



The
Fostering
Network



Foster carer retention and recruitment in England

Key research findings and
recommendations

May 2023



Introduction

Last year in England, more mainstream foster carers (excluding family and friends foster carers) stopped fostering than were approved, leading to a net decrease in fostering capacity. At the same time, the number of children in care increased.

Retaining, recruiting and appropriately supporting foster carers throughout their journey can help ensure children in care thrive. Having a wider variety of placements available, including fostering households from diverse backgrounds and with a range of experiences, can support better matching and create stable, well-supported placements. This is a focus of the Government's recently announced 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' children's social care strategy.

This research provides the most comprehensive and up to date picture for England on foster carer retention and recruitment. It evidences how feeling valued and supported – including through sufficient financial support, having good relationships with social workers and being able to focus on the role of providing 'stable homes, built on love' for children – is critical for foster carer retention and recruitment.

Based on the research findings, we make recommendations for both Government and fostering services to ensure we grow and support fostering households from diverse backgrounds with a range of experiences to support better matching and stable foster care for children and young people. Although this report focuses on retaining and recruiting non-family and friends foster carers in England, the findings can also be applied across the UK and to retaining family and friends foster carers.

The research for this project was undertaken by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) and was supported by KPMG Foundation. You can read the full research report [here](#).¹

The Fostering Network is calling on Government to take a holistic approach to improving the retention and recruitment of a diverse and stable foster care workforce in England.

This includes providing the funding that is needed to meet the needs of children and for foster carers to be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child. By doing so, they can continue to transform children's lives and encourage others to do the same.

¹ <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/research/RR>

Methodology

Secondary data analysis of national data sets – The research team at CEI analysed the **Ofsted Fostering in England²** data and **The Fostering Network’s State of the Nation’s Foster Care 2021³** survey data.

Survey of prospective, current, and former foster carers – 1,879 responses were received:

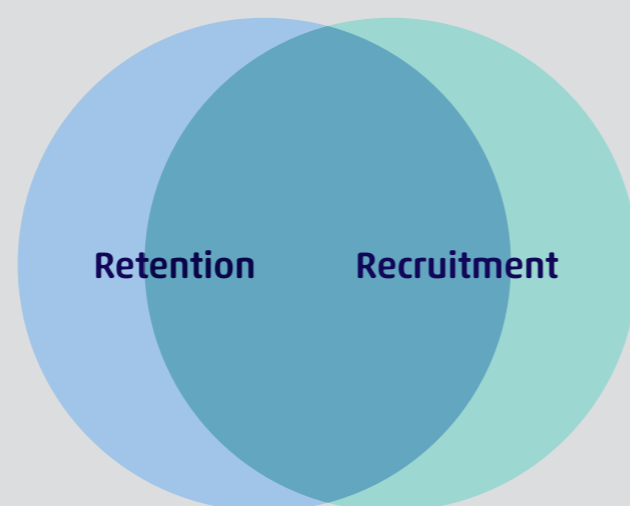
- 1,751 of the respondents were approved foster carers (93 per cent)
- 112 (six per cent) had stopped fostering within the last five years and
- 16 (one per cent) were enquiring or applying to foster.

Interviews and focus groups with fostering service staff, prospective foster carers, current foster carers, and former foster carers – 52 individuals were spoken to for this research:

- 11 participants were interviewed including two prospective foster carers, four approved foster carers and five recently resigned foster carers.
- Eight fostering service staff participated in two focus groups, 29 approved foster carers participated in four focus groups, and four retired foster carers participated in one focus group.

In order to reflect the views of a diverse group of foster carer participants, we over-sampled those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Throughout this document, we refer to ‘retention and recruitment’ for two reasons. Firstly, the best recruitment strategy is good retention of foster carers – this was explicitly expressed in our research. Secondly, it does not matter how many new foster carers are recruited if they cannot provide quality care to meet the needs of children in care, or if those who can provide the quality care are not retained; as one foster carer put it: ‘retention is how you recruit’.



² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022>

³ <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn21>

Research findings

1. Recruitment and approval

1.1 Being recruited and approved as a foster carer

The analysis completed by Ofsted in their Fostering in England report shows that:

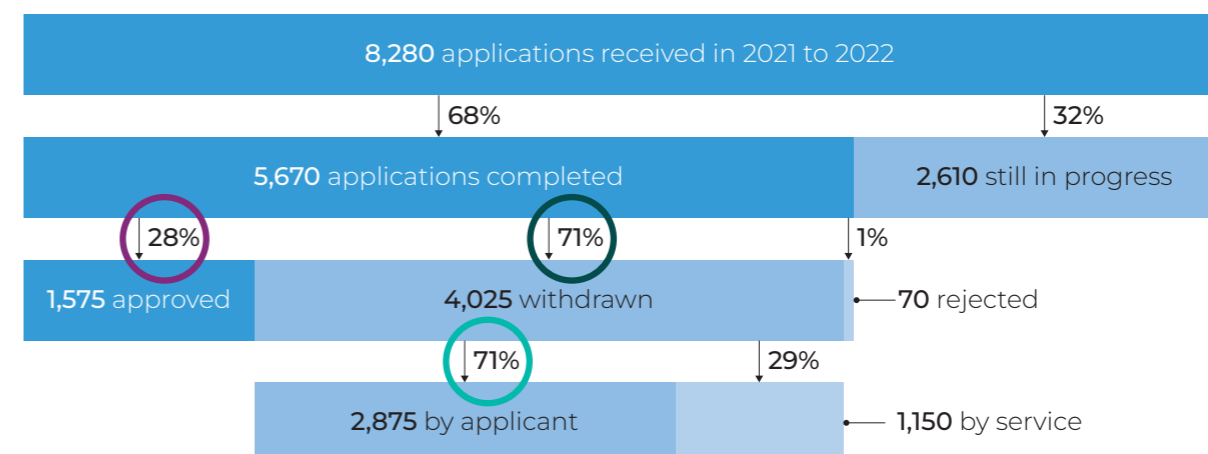
- Fostering services received 8,280 applications to become a foster carer in 2021-2022. Of the 5,670 completed applications made to fostering services, the majority (**71 per cent**) were withdrawn, a rate which had increased from **68 per cent** in 2020-2021.
- In 2021-2022, most of those applications (**71 per cent**) were withdrawn by the applicant, and **29 per cent** by the service. The year before, only **55 per cent** of withdrawals were by the applicant.
- Foster carers in their 20s and 30s accounted for a quarter (**26 per cent**) of all newly approved foster carers in 2021-22, despite forming only **10 per cent** of foster carers overall.

71% of completed foster carer applications are withdrawn the by the applicant.



- When looking at ethnicity, the data shows that the total of Asian/Asian British foster carers has increased compared with previous years, whereas the number of Black/Black British foster carers has stayed about the same, with a slight decrease. There is more work to be done to recruit foster carers from both groups.

Applications received in 2021 to 2022, by status on 31 March 2022 (Analysis taken from Ofsted, 2022)



1.2 Motivation to apply to become a foster carer

Similar to the State of the Nation results each year, in the survey, the top three motivations to foster were:

- I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care (**89 per cent**)
- I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family (**67 per cent**)
- I enjoy working with children (**58 per cent**).

The research found the following factors influence the decision to apply to be a foster carer:

- previous experience working with children
- having flexible work arrangements or finishing full-time employment
- gaining spare bedrooms due to moving to a bigger house or their children moving out
- knowing other foster carers or those involved in social care also supported foster carers' decisions to apply.

Tapping into people's motivations to foster while providing realistic expectations of the challenges and support available may help recruit quality, motivated carers.

1.3 Recruitment approaches

Through focus groups, fostering service staff reported that in the last few years they have taken a 'back to basics' approach, spending more time interacting with the community to encourage enquiries, in addition to online social media campaigns. They are also fronting the financial support available for foster carers more than they have in the past.

Foster carers felt that it was important to have adequate financial compensation, but that leading promotion with financial compensation may attract the wrong people. Additionally,

many felt that images and advertisements of 'superheroes' or small children without challenges were unrealistic.

Fostering services use many methods to increase recruitment, including mentoring and 'refer a friend' schemes which involve a cash incentive for foster carers. They have also found that putting more time into forming relationships with prospective foster carers by following up individual enquiries has been effective.

1.4 Experiences of the application process

Whilst understanding the need for the application process to be rigorous, the foster carers spoken to through interviews and focus groups generally found it to be long and intensive. Participants described having to complete training, attend interviews, facilitate home visits, and fill out numerous forms. The typical timeframe for interviewees' application processes was around six months, but often extended up to a year. In one case the entire process took two and a half years due to administrative errors.

Foster carers who had applied to multiple services sometimes experienced a much higher and more consistent level of contact from one service, which made the application process easier.

Prospective foster carers identified the need for social workers and services to be culturally sensitive and aware of the different religious practices among foster carers.

Negative experiences of the application process were common in the research. The table on the following page outlines some of the factors raised by foster carers that contribute to positive and negative application experiences.

Factors contributing to a negative application experience	Factors contributing to a positive application experience
Poor and unreliable communication from fostering services.	Reliable communication with their fostering service.
Unable to have questions answered.	Able to have questions answered when they arose.
Insufficient information about the application process or timelines.	Being given accurate expectations of the timelines and process, where participants had a clear idea of what the application process entailed.
Incorrect information about how to transfer to another service.	Visits were arranged around prospective carers' working hours.
Unexpected delays to the application process, due to changes in social workers processing the application and administrative errors.	Opportunities for prospective carers to engage with experienced foster carers, including seeing other carers like them during the process – whether by age, ethnicity, or culture.

1.5 Reasons for not progressing enquiries and withdrawing applications

The survey investigated why there are such high rates of prospective foster carers who make enquiries to fostering services to become a foster carer, but decide not to apply or withdraw their application. **21 per cent** (n=382) of the respondents had decided not to apply after initially enquiring to a fostering service. These respondents were asked to select the main reasons for not applying, the top three were:

- deciding to apply to another service (**32 per cent**)
- feeling that it was not the right time (**17 per cent**)
- realising that they could not afford to foster (**11 per cent**).

Similarly, **five per cent** (n = 88) of respondents had withdrawn an application, and their top three reasons for withdrawing were:

- deciding to apply to another service (**35 per cent**)
- feeling it was not the right time for them (**19 per cent**)
- their relationship with the assessor (**16 per cent**).

These reasons were also supported in the interviews with foster carers.

Multiple enquiries to foster

This research suggests that when applying to foster, individuals get in touch with multiple fostering services to find out more about the role and the support available. Each fostering service takes a different approach to defining and counting enquiries (e.g. interactions on Facebook, phone calls, or visits), and an individual can enquire to various agencies or make multiple enquiries to the same agency. This can make the number of enquiries to foster appear higher and does not accurately reflect the number of individuals interested in fostering.

In the survey, conversion rates from enquiry to application differed by characteristic, including by:

- **Ethnicity:** Applicants of Asian (24 per cent) and Black/African/Caribbean (23 per cent) ethnicity were more likely not to apply after initial enquiry than those of Mixed (19 per cent) or White (20 per cent) ethnicity.⁴ For participants from Mixed, Asian, African and Caribbean ethnic groups, they highlighted that the service took too long to respond as a top three contributing factor for not applying.
- **Education:** Applicants with higher levels of education (higher than A/AS level) were more likely not to apply after enquiring. Applicants with lower levels of education reported wanting more support and the service taking too long as key factors for not applying.

In the focus groups, staff reported that prospective foster carers often withdraw their applications once they realise the complexity and intensity of fostering, which can arise late in the assessment process. Foster carers also reported that initial messaging (e.g. radio and bus adverts) are misleading, and that applicants withdraw once they learn the challenging reality of fostering. Applications are also withdrawn late in the process because prospective carers often believe they can continue working part time, but once they are given an example of a weekly schedule of required meetings, they realise their job does not provide enough flexibility.

These findings imply that applicants are not being given sufficient information to support their decision early enough in the approval process, leading to individuals and services investing time and resources when fostering might not be the right fit.

// **Getting a sufficient [payment] rate is important but it's not the hook that's gonna get people to apply.**

Focus group participant

// **1.6 Improving the recruitment and approval process:**

In the survey of prospective, approved and recently resigned foster carers:

Foster carer's top three suggestions for improving recruitment were:

1. providing better pay 
2. having less turnover of social work staff 
3. valuing and respecting the role of foster carers more highly 

The interviews showed that foster carers viewed having stable and supportive staff, feeling valued and respected and being given honest information early as top suggestions for improving the application process.

Financial incentives: in the focus groups, fostering service staff discussed increasing payments, providing payments between placements and offering council tax deductions and other benefits in order to improve recruitment and increase the pool of foster carers. While foster carer participants considered it important to compensate foster carers fairly for their work and provide honest financial information upfront, they did not consider it the sole factor in recruitment.

Focusing recruitment messaging on financial compensation was viewed as potentially damaging to the fostering service. Recruitment staff reported that children in care felt such campaigns made them feel unwanted, and like their carers were just in it for the money. Experienced carers expressed concerns that emphasising the level of fee payments you could receive may encourage applications from people 'for the wrong reasons'.

Respect throughout the recruitment and approval process: foster carers valued two-way decision making throughout the process, being treated with respect and when fostering services valued the time and effort put into the application.

Better communication throughout the application process: foster carers valued transparency, being given a timeline and information about what to expect and being able to contact their social workers with questions.

A more streamlined application process: simpler and less bureaucratic administration requirements, including when transferring fostering services.

More cultural sensitivity: the interviews highlighted how important it is for services to ensure they are aware and appreciative of different cultural norms, holidays and festivals and to use appropriate and respectful language when they are working with foster carers.

More personalised approaches, including flexibility for applicants who are also working: for the application process to offer alternative options for those who have specific access needs or are working, such as offering visits and meetings outside of working hours or support with digital forms.

Discuss finances early: fostering services and foster carers suggested providing realistic financial information early in the recruitment process to enable foster carers to plan around other jobs, mortgages or rent, etc.

Assistance for prospective foster carers to decide whether fostering is a good fit for them: to provide time and space for honest discussions around the fostering task, set up buddies or mentors and provide more opportunities for gaining experiences of what it's really like to become a foster carer. Additionally, many felt initial advertising messages did not accurately represent the children and young people in need of fostering and showed unrealistic ideals of foster carers.

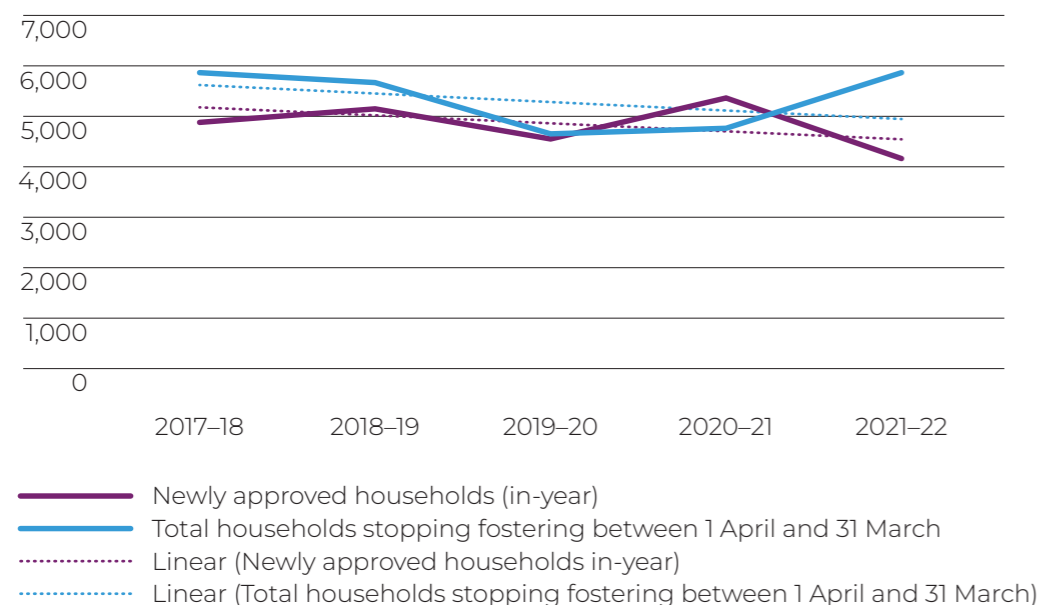
Having stable, supportive social work staff, who are skilled and experienced in all aspects of the fostering role could improve foster carers' experiences of the recruitment process and beyond. Feeling valued and respected and providing accurate information early are considered key in improving the recruitment and approval process.

⁴ In total, 1,700 respondents to our survey were White (92 per cent), 64 were Black/African/Caribbean (three per cent), 42 were of Mixed ethnicity (two per cent) and 34 were Asian (two per cent).

2. Retention: who is leaving and who is staying

The graph below shows a five-year trend of a decreasing foster carer workforce in England, shown by the dotted lines. The bold lines plot the actual number of households that have started (purple) and stopped (blue) fostering each year.

Total number of fostering households starting and stopping fostering per year (Ofsted)



2.1 Foster carer satisfaction and plans to continue fostering

In the survey, we asked approved foster carers (n=1,751):

- whether fostering matched their expectations: **47 per cent** strongly or slightly agreed, while **32 per cent** slightly or strongly disagreed.

- how far they agreed with the statement that they plan to continue fostering a year from now: **65 per cent** strongly or slightly agreed, whilst **21 per cent** either slightly or strongly disagreed.

The full report explores differences by age and ethnicity in relation to satisfaction and plans to continue fostering.

2.2 Reasons for continuing or stopping being a foster carer

The factors contributing to foster carers feeling satisfied in their role and how these contribute to people leaving or continuing fostering was explored in the interviews and focus groups with foster carers and fostering service staff. Three key themes arose:

- receiving sufficient support from fostering services
- feeling valued and respected by fostering services and social workers
- the adequacy of financial support and administration.

2.2.1 Support from fostering services and social workers

- Positive experiences of support while fostering included having a reliable and easily contactable social worker and being given support without having to ask or advocate for it. Additionally, having a consistent social worker over time allowed for foster carers to develop strong and trusting relationships.
- Formal structures such as **Mockingbird**⁵ constellations or support hubs were also mentioned as positive examples of support.
- Foster carers particularly reported a lack of support during times of transition of children's placements, when trying to access and coordinate support for children's additional needs (for example, special educational needs, or mental health) and when crises arose.
- Foster carers reported that social workers often dismissed their concerns – or felt judged for their concerns – rather than providing meaningful support.
- Foster carers noted that high staff turnover, high staff workloads, a lack of understanding of the fostering task and a lack of communication and coordination between social workers and social care teams all contributed to a lack of support.

- A key issue that arose around support was the lack of ability to access sleepovers or short break care.
- Foster carers also expressed a need for greater emotional support from fostering services.



We're all trying to do the same job, we're all trying to look after children, but you need to look after the foster carers too.

Interviewee



Foster carers who rate the support they receive from their fostering service as

excellent/good

are more likely to recommend and continue fostering.



Overall, the findings highlight that receiving sufficient, consistent support is a challenge faced by foster carers and that this is one of the determinants of foster carer retention.

⁵ <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/mockingbird-programme>

2.2.2 Feeling respected and valued as a foster carer

The interviews and focus groups found that foster carers felt that their knowledge around how to care for a child and of specific children's needs was often dismissed and not respected. Foster carers also expressed frustration around feeling judged by some social workers, which they report as being particularly prevalent when they raised issues or concerns whilst fostering. Communication from the fostering services and social workers was reported to feel 'dictatorial' and non-collaborative.

Positive experiences were noted by foster carers when social workers and fostering services treated them as an equal member of the professional team caring for a child. This included being invited to professional meetings and actively involved in decision making around the child. Being made to feel genuinely appreciated was noted as a key factor in feeling valued and respected.

If there is an issue, [social workers] can make you feel worthless or like you've not been doing a good job. I think that's why many people leave. It's the judgemental attitude that people find hard to swallow and hence decide to move on.

Interviewee



I really admire the social workers. I think it's an amazing job - really hard and incredibly responsible. But they need to accept the foster carers are doing a good job too and that without the foster carers, the entire thing does fall apart.

Interviewee



Example of good practice: Fostering Wellbeing

Fostering Wellbeing⁶ is funded by Welsh Government and delivered by The Fostering Network in Wales. It brings together all professionals involved in supporting children who are looked after, including foster carers, promoting equality of status. It encourages professionals to work together with a focus on improving children's wellbeing and sharing best practice across service boundaries.

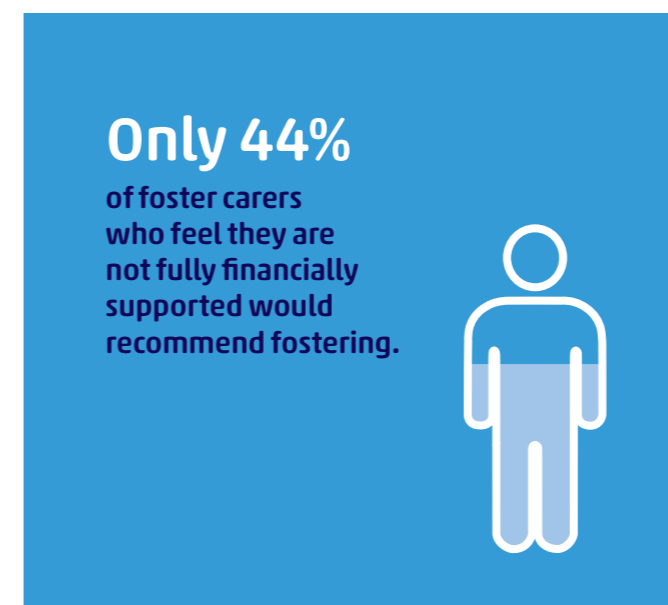
A recent pan-Wales evaluation⁷ has found the programme to embed a clear understanding of the role of the corporate parent as being everyone's responsibility. It identified that foster carer participants felt empowered to become stronger advocates for the children in their care.

⁶ <https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/fostering-wellbeing>

⁷ <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/Evaluation%20of%20Fostering%20Wellbeing.pdf>

2.2.3 Financial support and administration

In the State of the Nation 2021 survey, only **61 per cent** of respondents reported that the allowance and expense claims cover their cost of fostering. Of those foster carers who say the costs of caring for a child are met, **63 per cent** would recommend fostering to others, while only **44 per cent** of those who say that the costs are not met would recommend fostering to others. These differences are statistically significant meaning that it is highly likely that an insufficient allowance results in foster carers having a less positive experience of fostering.



Covering costs was particularly challenging for single foster carers who did not have financial support from a partner, and most participants noted that the financial compensation was not sufficient to sustain themselves without alternative income.

We shouldn't be worrying about making ends meet, we should be focusing on caring for the children.

Focus group participant



Foster carers reported that payments were often very delayed (in some cases by months), that they received incorrect payments and that there was no way of knowing what payments covered the allowance, fee or other expenses. This means they were unable to see how much they had been compensated. Several participants reported being overpaid by several thousand pounds without knowing due to the lack of paperwork, and that local authorities then demanded repayment with very little notice.

A lack of information around rates of pay for different types of care a foster carer provides and other types of compensation (council tax exemption, parking permits etc.) make it challenging for foster carers to plan. Foster carers said that the financial aspects of fostering did not feel professional, which was frustrating and demotivating and took time and effort away from their caring role.

They need to get this right so as soon as you start you are properly compensated and don't have to fight for it.

Focus group participant



Contributing to the overall feeling of satisfaction in fostering was whether the financial support provided by the fostering service - the allowance - covered the expenses incurred by the foster family in caring for a child.

Foster carers also experienced administration errors being made around documents for the child. This included incorrect information about children before and during placements, forms having to be repeated because information had been lost and delegated paperwork being delayed. These issues had significant effects on their ability to provide adequate care for the children they were looking after.

2.2.4 Other contributing factors to considering stopping or continuing fostering

- **Peer support:** Foster carers who hold employment alongside their fostering role experienced difficulties with building social connections with other foster carers (many of those who do not work meet up during the day), joining meetings and being available for visits from social workers if they were organised during working hours.
- **Information sharing:** Foster carers described that they had experienced challenges around receiving little or no information about a child that was to be placed in their care.
- **Matching:** If foster carers felt that they were not well matched to meet a child in their care's needs, they were more likely to consider giving up fostering; in the State of the Nation 2021 survey, **20 per cent** of those who **had not** had a positive match in the past 24 months would consider giving up fostering as opposed to **seven per cent** of those who **had** a positive match – this difference was statistically significant.
- **Allegations:** Some foster carers noted that if they experienced another unfounded allegation they would resign from the role, as they could not go through the process again. This finding reiterated the messages from the State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 thematic **report on allegations**.⁸

Case study: experience of combining fostering with other work

After considering fostering for a number of years, Helen applied to become a foster carer when she was finally at a place in her life where she could work self-employed from home flexibly and foster at the same time.

Helen was a single foster carer. She had preferred to be matched with a teenage girl, which she felt would best suit her training, skills and knowledge. Instead, she had young people placed with her on a short-term basis who required intensive support.

Neither young person Helen cared for was in school much and support that was promised from health care professionals or the fostering service (in the form of short breaks) did not come through. She found that she was not able to do her own work alongside her fostering role, which contributed to her decision to stop fostering. She had envisioned fostering as a commitment for at least five years, so it was hard for her to leave after two years. Helen has maintained a relationship with the young people she cared for after they moved on.

2.3. Reasons why foster carers continue fostering, despite facing challenges

Foster carers explicitly noted continuing for the children, with some foster carers noting that deep and complex motivations to foster are not always acknowledged or covered in assessments and supervision.

One aspect that was discussed was whether foster carers expected the challenges of fostering before they began, with the general sentiment that if you expected the challenges, you felt more likely to continue.

Despite challenges, the relationships with other foster carers and support staff – particularly supervising social workers – led foster carers to continue fostering. These relationships often contributed to a sense of community.

Foster carers reported continuing fostering because of the children they care for, in spite of a lack of support. Foster carers are more likely to be retained and can provide better care for children when they feel well supported, respected, and are provided with a well-organised fostering service with adequate pay.

2.4 Reasons for leaving a fostering service

18 per cent (n=331) of foster carers who responded to the survey had stopped fostering for a service. These respondents were asked to select the main reasons for this. The top three reasons were:

- decided to apply to another service (**36 per cent**)
- relationship with the fostering service (**20 per cent**)

- wanted more support from the fostering service (**19 per cent**).

Foster carers in our focus groups spoke about switching services primarily for better support, greater respect and for a better experience with the fostering service (including pay, administration and perceived support if there were an allegation).

2.4.1 The exit process

From the interviews with foster carers who had left, they had generally not had a conversation with the fostering service about their decision to resign. They would have valued the chance to think about resigning more carefully with the service, since it is difficult to change the decision once the 28-day notice period comes into effect.

Some foster carers noted the long application process as a barrier to their decision to begin fostering again. They would have valued a fast-track option for recently resigned foster carers, to allow for changes in decisions around stopping.

Foster carers also commented that they would have found it helpful to have the option to do something around fostering that was less intense than having to be a full-time foster carer.

The findings from this research suggest that feeling unsupported, being treated with a lack of respect by fostering services and having bureaucratic and unprofessional processes around fostering are key when considering how to improve the retention of foster carers.

⁸ https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-04/State%20of%20the%20Nation%20Thematic%20report%20%20Allegations_0.pdf

2.5 Improving foster carer retention

Provide more support to foster carers:

- The interviews highlighted that foster carers who had stopped fostering would have valued more in person, proactive support offered by social workers.
- Foster carers would have liked support when coordinating care and services for children, in urgent and safeguarding situations and in organising short breaks through support networks known to the carer and child.
- Foster carers mentioned they felt as though some social workers did not have sufficient training or an in-depth understanding of what it was like to be a foster carer. This prevented them from being able to provide insightful advice and support when needed.

Show appreciation and respect towards the role of foster carers: foster carers want to be invited to 'professional meetings' and feel appreciated. They want social workers to collaborate with them to find solutions to issues, for their knowledge and skills in caring for children to be respected and heard in decision making processes. They feel this would generate a feeling that foster carers are on the 'same team' as social workers, which would increase retention and feelings of wellbeing among foster carers.

Act on foster carers' feedback and complaints: foster carers value when their complaints and issues are listened to and considered by the fostering services.

Improve and standardise fostering

processes: this was raised as an overarching recommendation for improving multiple challenges experienced by foster carers.

Foster carers wanted better pay and for financial administration to be accurate and treated more professionally.

Foster carers also felt that retention would be improved if they had inductions, better training and support, professional mentoring and support throughout their time as a foster carer.

In doing this, foster carers explained that it would ensure standards for foster carers would be kept high and subsequently improve retention.

Be more respectful and aware of different cultures and diversity: this was spoken about generally and in particular instances, with one interviewee noting 'discrimination pushes people out'.

Reduce social worker turnover: high social worker turnover led to foster carers' experiences of errors in administration and inability to form strong, consistent relationships with social workers.

Provide appropriate support for children: foster carers feel that appropriate support – such as life story work and in school – was important for both the children and foster carers.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are targeted at making improvements to the retention and recruitment of foster carers to ensure we grow and support fostering households from diverse backgrounds with a range of experiences to support better matching and stable foster care for children and young people.

Recommendations for Government:

Recruitment

- **Mentoring schemes:** Introduce and evaluate buddying/mentoring schemes to assess the effectiveness in offering wraparound support to prospective foster carers during the approval process. These schemes could be trialled and evaluated through the regional pathfinders. Any evaluation should assess the impact of matching buddies/mentors by different demographics.
- **Communications and marketing:** Ensure that recruitment marketing and communications to promote fostering are co-produced with young people, foster carers and fostering services. They should be targeted at local/regional need, be child-focussed, communicate the complexity of the foster carer role and showcase the difference foster care makes to children and young people.

Retention

- **Financial support:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances using up to date evidence to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child and ensure all foster carers receive a regular fee payment which recognises their time, skills and expertise.

- **Short breaks:** Amend the foster carer assessment process to include the establishment of a support network of known trusted adults who can offer short breaks for children and support to foster carers.
- **Information sharing:** Introduce information sharing standards for children's placing authorities to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching. In developing these standards, Government should consult with foster carers about what level of information they feel is appropriate to enable them to care for children.
- **Allegations:** Commission a 'deep dive' into allegation investigations in foster care including analysis of current policies and processes and how they are working in practice for children and carers.
- **Consistency for the foster care offer:** Develop a best practice framework for foster care to provide consistency to the foster carer offer as part of the Government's plans to develop a Children's Social Care National Framework.

Recommendation for Ofsted:

- **National data collection:** Introduce clear definitions around enquiries to become a foster carer, categories to code the reasons for withdrawing applications and main reason for leaving fostering, including if foster carers left as a result of an allegation.

Recommendations for fostering services:

Recruitment

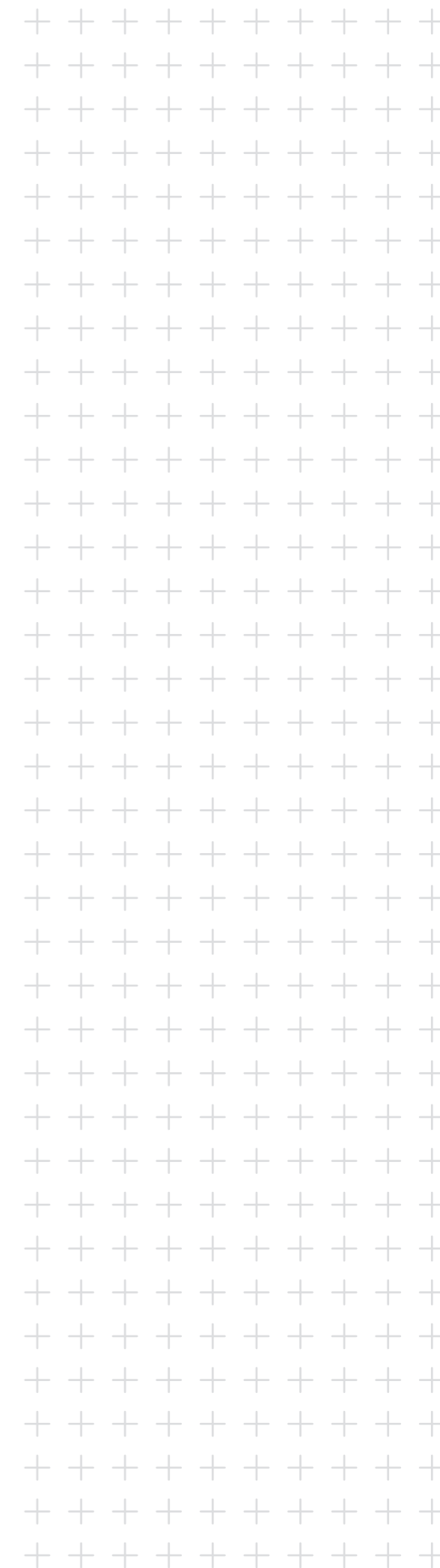
- **Application and approval process:** Review the application and approval process considering the following principles:
 - **Lived experience:** young people and foster carers should be involved throughout the recruitment and approval process including initial recruitment, open evenings, pre-approval training and mentoring. This could also help with the retention of foster carers, demonstrating that their contributions are valued.
 - **Quality relationships:** limit the number of social workers that prospective foster carers work with, from initial contact all the way through to matching. This allows prospective foster carers to build trusting relationships with a key social worker ensuring consistency, stability and limiting bureaucracy. It also allows honest conversations about the role to be facilitated early in the process to inform decision-making and ensure newly approved foster carers are well-equipped for the role.
 - **Flexibility:** the assessment should consider the needs and schedules of the applicant.
 - **Transparency:** about what the process entails, how long it is expected to take and the support available.
 - **Cultural sensitivity:** all social work professionals (including panel members) assessing and approving foster carers should feel confident in initiating or engaging in discussions about matters related to culture, language, ethnicity and religion.
- **After an application is withdrawn:** Fostering services should seek the relevant permissions to store the details of and keep in touch with people who enquire to foster but don't submit an application or withdraw an application. This would allow the service to keep engaging with people who are thinking about fostering (e.g. through newsletters and inviting them to follow-up events).

Retention

- **Support:** Ensure there is quality, pro-active, wraparound support for foster families available at the point of need, including specialist out of hours and peer support.
- **Delegated authority:** Actively involve foster carers in decision making about a child in their care including being invited to meetings and having the appropriate authority delegated to them to make decisions for the children they look after, as any other parent would.
- **Transparent administration:** Provide timely transparent administration of payments to foster carers including what covers the allowance, fee and any other expenses.
- **Exit interviews:** Offer all resigning foster carers an exit interview to inform service development and retention and recruitment strategies.
- **Career pathways:** Develop career pathways for foster carers who wish to reduce their commitment to the fostering role. This could be (and not limited to) becoming a significant adult, providing regular short breaks, offering community services, peer mentoring, befriending or providing training.

Recommendations for further research:

- **Exploring differences by demographics:** Investigate how the application process and length varies by group and the experiences of specific groups of potential foster carers that are under-represented in the current workforce and our research sample (such as Black Caribbean, working foster carers, and younger prospective, current, and former foster carers).
- **Withdrawing applications:** Conduct research with prospective foster carers, especially those who do not complete applications, to understand why they do not continue to become a foster carer.





About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in foster care. We support foster carers to help transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all children and young people in foster care experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

About CEI

The Centre for Evidence and Implementation envisions a world where people can improve their lives through support that is equitable and effective. They are a global, for-purpose evidence intermediary and advisory organisation dedicated to using the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of people facing adversity.

About KPMG Foundation

KPMG Foundation work with others to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK, so they are safe, healthy, happy and learning. Their current focus areas include improving the lives of care experienced children and young people.

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