Chapter 4
Key messages – fostering teams

As part of research for this guide, discussions were held with four fostering services. These had considerable success in both recruitment (proportionate to the agency size) and Ofsted inspections. Although they reflect only a small proportion of total fostering services, their successes in recruitment and retention mean that they provide valuable data.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were carried out with a range of staff, including registered managers, heads of fostering teams, team managers and supervising social workers, who are responsible for assessing fostering applicants as part of their role.

Staff were presented with the following questions:

- What are the demographics of the children you are seeking foster carers for?
- What are your current numbers of foster carers, in joint/single households?
- What is the age demographic of your carers?
- What is the diversity of carers who are approved?
- How successful are you in matching children with carers who share the same religious, ethnic and cultural background?
- How successful are you in recruiting carers for larger sibling groups?
- Do you have a specific recruitment team? Do you find this to be more effective?
- What do you consider to be successful recruitment?
- What are your current retention figures for foster carers?
- What do you feel are the key components to retention?
- What do you consider as being successful retention?

WHAT DID THE INTERVIEWS TELL US ABOUT RECRUITMENT?

Reviewing past applications when applicants have historically been refused by the service

The discussions revealed that where managers had joined the fostering service and decided to review historical applicants who had been refused, this was beneficial in understanding recruitment strategies. Thresholds and requirements can change over time, and therefore if an applicant, e.g. had historically been refused due to wanting only younger children, but now there was a demand for that age group, it was helpful to reengage to see if they were still interested in fostering.

> *Manager 1: When entering his role, he undertook a historical check on refused applicants and discovered that the rationale for some being refused by the fostering agency was not proportionate. He provided examples of applicants being ruled out for having no dining table, or bottles of wine in the fridge, or applicants who had just moved house. When following up with these applicants, Manager 1 found a large majority had been recruited by IFPs after being refused by the authority's fostering service.*

This is a good practice approach for recruitment managers joining a service to get a better understanding of the message that has historically been provided by them and then working to (if needed) change the recruitment message so it reflects current requirements. Research has also highlighted the importance of adopting more flexible and open approaches to selection in order to reduce bias against specific groups (Luke and Sebba, 2013).

Screening calls/initial conversations

Recruiting requires considerable investment from services to enable quick responses to enquirers, particularly when responding to advertising and social media campaigns. At times, this can be less successful as nothing is guaranteed:

> *Following a Facebook campaign, we had 33 people interested to attend the virtual event and only one person attended. Staff had taken time out to be part of the event so it was disappointing, but it provided the one person with our undivided attention.*

However, a quick response to enquiries can be effective in recruitment. All four fostering services shared that one of their main recruitment successes has occurred because they tend to be the first agency to respond to applicants. Larger services had implemented an enquiry line that ensured responses to all fostering enquiries within a 24-hour window. Interviewees recognised that most applicants will contact several agencies when making

initial enquires, and how and when they respond can impact recruitment success.

> *Manager 3: Being part of a smaller agency enables me to monitor the initial process, the telephone screening completed by social workers before a decision is made by the senior social worker or myself to make a decision if it should proceed. Applicants like discussions with a social worker as they are able to speak about some of the practical elements of fostering.*

Clear advertising message about what is offered by the service

Agencies may utilise established models for fostering, such as the Mockingbird programme (Fostering Network), an approach that nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families and supports them to build a resilient and caring community of satellite families. Mentioning this during recruitment can be a helpful "selling point" for recruiting carers, particularly regarding Mockingbird, as the model enables prospective carers to build a support network, which can be a good incentive for those who may not have significant people in their network who can be a source of practical support and guidance.

> *Manager 3: The agency has been very successful in the placement of sibling groups, due to the recruitment of carers who can accommodate them, but also because they use a Mockingbird model, which enables us to consider two carers who may be part of the same constellation group to care for a sibling group.*

Approach to initial visits/forms

All the fostering services highlighted that reviewing their initial visit forms was an important part of changes they made to their recruitment process. They recognised that this form was the first main document to support carer engagement and recruitment, and therefore it was important to consider what was needed at this stage. Having a long form that focused on getting through a series of questions was not considered effective, and may be rather offputting to prospective carers, rather than focusing on relationship building between the agency and potential applicants at this stage.

The initial visit is also the opportunity to share information about the fostering service, alongside the prospective carers asking questions. The importance of this opportunity and information sharing is supported by research findings that highlight support as a key motivator for applicants when considering which agency to foster for (Fostering Network and DfE, 2015).

For many of the fostering services, the initial visit was completed within seven days of the initial contact; again, recognising the importance of a timely response when agencies may be in competition with others. Initial

visits should also be an important opportunity for services to be open and transparent about the checks and references process. When services are clear about expectations from the start, this prevents issues arising later during assessment, and can also prevent delay. Potential applicants should be prepared by talking them through the assessment process, alongside ensuring that services are meeting their safeguarding requirements of safer recruitment.

The timing and pace of engagement with applicants

Fostering staff recognised that the pressures of recruitment on agencies and their timescales can often result in pressure for applicants to agree to a process they may not be ready for. Fostering services need to consider how these pressures may be offputting to prospective carers – if this results in applicants withdrawing during assessment, this represents a notable loss of the time, cost and resources agencies have expended. Some therefore took a more staggered and connected approach with applicants who seemed hesitant. Instead of closing initial contacts and referrals, staff supported and developed applicants' knowledge of fostering so they had the opportunity to enter the assessment process when they felt ready. This could also mean that discussions may not be covered in just one initial visit.

> *Manager 2: In the first year of the agency's setup, the focus was to raise awareness about fostering and develop trust within the local communities. Those individuals in the community wanted to have direct face-to-face conversations, and whilst they found leaflets useful, prospective foster carers benefited from conversations that enabled them to ask questions specific to their family's circumstances, and for the agency.*

> *Manager 3: Enquiries do not need to be rushed and should be undertaken at the pace of the applicant, and whilst there are pressures to recruit, some foster carers need more time than others before taking the step to go through the assessment process, so we work to maintain contact and answer as many questions as possible.*

KEY MESSAGES

- **Invest in and engage with staff so they understand the fostering service's "vision", to better equip them for discussions with prospective applicants.**
- **Do not underestimate the importance of outreach and investment in local communities to create discussions and exposure to fostering.**
- **Consider looking into previous recruitment processes to apply learning and service improvement.**

- **Share information about the agency in the initial stages, to inform prospective foster carers of what can be offered.**
- **Initial contact should focus on building a rapport alongside gathering information to enable a meaningful interaction between the service and the prospective carer.**
- **Revisit initial enquiries and maintain links with those applicants who have initially enquired but may need more time to consider before they apply.**

Targeted recruitment based on demographics of children needing foster homes

The focus of recruitment campaigns should reflect the demographics of children needing foster homes in the local area. When fostering services do not take this into account, they risk having approved carers who are underutilised, or who may either leave and/or join other services. Research highlights that matching in foster care is complex and uncertain, and determined by fostered children's characteristics and the quality and skills of the carer (Zeijlmans *et al*, 2017). Part of a successful recruitment strategy is for agencies to understand the demographics of looked after children within their area who require a foster home.

CASE STUDIES

- In one fostering service, the children being referred and considered were majority White/British, but 18 per cent were non-white British, with 10 per cent of those being unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The focus of the service's recruitment was on recruiting prospective foster carers who could offer care for children who did not share their cultural, ethnic or religious background – thus ensuring they had sufficient carers for this group.
- A fostering service focused on recruiting foster carers who were able to look after sibling groups, as these were increasing in the area. The recruitment strategy prioritised applicants with enough beds/space to accommodate siblings who could not share a bedroom.
- The same service highlighted that within their area, there were a high number of adolescents with mental health needs. Part of their recruitment "offer" was training provided by the Solihull Parenting Approach.[5] The agency offers three training events before approval, with one being an introduction to therapeutic parenting. Staff also make available their training manual to all carers being assessed, to provide them with an opportunity to develop very early on in the process.

5 This focuses on supporting mental health and wellbeing (www.solihullapproachparenting.com/).

This approach has been taken by other local authorities where bespoke training courses have been created for foster carers to look after teenagers by upskilling existing carers to meet the demand (Fostering Network and DfE, 2015).

Demographics of foster carers

When considering the national picture of foster carer recruitment in terms of age, staff in some fostering services noted successes in recruiting carers from younger age brackets. Whilst many foster carers are aged over 50 (in line with Ofsted statistics), one fostering service had a majority of carers between the ages of 30–45. One service had a push within their advertising campaigns to represent carers of various ages, which encouraged younger carers to apply.

There is a national shortage of foster carers from diverse backgrounds (as explored later in Chapter 5). All the fostering services shared the national picture of finding it difficult to locate foster homes for children where the carers shared the same culture, ethnicity or religious background. One service, which has been highly successful in recruiting foster carers from diverse backgrounds, noted the importance of targeted recruitment, which requires more localised contact with community groups as opposed to large social media recruitment campaigns. In communities where English is a second language, information can get lost in translation, so developing links and sharing information about the process can break down barriers. Research also shows that potential barriers to fostering can be created by myths held by wider communities of what the role entails (Sebba, 2012).

Manager 2 shared that his strategy was to go out into the local communities to recruit from black and global majority communities. 'We set up events at local community centres and in local restaurants. We went into Black African/Caribbean/Asian communities, and within those communities where Christian, Sikh, Hindu and Muslim faith groups were represented, ensuring that they had a presence across all local communities.

Regarding good practice when recruiting from diverse communities, it is important for those practitioners at the forefront of recruitment to have cultural humility when engaging with prospective carers. Services should be mindful of the imagery used in recruitment campaigns, which can suggest that foster carers need to be of a certain background to "fit in". This could lead to prospective carers of global majority backgrounds not "seeing themselves" in the advertising. This is also supported by research (Luke and Sebba, 2013), which states that fostering services should adopt more open approaches to recruitment to avoid bias against specific groups.

Interviewees recognised the importance of having a diverse staff group, which represents different genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, cultures

and religions, particularly those communities from which a service is looking to recruit, as this can appeal to prospective applicants. This should be represented on the service's website and recruitment webpages.

However, the main success of fostering services that have successfully recruited from diverse communities has been as a result of word of mouth. Interviewees felt that this was in large part due to their networks and links within those communities, and to fostered children becoming part of those communities when they are fostered. This exposure within the community to fostered children then promotes more curiosity and interest about fostering from carers' extended family and friendship networks.

> *Manager 2: The success of our recruitment strategy has meant that 75 per cent of children placed in our agency share the same religious, ethnic and cultural match as their foster carers.*

KEY MESSAGES

- **The contemporary trend of adult children remaining at home for longer will impact on the resources provided by foster carers, including accommodation for sibling groups.**
- **Consider the potential of carers being able to meet the demographics of children within the area, alongside how support and training can upskill carers to meet the needs of children who do not share the same cultural, ethnic or religious background as their own.**
- **Consider the positive impact of linking with local communities to engage with prospective carers from global majority communities in recruitment campaigns.**
- **Word of mouth is a valuable resource, as it consists of the direct lived experiences of foster carers and professionals working in the sector. Consider providing incentives for carers who promote the service in this way.**

APPROACH TO ADVERTISING

It is important for fostering services to have a clear focus and "brand" in terms of what they offer, not only around their services and support to their prospective foster carers, but also around about who they are as a service. One service had a core vision focused on improving outcomes for children. Successful practice also highlighted the significance of having a marketing/

recruitment manager/officer whose sole focus was on the agency's development and visibility.

> *Manager 1: When I joined the fostering service, the team did not have an identity outside of the larger local authority organisation. We put a team together to focus on recruitment, which included a marketing and communications officer, a bespoke trainer, a social worker and a senior social worker.*

For advertising campaigns, it is important to emphasise "looking through the eyes of prospective foster carers" as members of the public who would not have engaged with social care previously, so use of language and terminology is very important. This includes reducing the use of social work "jargon", e.g. "respite/short breaks care". In one practice example, the service used the term "part-time foster care". This led to a high number of enquiries and assessments of carers who could support the children with disabilities team.

The approach to advertising should be clear about the types of foster carers needed, e.g. if the service requires foster families to care for sibling groups, then it is important that any campaign includes a focus on fostering siblings.

Advertising campaigns can be focused on increasing the exposure of fostering services within society. Agency good practice included targeting local festivals and community events to spread the message of fostering into the community and provide an opportunity to raise discussion levels about fostering. Whilst such campaigns may not result in more applications at the time, they support fostering in becoming a more common topic of conversation – which may increase applications in the longer term. Managers in the fostering services we talked to explained the effectiveness of this approach as being that when people are ready to discuss fostering, they will consider the fostering service they have heard about first. One manager noted that their successful exposure meant an increase in enquiries over a prolonged period.

Advertising campaigns must also consider the longevity of the foster carers they are recruiting for, in terms of how long they are likely to remain in the role based on their own motivation, needs and plans. Agencies can describe an "offer" based on how they will provide support, e.g. focused advertising for one agency was based on the Mockingbird model, as this was established and respected.

Fostering services highlighted that it was important to consider the imagery of children who are fostered. If a diverse range of children need homes in the area, they should be represented in advertising to interest potential foster carers from those communities. Interviewees also felt that images of fostered children should be aspirational and highlight the rewards of fostering, to provide a balance to information about children's difficult early lives.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Consider how foster carers are shown in advertising – does this reflect the demographics of carers the service is looking to recruit?**
- **Consider the images of fostered children used in advertising – do they reflect the current need?**
- **Ensure that staff respond quickly when people make enquiries to foster – this can make a real difference in recruitment.**
- **The timeframes around initial engagement with the fostering service and when an applicant moves to assessment must be considered at the pace of the applicant – not at the pace of the fostering service.**
- **A presentation of a smaller fostering service, "family feel", and "charity" appears to be more appealing to potential foster carers.**
- **Any models of support available to foster carers, e.g. Mockingbird, should be clearly defined in recruitment material.**

WHAT DID THE INTERVIEWS TELL US ABOUT RETENTION?

It is important to consider the link between a fostering service's recruitment offer and the retention of foster carers. Our discussions with fostering services highlighted the significance of ensuring a follow-through on what they offer at the recruitment stage, so this is mirrored in foster carers' lived experiences once approved.

Training offer

The fostering services highlighted the importance of ensuring that their training offer is relevant to the care provided to foster carers, i.e. that the agency not only provides support for the care provided to fostered children, but that it is also proactive in investing in its carers. Agencies need to consider how they engage carers in training, the quality of training provided, and how they consult and review their training offer with their carers.

CASE STUDY

A manager decided to design a bespoke training package after discussions were held with the agency's approved foster carer group. The trainers included social workers and therapists who positively supported foster carer engagement in training. The agency ensured that trainers had a background in well-known approaches, such as the Solihull Approach, which helped in covering bespoke training needs. Research shows that boosting initial and ongoing training can help carers feel engaged and prepared for their role (Randle *et al*, 2016).

Initial support

The level of support for newly approved foster carers will be important for those in their first year of approval, and can impact their longevity in fostering. One good practice approach by an agency was for the recruitment team to hold supervisory responsibility for all the foster carers for the first year of approval, which enabled consistency in the social worker they would have contact with. This also allowed for the high level of support that carers need in the first year, and supported how the carers experienced fostering holistically.

Another good practice example included having experienced foster carers taking on a role as "foster carer buddies" for newly approved carers, as this adds an extra layer of support in the initial approval year and provides an additional element to their support network.

Communication and engagement

There were also good practice examples of how communication is retained with carers and maintaining links, through a regular newsletter and news updates so carers are informed and aware of the team and agency practice.

Some successful examples of engagement included participation groups of foster carers, involving carers in looking at agency policies, procedures and development, and foster carers being directly consulted about changes. This supports them to feel part of the organisation.

Another good practice example involved foster carers being able to contact managers within the agency team, as this enabled accessibility but also accountability of the agency. One registered manager in the group routinely went out to visit his foster carers, not just because of problematic issues such as placement breakdowns or concerns, but also just to "check in". Research shows that foster carers can struggle to report difficulties and openly admit problems and need to feel comfortable to share their concerns, so having different outlets can support those discussions (Adams *et al*, 2018). In further examples of good communication and engagement, agency staff ran weekly "carer surgeries" to give all carers a chance to talk to them,

and some agencies had regular small gestures, like sending birthday cards or thank you cards to carers. It is important to ensure that professionals in the agency have authentic engagement and good communication skills, value carers and treat them as professionals.

Supervising social workers

The emerging theme from all the fostering services consulted was the importance of retention through ensuring that foster carers have the support needed from their supervising social workers – this is a key relationship and has a notable impact on retention. Research highlights the importance of the supervising social worker role in making carers feel appreciated and taken seriously (Randle *et al*, 2016).

Good practice included upskilling supervising social workers, to ensure they have a sound foundation and understanding of statutory processes as well as the ability to supervise, provide guidance and support for the care of children who have experienced trauma. This enables foster carers to feel confident in their support structures and reassured that the guidance they are provided with comes from a point of sound knowledge. (See Davis, 2022 for more guidance on the supervising social worker role.)

Support and intervention

Support is about more than just the children whom foster carers are caring for – it should also include support for them as individuals and for the fostering household. Interviewees felt that supervising staff must understand the importance of taking their time when visiting foster carers, and being aware of the impact that fostering can have on carers' mental health. The impact of parenting stress on foster carers has been documented as one of the reasons carers may leave the role (Arroyo *et al*, 2023).

Good practice examples of intervention that supported carer retention included the Mockingbird model, which helped enable carers not to feel overwhelmed. Research from Fostering Network (2021c) also highlights that Mockingbird carers rated the peer support they received as higher than other non-Mockingbird carers. The provision of respite and day care support also appears to help foster carer retention. The good practice shared by agencies that utilised the Mockingbird model or a similar form of support observed lower resignation and termination of approval rates, and their carers being more likely to recommend fostering to others.

The agencies that utilised an effective out of hours service and had agency therapists or an "intensive worker" to support "fragile" placements of children also appeared to support carer retention.

Fees

All managers felt that the key for retention is the need to compete with other agencies that can offer more in terms of fees. One interviewee noted that their main loss of foster carers occurred when the carer fee was not as competitive as other agencies and that this had been central to people leaving, exacerbated by the recent rises in the cost of living and energy costs – they felt that agencies must understand that foster carers are in a difficult position. This is supported by research from the Fostering Network (2021b), which found that over one-third of foster carers did not feel their allowances met the full cost of caring for children.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Regularly review the level of support provided by fostering services for carers in their first year of approval and those caring for children with complex needs, to reflect children's needs.**
- **Consider the communication strategy between the service and foster carers, with regular updates.**
- **Have a package of support informed by foster carers via conversations with them about what is most helpful and where resources are most needed.**
- **A package of training for experienced foster carers is essential.**
- **The experience of supervising social workers and their ability to understand the needs of foster carers and children is fundamental.**
- **Foster carers who stay may also boost the recruitment of others, through word of mouth.**
- **Review the implications of carers' fees on retention.**
- **Take an inclusive approach to working with foster carers, and promote engagement, so carers feel invested in the agency.**
- **Consider the impact of using services and providing support through the Mockingbird model or other similar approaches.**
- **Utilise rewards and recognition schemes to promote foster carer satisfaction.**

All the managers placed importance on forward thinking, and having ambition for children. It was notable that their main purpose when they began in their role was to recruit safely but equally, with a focus on information and support right from the beginning of a person's initial interest in fostering. These managers were also given the autonomy to follow through on their vision by senior staff, resulting in clear and creative

planning and utilisation of historical information around recruitment to inform their current approach.

Since these interviews were completed, the DfE has produced a research report on foster carer recruitment and conversion rates (Ozan *et al*, 2023). This involved 10 case studies, five with local authorities and five with IFPs. The key findings regarding marketing, advertising and recruitment processes share very similar patterns and themes to those found in our discussions with agencies and highlighted in this chapter.