

# **MCA Awards 2013**

## **Customer Engagement**

### **Case study**

**iMPOWER Consulting and  
Buckinghamshire, Staffordshire and  
Hertfordshire County Councils**

**Why foster carers care:  
Using advanced behavioural insight  
to help vulnerable children**

**iMPOWER Consulting Limited**  
8<sup>th</sup> November 2012



## 1. Executive summary

Since the tragic death of Peter Connelly, or 'Baby P', in 2007, the number of children taken into care has seen an unprecedented rise. Pressure on Councils is only likely to increase: a recent report by the House of Commons Education Select Committee suggested that "more children at risk should be put into care"<sup>1</sup>.

Until they can be returned to their family, or a more permanent solution such as adoption arranged, the local Council must find a temporary home for these 'looked after' children. Ideally this will be with a qualified and caring foster parent who can provide the child with all the opportunities they deserve.

Traditional Councils systems for recruitment and retention of foster carers are under heightened pressure. More reliance on expensive alternatives such as independent agencies or children's homes is becoming commonplace. At a time when Council budgets have diminished by over 25%, this makes for one of the single biggest pressures facing the sector.

More pioneering councils such as Buckinghamshire, Staffordshire and Hertfordshire are now responding by using our cutting edge behavioural insight to get beyond demographics to find out what motivates people to become, and stay, foster carers, and transforming the way they work.

This new approach puts the customer – the carer – at the heart of the endeavour and our clients ahead of national thinking. They are now on the front foot in the fight to control costs – releasing savings of 6% - and most importantly can ensure that 11% more children will find caring homes and better life chances.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-20226345> 7th November 2012





## 2. Project and Approach

### A national issue for every local community (the client problem)

The UK needs more foster carers.

The Prime Minister is one of many who regularly reminds us, and Councils, of this sad fact. There are more children in care, or 'looked after', than ever before. Approximately 60,000 of these children live with 45,000 foster families who help them achieve their potential. But this 'looked after' number is rising rapidly and at the last estimate by charity Fostering Network, a further 9,000 foster carers were needed across the country.

Without the right foster care placement, a problem can soon develop into a life-changing crisis for a vulnerable child and their family. The child may have to move to a distant location, live with carers who have different values, backgrounds or lifestyles or go into a home. And all these options generate further cost to the public purse, initially within children's services and later within adults' services, storing up further impact for other public agencies such as the Police or Probation.

Pressures like these, combined with contracting budgets, have prompted some local authority finance directors to envisage a situation where they can afford to do nothing else other than provide social care services.

Traditionally, fostering systems in councils have been focused on quality assuring potential foster parents, and ensuring the wellbeing of the child. Social workers bear a heavy burden for getting this right and OFSTED measure the performance of fostering services on this basis.

As a result, systems have perhaps not been as customer-friendly for potential foster parents as they otherwise might have been. Processes are designed around internal systems and not customers, and staff capacity and skills are focused more on assessment and less on recruitment and marketing.

This partly explains why some Councils have lost ground to the private sector in the recruitment of foster carers. There is now a mature market in which independent fostering agencies operate but these placements are usually much more expensive than those recruited by the Council too - the immediate cost difference being between £20,000 and £30,000 per carer per year.





## How we helped our clients innovate to solve the problem (solutions and objectives)

Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Staffordshire have not stood idly by as the financial pressure has increased. They have developed information about what demographic characteristics to look for in prospective carers. They knew what vocations and interests were likely to lend themselves to foster care and therefore where to locate potential recruits, and even what times of year those people might be seriously considering such a huge life change. But this information wasn't enough, because the gap continued to grow on recruitment and retention. Each council was faced with a tough financial target to hit: recruit and retain more foster carers, and save significant sums of money over the next 3 years.

In order to really make a step change, they decided they needed to know *why* those people would apply to be, and then become, brilliant foster carers. They needed a way to understand basic human motivations and behaviours in order to positively influence the 'right' choices, in this case to generate more enquiries and then to sustain that interest throughout the application process and beyond.

They asked iMPOWER to help because we are leading the sector on behaviour-change led transformation. Our method of applying behavioural theories and tools to identify the right incentives for the right people was unlocking huge opportunities in other local public services and together we saw a chance to apply this new thinking to foster care recruitment.

Although the problem was old – the need for more foster carers - the solution was entirely new: to use pioneering techniques to understand foster carers' common values and to redesign recruitment and retention strategies centred on satisfying them.

### What we did (the approach taken)

Whilst each client situation was different, we have drawn the common threads of their experience with us below.

First of all we clarified that the child isn't the only customer in this system. The foster carer is a customer too and we must put them at the heart of the process. The system, which had been so focussed on ensuring compliance from foster carers, wasn't geared up to do that. This therefore required a major cultural shift.

Second we conducted a value-for-money analysis to clarify current performance (using data) and the impact a positive change might have. This felt difficult and distracting to the fostering services who, understandably, wanted to focus on the children, and which often did not have a culture of performance management.

Third we devised improvement hypotheses and lines of enquiry, asking the question: what is it that we could do better or differently to inspire more interest in foster care and sustain that motivation?





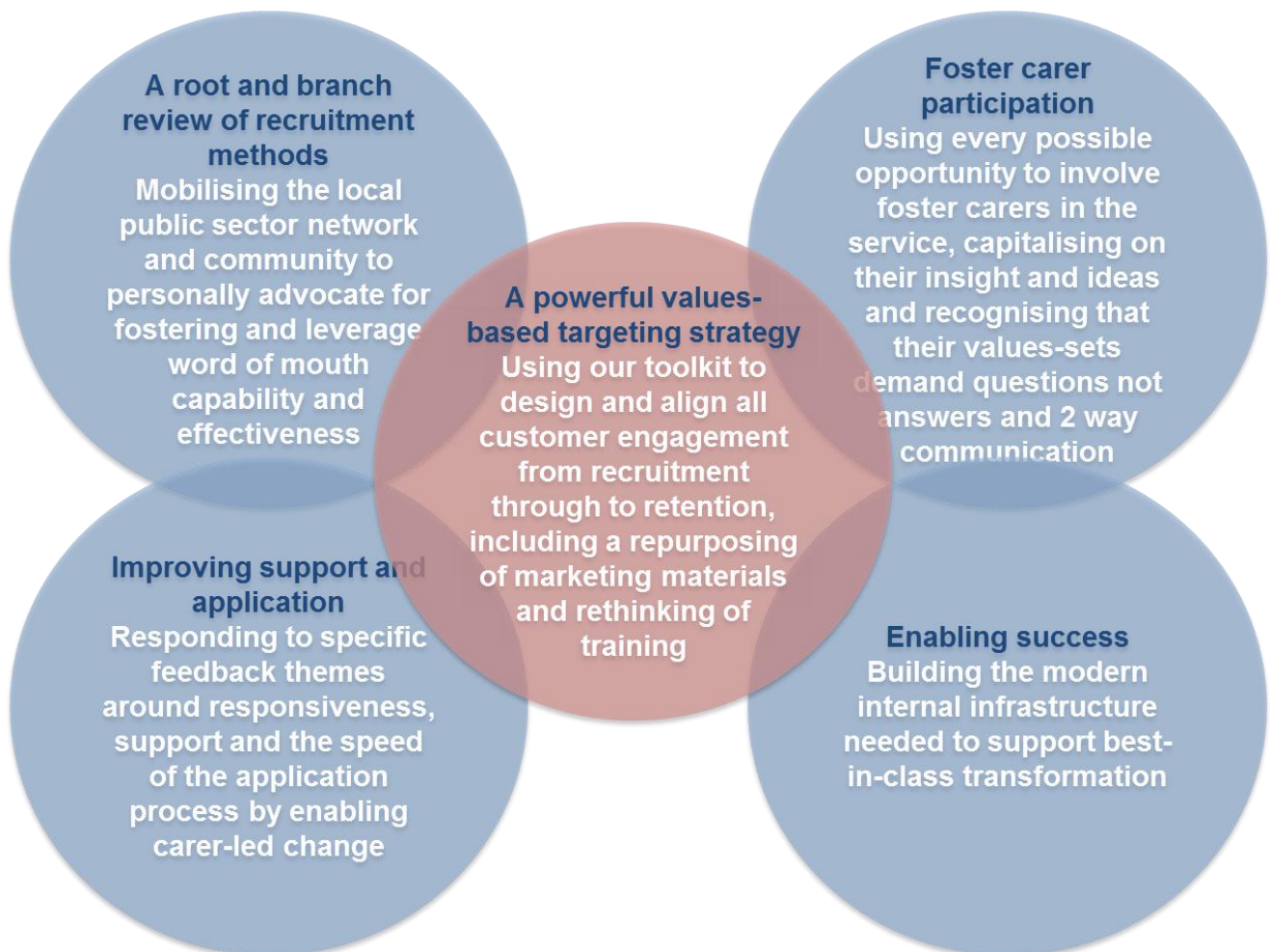
Fourth we segmented the customers according to their values sets - the core innovation to both this project and national thinking. Using a system called Values Modes we identified the core beliefs and behavioural drivers of foster carers in order to predict their needs and choices. This was new and alien.

Fifth we engaged thoroughly with the customers through traditional research methods to test the hypotheses, but with the advantage of the new insight discovered above. This involved facing up to some home truths.

Sixth we analysed all the findings through the lens of the customer values types. This was revelatory.

And finally, we helped our clients turn all this insight and intelligence into positive improvement actions to recruit and retain more carers.

The core recommendations were:





## **How we made it work (how the process was managed, including showing how difficulties were tackled)**

This project inherently puts people at the centre. Because it doesn't start with process or ICT it engages customers and staff (social workers) alike, inspires creative discussion and builds a feeling of co-ownership. Both social workers and foster carers really enjoy talking to and about each other!

Our project teams were formed of both iMPOWER and client colleagues and they used the project methodology to speak extensively with virtually all operational team members and carers. They shared findings, identified issues and planned actions together, promoting buy-in from those delivering and receiving the service.

When hard messages came back from customers, these were sometimes difficult for staff to hear, and challenged years of established practice. But these could now be understood and accepted from a new perspective, and constructively addressed. The project therefore provided a positive avenue through which to revisit old and thorny issues.

Using direct customer quotations such as "I don't think I get enough thank yous" or "we are kept out of the loop" or "I would like to get involved with recruitment speaking to people who have shown an interest as I feel my positive experience is encouraging", for instance, these points could be clearly understood by reference to customers' values and needs, rather than received as criticism.

The insight also uncovered totally new areas of improvement opportunity, most of which could be pursued at low cost and low risk, which would otherwise never have been identified. And because it was the customers and staff who suggested changes, not the team, the improvement actions were accepted and owned.

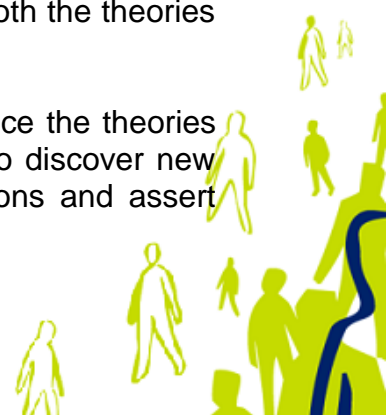
The approach was therefore a process of discovery for our clients; initially of new techniques to understand their customers and subsequently of the best ways to engage with those customers.

## **Our relationships (the client/consultant relationship, including how the consultants positively challenged the client's thinking)**

The behavioural theories underpinning this work are new to public services and, as it was often Chief Executive or other Senior Officers who had sponsored the work, there was initial scepticism and the risk of staff feeling 'done to' on the ground.

The value of this project is in changing the behaviour of the front line staff so this opposition risked undermining it entirely. Bringing staff along with both the theories and the work were therefore critical to its success.

We did so through fun and engaging role-play exercises to introduce the theories and by limiting our role to coaching and facilitation, helping staff to discover new information yet always allowing them to draw their own conclusions and assert







their own recommendations. In the space of 12 weeks this took us from passive opposition to promotion and advocacy, a culture change in itself.

### **Making a personal impact (how the skills and experience of the consultants involved were used to support the project)**

Those engaged in providing local public services are often wary of consultants. Surely they're here to trim the workforce, streamline the process or replace people with ICT? Or to cut costs some other way?

For this project to succeed we had to build support on the front line from the start. Without this, contributions would have muted, resulting actions disowned and ultimately children failed.

Being able to quickly build relationships of trust at all levels is a defining feature of iMPOWER's way of working and we achieve it by using the same tools and techniques we deployed in this project. We take the time and effort to think about our clients and their customers as individuals, with different beliefs and motivations and tailor our engagement accordingly.

Taken together with our technical skills - project management, finance expertise and commercial acumen – this enabled us to quickly become trusted advisors.





### 3. Outcomes

Our clients are delighted with the new insight and buzz this innovative project has generated. They believe it has provided them with the competitive advantage they were looking for and are now striving for new levels of performance.

If only one extra foster carer is found as a result of this project it will surely be worthwhile. If 5 are found it will pay back within a year. However Buckinghamshire County Council is now working towards a recruitment target of 50 (net) additional foster carers by next year and the increased level of enquiries they are receiving from prospective carers indicates this is a realistic expectation. They had previously found it difficult to add any new carers and this would add more than 50% to their placement capacity. Hertfordshire County Council is working towards a net increase of 45 carers – 3 times their average annual gain - and Staffordshire County Council a rise of 20, a fourfold rise. These targets all being against a backdrop where local authorities across the country are struggling just to maintain the same level of foster carers year on year.

Given the savings that arise from the recruitment of one additional foster carer, this equates to total annual savings of over £3 million, and represents an overall return on investment of over 40,000%! Our clients are so confident in these cost reductions they have committed the savings to future budgets.

The project has also provided our Council clients with an added opportunity to listen to some of their most valued customers, and a lasting framework with which to understand and influence their choices.

It has given social workers a common view of their customers and an opportunity to participate in the redesign of the business they care so much about and which are already rated as either Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. It has provided a platform for them to put forward invest-to-save initiatives and revitalise their efforts as well as a ground-breaking prototype change project to share with colleagues in other service areas.

Most importantly of all though, this will mean better outcomes for 150 looked after children at any one time (each carer on average accommodates 1.4 children for 85% of the time). If this success can be replicated across the sector it might just plug the gap cited by Fostering Network.

*Addendum: it can take between 6 months and a year to recruit a new foster carer, so whilst our clients have allocated reduced budgets and are now delivering the planned changes, the recruitment pipeline is still being worked through. In the event we are shortlisted, we will provide a recruitment outcomes update prior to / at interview.*







## 4. Client Testimonials

**Sarah Ashmead, Head of Policy, Performance & Communications at Buckinghamshire County Council said:**

*“Working with iMPOWER was a valuable and enlightening experience. The combination of Alastair's knowledge, skills and use of technique quickly established a belief in the methodology, even for the most sceptical. The effort in understanding us put foundations firmly in place. We were helped to look at our service through our carers' eyes and challenged on ways to recruit and how effective, internal processes were crucial to supporting this. It was "eye-opening"!*

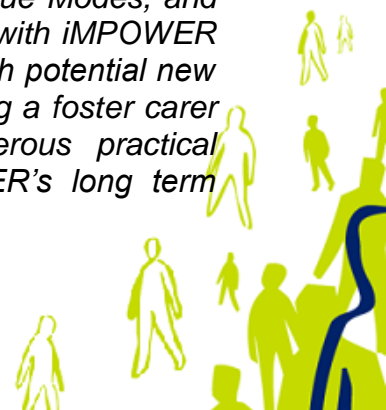
*The Engagement Toolkit has been critical to us offering guidance on how to reach people with different values and motivations and was the basis for a brief for a new marketing plan for recruitment of new carers. It has supported an innovative approach using new messages and methods. The fostering team have embraced a new, positive approach to recruitment and beyond. Month one of the new campaign saw enquiry levels 200% higher than the same time last year.”*

**Marion Ingram, Children's Services Operations Director at Hertfordshire County Council said:**

*“Our fostering service is rated ‘Good’ by Ofsted but this is all the more reason to do more. This is why we partnered with iMPOWER on this innovative project. I expected a redesign of the marketing materials but the project delivered so much more. We are a very large service operating across different areas and functions and this work pulled our staff together. It is enabling us to work as a single team and achieve consensus which had perhaps been difficult before. The insight was fascinating and we now all share a new and common view of our ‘customers’ and a better understanding of one another. The outcomes would not have been possible though had iMPOWER not gelled so well with the team – all 55 of them. Rarely a week went by without a workshop! And most importantly of all, we now have heightened ambitions for extending our high quality service and finding the right placements at the right time for our children.”*

**Richard Hancock, Assistant Director, Looked After Children, at Staffordshire County Council said:**

*“iMPOWER worked closely with the fostering team to baseline current performance and develop a range of innovative approaches to measure the level of opportunity for Staffordshire to increase take-up to our already high performing in-house fostering service. The team introduced new concepts, such as Value Modes, and the effects of this fresh thinking was felt immediately, as together with iMPOWER we revamped the service's approach to the crucial first meeting with potential new recruits. The new approach visibly showcased the benefits of being a foster carer more effectively and helped the team understand the numerous practical applications of this previously unfamiliar methodology. iMPOWER's long term*





*legacy is the way they have critiqued our past practices and constructively challenged the way we view communications with existing as well as potential new foster carers. iMPOWER's collaborative approach has enhanced an already high performing team, with innovative thinking and fresh ideas"*

