

Independent Evaluation of Fosterline England

Executive Summary, March 2015

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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.

*Dr. Carolyn Blackburn
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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 Advisors have the knowledge and expertise to support foster carers in their caring role. This report shows Fosterline 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 high social return for children who are fostered. Identifying a value for the return on investment has

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!

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 to the evaluation report.

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.

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 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.

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 in more detail within the evaluation report. In summary, 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. 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 Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Associations 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 1.

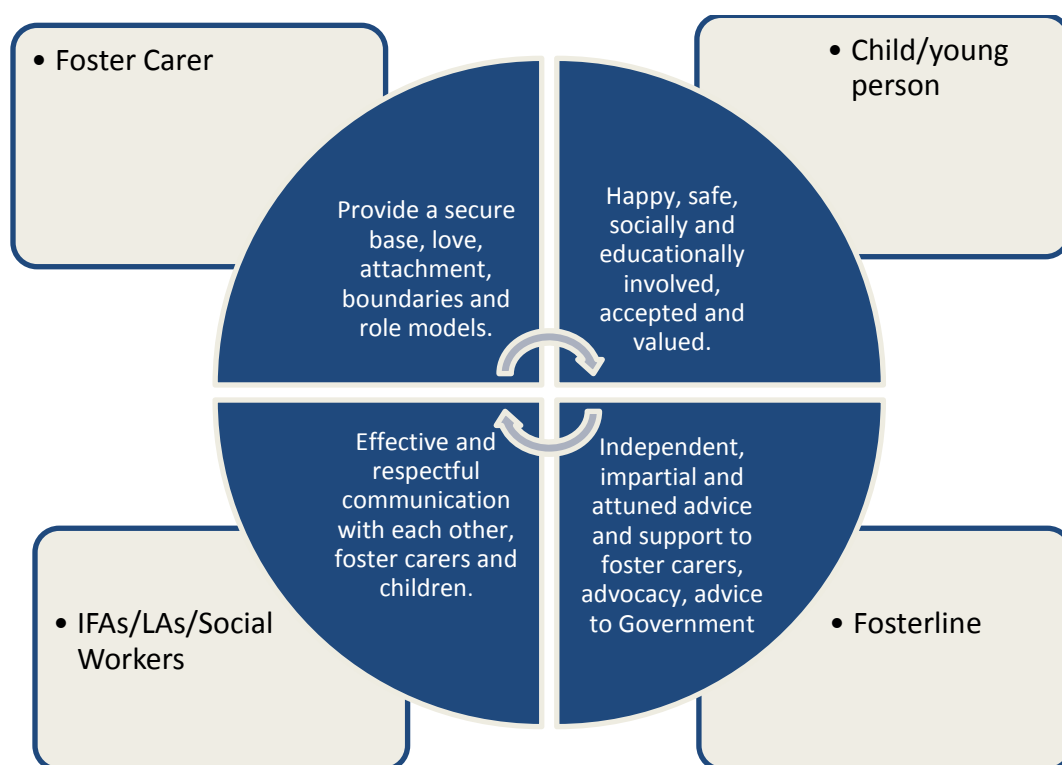


Figure 1: Team around the foster carer approach

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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