase in the use of Independent Fostering Providers suggests that this sector is more effective at recruitment (Fostering Network, 2006), which may be the result of

higher payments, and the lower caseloads of supervising social workers in the independent sector (Holmes and Soper, 2010). Nevertheless in their 2010 annual report the Multi Treatment Foster Care in England implementation team identified recruitment as a key challenge, which was compounded by specialist placements becoming long-term non-specialist placements and reducing the pool of available carers.

2. Carers with more resources and those in the helping professions may be most willing to foster children with emotional/behavioural problems

In early studies conducted in the US, carers reported a greater willingness to foster younger children than teenagers, (Kriener and Kazmerzak, 1995) and a lower willingness to foster children with various kinds of problems including mental health issues, physical disabilities, emotional/behavioural difficulties and medical problems including HIV and fetal alcohol syndrome (Downs, 1989; DHHS, 1993). While most carers in a later study were at least willing to discuss fostering children with various problems, children who set fires, behave destructively, or 'act out' sexually were the least acceptable to carers when they were asked to identify the children they were most and least willing to consider fostering (Cox et al., 2003). Of the 142 foster family applicants involved in this study, it was families with more resources, and those in the helping professions that were more willing to foster children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, suggesting that recruitment efforts should target public sector workers within the NHS, social services and education (Cox et al, *ibid*). In separate studies Cox (2000, 2003) also found evidence that those who became aware of the need to foster through religious organisations fostered for more years than those who learned of the need through other channels, and if they belonged to a place of worship were more willing to foster children who were deprived or abused, than families who did not. However this research was conducted in the USA and further studies would be necessary to verify this finding within the UK context.

3. Of the external barriers that prevent people from becoming carers, it is those related to fears and misconceptions about fostering that can be addressed by agencies, who must nevertheless present a realistic picture of children's' needs.

Of the powerful barriers that prevent people becoming carers, many are possible for agencies to address. For example, within their sample Triseliotis et al, (2000) identified fear of not being good enough for an agency, lack of confidence in caring for someone else's child, lack of trust in social workers, the poor image of children in care, having to return children to their families, and protracted assessments. However in a study carried out in California Tyebjee (2003) found that the largest barriers to the general public were firstly life stage (age/family size), then resources (finances/time/space), and then finally external factors already mentioned, such as dealing with agencies. In this respect, the notion of 'readiness' is important, and various research has found that carers will have considered fostering for at least 12 months before making a decision to apply (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983; Siegel and Roberts, 1989). A number of studies therefore recommend continual marketing campaigns, including the Multi Treatment Foster Care in England evaluation, (2010)

It has already been suggested that work may need to be done to address poor perceptions of children in care, and their needs. However Shaw and Hipgrave, (1983) warn that creating a

positive public image of what is often complex, inconvenient and not always easy is a slow and continuous process. Here, best-practice suggests that advertising should be eye-catching, and portray children who need care in a realistic way (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, 1995). The responsibilities and realities of being a carer should be outlined early on, and informal meetings with carers and social workers are an excellent way to do this (Triseliotis, Sellick and Short, *ibid*; Fostering Network, 2006).

For some carers, expectations of young people's sexualised behaviour *may* be a barrier that needs addressing. In one study, only 10% of carers interviewed had had an allegation made against them, but 49% had 'some' fears and 11% had 'many' fears about allegations by children (Farmer et al., 2005). Of the two-thirds of carers who had adopted 'house rules' to protect them from allegations by children with particularly sexualised behaviours, just under half of these (20) carers felt this had restricted their liberty as carers, and 42% felt it impacted negatively on their children through making them aware of sexual issues at too early an age. Kelly and Gilligan (2001) warn that potential carers who learn of the possibility of allegations being made against them can withdraw applications. However, in their study Triseliotis et al, (2000) found that while a quarter of carers were concerned about allegations of physical/sexual abuse, only 3% suspected that this would prevent someone from applying to become a carer.

Finally, Farmer, Lipscombe, Moyers (2005) found that initial negative reactions to young people often affected and influenced the course of the placements and conclude that early expressions of dissatisfaction or reluctance should therefore be taken seriously.

4. Personal connections to other carers is a very significant recruitment channel and can build confidence in potential carers.

Contact with someone who has received foster care or who has fostered has been shown to be positively associated with motivation for fostering (Groze et al., 1993). In one study 21% of carers cited family and friends as their reason for pursuing foster care (Baum et al., 2001), while this figure was 56% in a similar study by Rodger et al., (2006). Those who knew someone who was, or had been, a foster carer were twice as likely to be willing to foster than the general population, in a telephone survey of Californian residents (Tyebjee, 2003). Triseliotis et al., (1999, 2000) found that over half of the carers in their Scotland study heard about fostering through word of mouth, with many carers clustered geographically as a result. This confirmed earlier research that found that word of mouth and 'modelling' by existing carers were 'powerful' recruitment channels (Shaw and Hipgrave, 1983). More recently, Sellick and Howell (2004) interviewed 75 fostering agencies in the UK who agreed that successful recruitment is related to word-of-mouth/local schemes which included offering a financial reward to carers who introduce a friend. The importance of personal connections may be particularly true of specialist foster care. For example, Siegel and Roberts (1989) found that people who were familiar with the needs of disabled children were more likely to become specialist carers, and to be realistic about what care would involve as a result.

Carers believe themselves to be best placed to address a credibility gap between social work and the public, and to address misconceptions about fostering (Triseliotis et al., 1999; 2000), and potential carers are positive about the use of existing carers in the training process (Baum

et al., 2001). In research by Sinclair (2005) foster carers suggested that their own networks be used to increase recruitment, and reported their belief that potential carers:

- are unaware of the need for foster carers
- are worried that they would not measure up
- lack confidence in being able to parent a foster child
- have a poor image of foster children and
- distrust social workers

Finally, they suggested that fostered young people should also participate more in recruitment.

5. Although it may not be the primary motivating factor, higher levels of pay and support can help to recruit and retain foster carers

A recent survey by the Fostering Network (2010) found that 65 per cent foster carers believe their income is too low for the job they do. Although payment does not necessarily motivate foster carers to care, higher levels of pay can influence recruitment levels (Waterhouse, 1997; Rhodes et al, 2001; Bebbington & Miles, 1990) and the adequacy and efficiency of payment systems can sustain them when faced with children's challenging behaviour or lack of progress (Kirton, 2001). Similarly, the offer of a good package of support helps to recruit and retain carers including carers' group meetings, access to equipment, 24-hour 'on call' support and regular supervision (Triseliotis et al, 2000; Kirton et al, 2003; Sinclair et al, 2004; Statham & Greenfields, 2005).

6. The use of media to emphasise the professional aspects of becoming a foster carer should be supported by a coherent and well-resourced recruitment strategy

There is no blueprint for a successful recruitment campaign, but research has highlighted a number of aspects that agencies may want to consider. After word-of-mouth, the most powerful recruitment channel appears to be the media, and particularly local press (Triseliotis et al., 2000). In this respect reports by SCIE (2004), and Sellick et al. (2004) emphasise the importance of focusing on the professionalism of the role, e.g. possibilities of training and obtaining qualifications, the financial reward, and avoiding the message that 'anyone can foster'. This message was repeated when the Fostering Network (2006) asked 75 fostering agencies across the UK about effective recruitment practice and found agencies portraying the professional nature of fostering by advertising it in job columns and specifying payment amounts.

Triseliotis et al., (1999) concluded that effective recruitment relies on a number of things including:
- a strategy that maps the needs of local looked after children against numbers and types of foster carers to be recruited
- close work with experienced carers, social workers and their managers a well-organised system that responds promptly to enquiries
- use of local media
- maintaining the continuity of recruitment campaigns

In addition the Fostering Network (2006) emphasise the need for a dedicated post to oversee recruitment, an adequate budget, a coherent process from enquiry to approval, appropriate training and support packages throughout a carers career, and a means of learning from foster carers who leave the service (e.g. an exit interview).

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