

# Fostering Futures

Jeremy Cooper and Alastair Thompson





“Consulting with and listening to foster carers is something we all aim to do all the time. I think this approach adds a focus to do that fully and authentically with a framework for processing what you find out. It was intense but very worthwhile. The big insights – Pioneers, networks, consultation, values, participation – have become common themes in planning our service developments and we’re now working on some major new initiatives across our service.”

**Angela Whitrick,**

*Care Services Team Manager, Surrey County Council*

“Family Values has been really interesting. It has put a different perspective on foster carer motivation and we have now developed a values-based action plan which will allow us to work more closely in partnership with our foster carers. We’re also excited that it has enabled us to secure the investment and resources that we need to make a real difference for our carers and looked after children.”

**Laura Farningham,**

*Team Manager, Recruitment and Assessment, Fostering Service, London Borough of Ealing*

“We were really pleased to work with iMPower and other local authorities on this fascinating exercise. The outcomes have had a significant impact on our future fostering work teams and in particular the way we work with and relate to our foster carers. We are in the process of looking at the most effective way to provide fostering services across Achieving for Children (across both Richmond and Kingston) so the research, and especially the intelligence about branding, came at the perfect time. The networking events also brought home to us the points about peer contact. Being Pioneers, we really valued those sessions.”

**Sylvia Chew,**

*Director of Children’s Social Care, London Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames*

# FOREWORD FROM THE FOSTERING NETWORK

Foster carers are a vital, increasingly professional, component of the team supporting, nurturing and caring for some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

They expose themselves, and often their families, to situations many would think beyond them, fuelled by the desire to make a fundamental difference to the life experience of a fostered child.

Understanding the motivations, personality characteristics and qualities of current foster carers is critical in the development of a successful recruitment and retention strategy. This is with the view to achieving not only sufficiency, but also enough placement choice to match each fostered child with the right foster carer at the right time. The Values Modes theory underpinning the Family Values research has proved an innovative and effective tool to achieve this, as demonstrated in the *Why Foster Carers*

*Care* report and subsequently within this new and exciting programme, which The Fostering Network is proud to support.

With around 13% of the foster carer workforce leaving annually, retaining and developing quality foster carers carries equal weight to the recruitment challenge. Support, generated through positive relationships with social workers and peers, is essential to achieving this – a core element of the Family Values programme. Alongside improved training, communication and recognition through pay and professionalism provided by fostering services, we anticipate a vibrant, committed and effective foster care workforce. As positive word-of-mouth is often seen as a primary reason for making an enquiry to a fostering service, the impact of this on recruitment is clear.

The Fostering Network is pleased to see strategic level commitment and investment from these eight

pioneering authorities on this local and national priority. We champion an effective and efficient sector, combining expertise from local authorities and independent fostering providers to improve foster care and outcomes for looked after children.

Recruiting and retaining foster carers is an ongoing challenge for fostering services across the country. Tools and techniques utilised within the Family Values programme are welcomed to expand our knowledge and ultimately enhance the lives and life chances of children in foster care.

**Jackie Sanders**

*Director of Communications and Public Affairs, the Fostering Network*

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The Fostering Network is pleased to see strategic level commitment and investment from local authorities to address the local and national priority to recruit and retain foster carers.”

**James Foyle**

*Recruitment and Retention Consultant, the Fostering Network*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report serves one primary purpose: to present the case that a national focus on fostering is not only right for vulnerable children but also for the public purse.

We have identified a consistent, nationwide opportunity to make a step change in fostering. Following extensive studies, on site learning, analysis, projects, collaborations and partnerships we have distilled our experience and insight into this report. It includes some fresh insights and primary research and builds on much that councils and others are already doing or trying to do. We argue that fostering offers councils one of the best opportunities to transform a specific service making a speedy, lasting and significant impact in the local area.

This step change would deliver improved outcomes for children and financial savings. We have calculated that the recruitment and retention reforms outlined in this report would improve life chances for **9,000 children**

and save **£150m each year**. In addition they would result in a fundamentally changed culture, within the fostering service and in its relationship with others.

Active citizens, mobilised communities, open hierarchies, professional collaboration ... all point towards a public service architecture that is designed around citizens. Their needs, behaviours, values and motivations provide the guiding lines for change. Listening more intently and actively to foster carers provides the starting point. This is not a report without practical grounding, far from it. The Family Values programme which has been operating across five client sites has provided a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data to share. Our ambition is for more local authorities to explore and use this information and insight. At present, too few are taking advantage of some evidenced and high impact opportunities.

We will explain how foster carers, at an emotional and

motivational level, are atypical of the wider population and that such an insight can be used to more accurately and consistently target prospective recruits and to support them more effectively. Allied to this we will highlight how the local authority agency has a latent brand power that, optimised and magnified, can create and enhance an effect we call **subliminal pull**.

This insight has also created the basis for a new approach to recruitment and retention. This focuses on activating foster carers as agents of recruitment themselves and explains how, when connected with other carers, a **network stimulus effect** occurs which makes the growth and resilience of such groups stronger. Once the community is engaged, there is still much more to do and in this report we explain how a more co-produced approach to the foster carer journey can improve the applicant's experience.

The business of social care is completely dependent on people. Underpinning this report is an assertion that:

- all people who contribute to that system deserve to be valued
- people's individual values drive their behaviour
- the system works best when individual values are aligned with business success.

We have found, taking each in turn, that consistently applying these principles in fostering services leads to the following insights:

- a concerted focus on listening to, involving and engaging foster carers, including in recruiting, supporting others and helping improve the overall fostering system is crucial. The partnership between a fostering service and foster carers is a complex one – part supervisory/compliance and part customer care. Professional supervisory practice is often done very well in difficult conditions, but this has crowded out the 'customer' and 'partner' aspect.
- Understanding foster carers' personal values, which include a strong emphasis on inclusion and

co-production, means the above point is even more important, but also helps us work out how to do this. Foster carers have an unusually common set of values, so understanding and working with these values can release enormous energy for change.

- Completely re-casting the commonly perceived tension between success as a fostering business with the personal motivations of social care staff is achievable. Working through a robust, rounded but simple expression of success enables everyone to fully grasp that business success does align with their personal motivation. Simply put, increased recruitment, retention and use of in-house foster carers improves children's outcomes. This is a powerful tool for cultural change and means you can instil a top to bottom focus on performance and business metrics which actually results in delivered performance improvement.

As the local authority moves away from being an arms-length institution and towards being a collaborative peer alongside citizens and communities,

the opportunity here is significant. Fostering has the potential to be one of the most successful public service reform stories provided we are bold enough to innovate.

# INTRODUCTION

It is a universal aim of local authority (LA) fostering agencies to provide a greater level of placement choice – to recruit and retain more foster carers – for looked after children<sup>1</sup>; because they can usually keep children closer to home and because they can provide a more cost effective solution than independent fostering agencies or children’s homes. We agree with this goal and believe it is achievable at a national level, yet what we are seeing is the opposite<sup>2</sup>. There is a growing reliance on independent agencies to provide placements. This is not by design, but as a result of constraining factors, and it is impairing the life chances of vulnerable children.

On 31 March 2013, just over 52,500 children were in foster care in England. 35,700 (68%) of those children were placed with local authority fostering (‘LA’) agencies and 16,900 (32%) with independent fostering agencies (‘IFAs’)<sup>3</sup>.

IFAs provide a valuable alternative to local authority

agencies. They often operate across local authority boundaries and their development has been encouraged to provide fostering services which could not effectively or efficiently be developed on a local level. By specialising, achieving scale or injecting practice innovation, IFAs can provide an essential and value-for-money service. Some independent fostering agencies are ‘for-profit’, whilst others are ‘not-for-profit’.

Experience to date suggests IFA placements are usually more expensive than those of LA agencies. They do not enjoy the same local economies of scale and in some cases the requirement for a profit margin can push costs up. This is not to say IFAs do not present value-for-money. Any local authority commissioner up and down the country would confirm that a ‘mixed economy’ of supply is critical and it is thoroughly incumbent on those commissioners to guide IFAs to areas in which they can add local value, and even incubate them.

Whether driven by social objectives, a profit motive, or a combination, IFAs have continued to provide a growing number of options for commissioners and, over time, have developed a level of capability which goes significantly beyond the original concept of niche specialist placement provision. It is to the credit of IFAs that they have done so, providing more and more capacity to the extent that they now provide over 30% of all fostering placements, to the benefit of many thousands of children who have been cared for in family settings as a result.

If local authority agencies cannot provide a value-for-money placement service, then IFAs offer an alternative or 'backstop'. However, this is changing. The market has now moved from an equilibrium state to something more unbalanced. In short, this is largely because of local authorities' inability to compete with IFA recruitment practices. As a result, IFAs are becoming an ever more dominant placement provider and, taking this trend to its logical conclusion, local authority provision of foster carers will become

smaller, less economically viable, and eventually extinct.

We argue that such an outcome is unacceptable because local authority agencies could and should, with help, innovate, compete and grow to provide a better service.

An important part of this view is that, with provider scale comes placement choice, not just in types of placement but also in locality. The average distance from a 'looked after' child's home address to the foster family's address is nine miles for local authority agency placements and 17 miles for IFA placements. Sometimes it is in the best interests of the child to be looked after a long way from home but generally it is not. Removal from their school and social network at a time when everything else about their daily life is changing is a poor outcome. A fragmented supply landscape, with no locally focused provider, will only exacerbate this. Local authority fostering services must compete.

# CHAPTER 1

## What is holding local authority agencies back?

Our view is that a range of systemic factors have contributed to this situation. In short, we believe a lack of certain skill sets has eroded confidence and starved the sector of investment and innovation.

As a result of their unique structure, business organisation and management/staff composition, it is difficult for LA fostering services to identify improvement opportunities, articulate with confidence the business case for change, and secure the necessary funding. This, however, is a pre-requisite of survival in the private and third sectors, whatever the motive for service provision.

Local authority fostering services are usually managed by social workers and very capable ones. However, they are not marketeers, recruitment consultants or

even business analysts. We can therefore not expect them to have come across the latest innovations in, say, marketing and recruitment, or have the instincts to prepare a business and financial plan for expansion. These disciplines are very deliberately not in the professional skill sets social workers have developed, nor are they always expected in the higher departmental management structure. As a result, year in year out, local authority fostering service managers find themselves on the receiving end of top-down 'allocated savings targets' that are based on greater in-house provision with too few options to do anything differently. It is no surprise then that the situation only deteriorates, with reliance on IFA providers increasing, looked-after children having to move further away from home and budgets squeezed yet further.

However, we believe such a situation can be turned around – local authority fostering services can and

should compete more effectively with IFAs to provide this community service. With the right skills, local authorities can innovate, improve and ultimately restore the right mix of placement provision.

## Aiming high

The 68% of national in-house provision referenced above masks huge local variation, from 30% to 97%<sup>4</sup>. Our starting point is that 85% represents the optimum. This may be amended following a detailed local analysis of children's placement needs but our local experience, and the range of performance across England, suggests that this is the point at which the benefits of a mixed economy are best realised, especially if LA services can successfully recruit and retain foster carers.

The national benefit of moving from an average LA provision of 68% to 85% is that approximately 9,000 more looked-after children in England will, at any one time, be accommodated closer to home. The financial benefits follow too. Based on an average

Local authority fostering agencies should provide 85% of all fostering placements.

placement cost difference of £17,000 per year<sup>5</sup>, this would generate year-on-year savings of approximately £150m for re-investment in other priorities, such as early help initiatives.

This is why the five sites in our Family Values programme (an iMPower-led fostering service improvement programme) looked externally for different ideas and skills, and why we have written this report.

Fostering is an area which is benefiting from this creative approach, and we believe many more local authorities can innovate. Perhaps more challengingly, we want to explore whether this innovation could provide a blueprint for doing things differently elsewhere in local public service.

## Where to start

The perspective offered by Family Values on the long-standing challenge of developing fostering capacity is that:

- the behaviours of and relationships between social workers and foster carers are the most important aspect of that service, and
- Those behaviours and relationships can be positively influenced when a deliberate approach to doing so is taken.

Rather than internal process or ICT, organisational structure or staff establishments, then, we start with the foster carer and form opinions and make recommendations for service approaches based on their needs.

## Practical tools to understand behaviour

Central to this approach is a means of understanding foster carer needs in a consistent and systematic way. In Family Values we did so by applying a form of value theory, deploying a psychographic classification system called Values Modes, which is owned and developed by our partner Cultural Dynamics Strategy and Marketing Limited.

Values Modes is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and operates on the principle that all our choices and behaviours are fundamentally an attempt to actualise what is important to us – our values. Therefore, if we can understand a person's values – their primary beliefs and motivations – we can infer, before any further information about that person, a number of useful 'rules' about what they will and won't value. From the content of messages, the messenger of those, or the communication channel, we can devise a framework for positively engaging with them. This

information can also tell us where we are likely to find people in certain values segments.

## Values Modes

Values Modes is a proprietary system<sup>3</sup>, which categorises people into 12 discrete psychographic types, each group representing between 5% and 15% of the population aged 15 years and over.

The categorisation is based on responses to a short questionnaire which was included within the national survey.

Values Modes is based on the psychological theory of motivation developed by Abraham Maslow and summarised in his Hierarchy of Needs. Within Maslow's hierarchy, three primary motivational levels are recognised – the Settler (Sustenance Driven), the Prospector (Outer Directed) and the Pioneer (Inner Directed).

The driving Settler (Sustenance Driven) needs are core physiological needs, safety and security and belonging.

Some typical Settler characteristics are:

- family and home, and caring for them, tend to be at the centre
- for those living alone, friends take the place of family
- tradition and family structure are important
- prefer things to be 'normal'
- naturally conservative (with a small 'c')
- security conscious - wary of crime, violence and terrorism
- supportive of tough punishment for criminals
- wary of change, especially for its own sake
- more comfortable with regular and routine situations
- concerned about what the future holds.

This manifests in behaviours which are concerned with looking for rules with which to comply and normality

with which to conform in order to acquire safety and security.

The driving Prospector (Outer Directed) needs are the esteem of others and self-esteem. Some typical Prospector characteristics are:

- success oriented
- always want to 'be the best' at what they are doing
- welcome opportunities to show their abilities
- take great pleasure in recognition and reward
- look to maximise opportunities
- will take opportunities for advancement and professional networking
- trend and fashion conscious
- like new ideas and new ways
- generally optimistic about the future.

This manifests in behaviours which are concerned with competing successfully within a system in order

to acquire reward, recognition and ultimately external affirmation.

The Pioneer (Inner Directed) needs are aesthetic cognitive and self-actualisation. Some typical Pioneer characteristics are:

- trying to put things together and understand the big picture
- concerned about the environment, society, world poverty, and so on
- always looking for new questions and answers
- strong internal sense of what is right and what is wrong
- strong desire for fairness, justice and equality
- self-assured and sense of self-agency
- generally positive about change, if it seems worthwhile
- cautiously optimistic about the future.

This manifests in behaviours which are concerned with

breaking down (or putting up) barriers to realise what is perceived as 'the right thing'.

Within each of the three Values Modes, the system ascertains four different sub-groups. These provide a spectrum to identify individuals' character traits within each values segment, identifying the subtle differences within each Values Mode.

For more information visit [cultdyn.co.uk](http://cultdyn.co.uk)

When developing this approach, we conducted a literature review of research centred on foster carer characteristics and found those studies largely focused on demographic markers such as income, age, vocation and so on. While this can certainly help in identifying targeting factors such as professions or the times of life at which fostering is considered, our view was that it was, at best, a half measure in terms of the analysis required to support a renaissance in local authority provided placements. Consequently, it didn't offer commentary on why people made such a life changing decision, and therefore couldn't provide

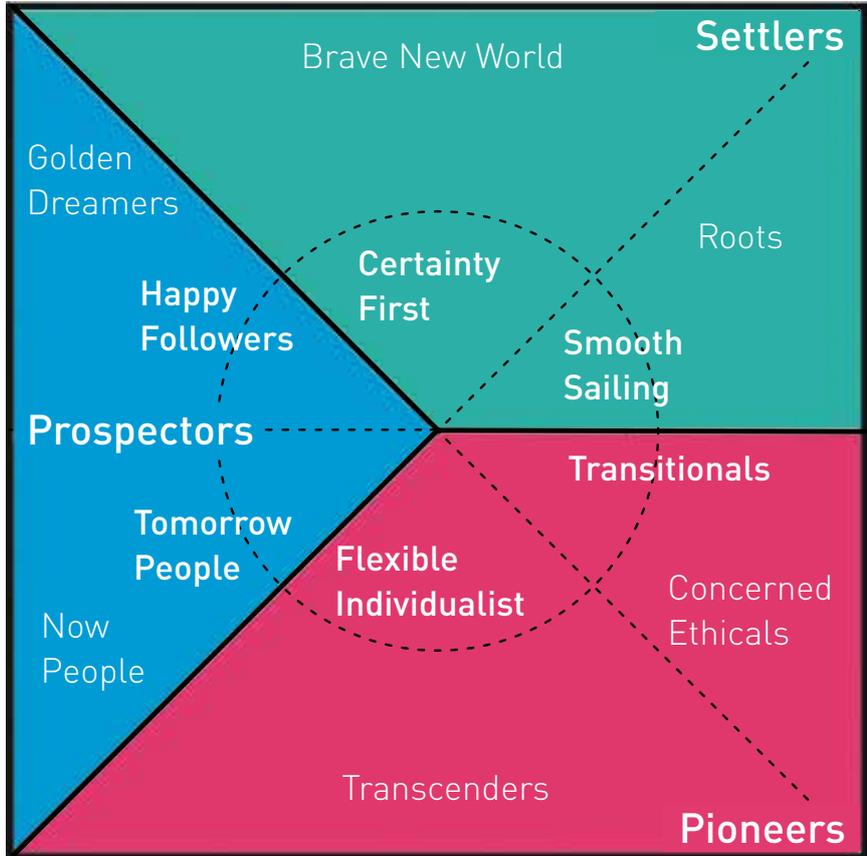
useful guidance on how to engage them.

## Following the carer journey

Fostering is in many ways a straightforward business. A local authority (the 'corporate parent') must understand demand – the needs of the children who are or are becoming looked-after – and then develop supply (foster care) capacity around those needs.

Taking the needs of the children as known and given (this would otherwise require a separate paper) we focus here on the foster carer's journey and experience. For all local authority services, that journey has common elements.

First, there is the act of enquiring with an agency; then the journey from enquiry to approval including screening, training and assessment; then the experience of being matched and placed with children and finally of the support received during placement (or when there is no placement). The Family Values analysis follows this journey and experience.



## CHAPTER 2

In this chapter we set out some of the key findings from Family Values, on both the values of foster carers and on the experience they reported.

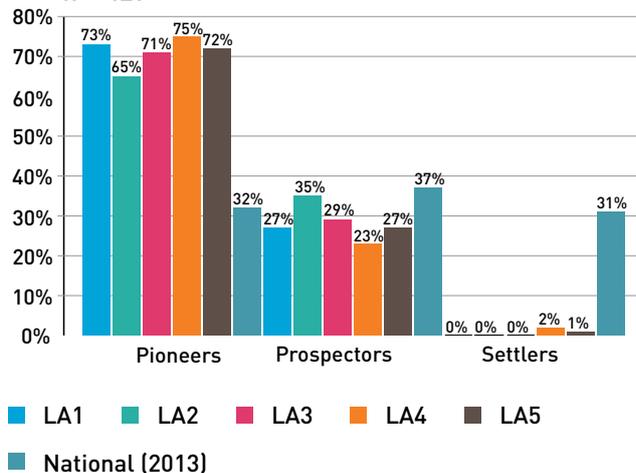
The relevance and implications of these findings – what they mean for fostering service development – are explored in Chapter 3.

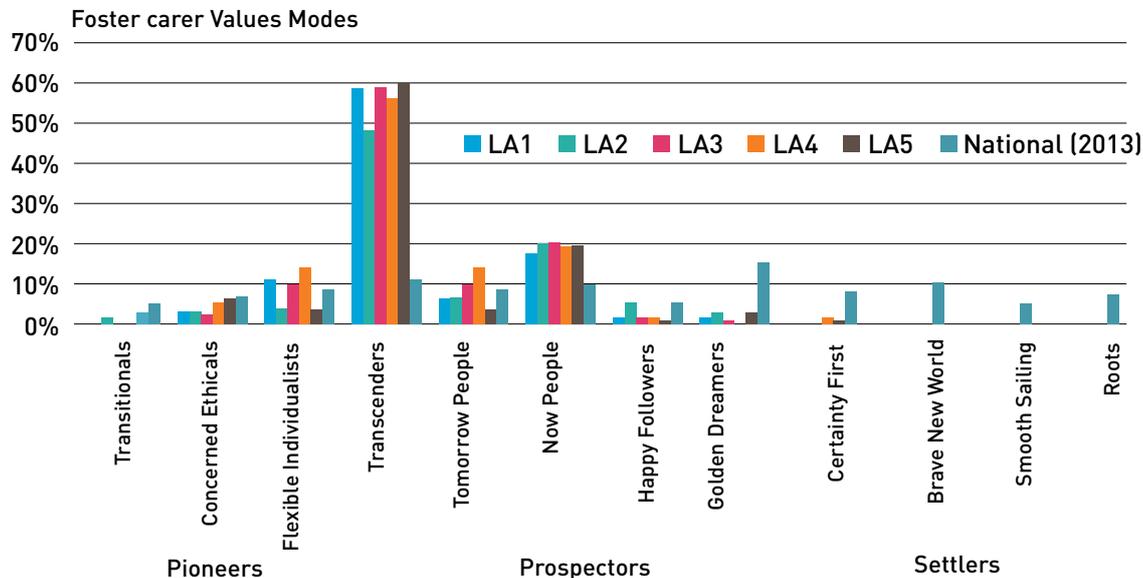
### Values – foster carers are more alike than we think

In the Family Values programme, we found that foster carers segmented across the following Values Modes: Pioneers, Prospectors and Settlers. The Family Values picture of foster carer values is consistent with findings from our earlier projects and the 2013 Fostering Network and iMPower report for the Department for Education in which the values of more than 1,800 foster carers were segmented nationally.

Foster carer Maslow Groups

n = 429

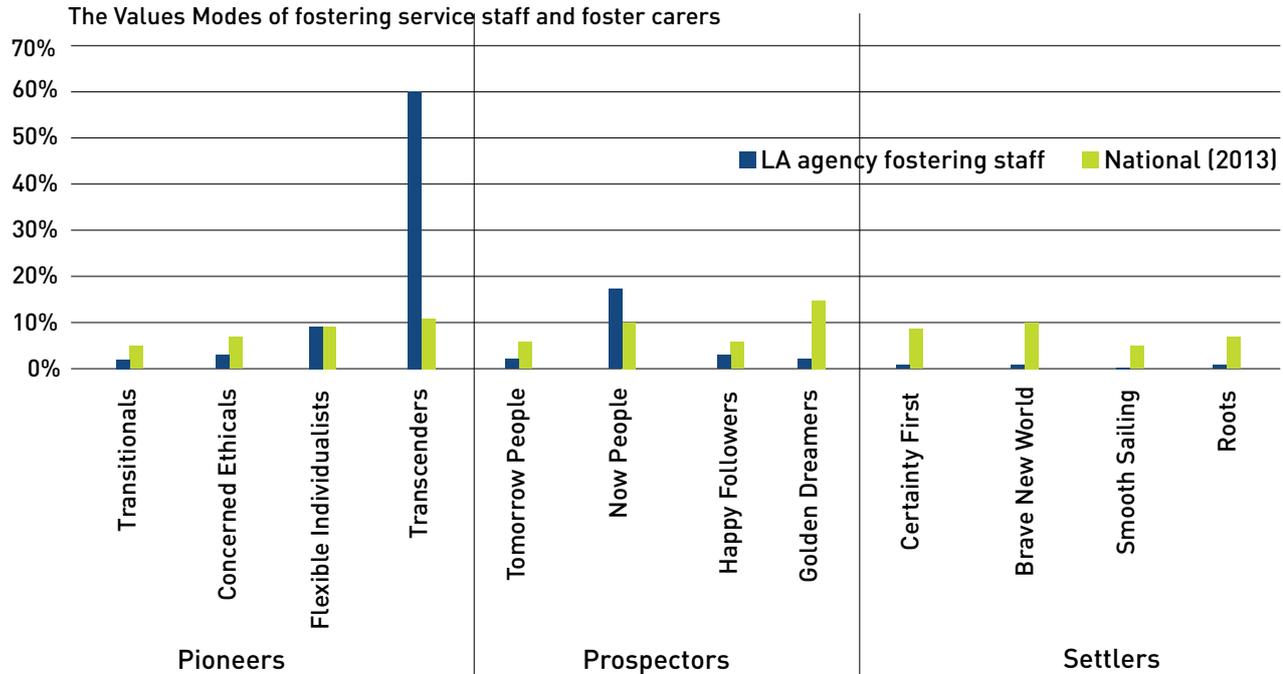




71% of foster carer respondents in the Family Values programme were Pioneers, compared to 32% of the UK adult population, and most of those were of a very specific values orientation ('Transcender' type Pioneers). If we add those Prospectors who share many of these Pioneer attributes – the Prospector 'Now People' and 'Tomorrow People' – we can account

for over 95% of the foster carer population within a relatively tightly defined set of values. If we choose to target 'Transcenders', 'Flexible Individualists', 'Tomorrow People' and 'Now People', we can capture 89% of foster carers (compared to 36% of the UK adult population).

Interestingly, this highly skewed values picture is almost mirrored in the LA fostering service staff, indicating there is no inherent conflict in motivations between service provider and user.



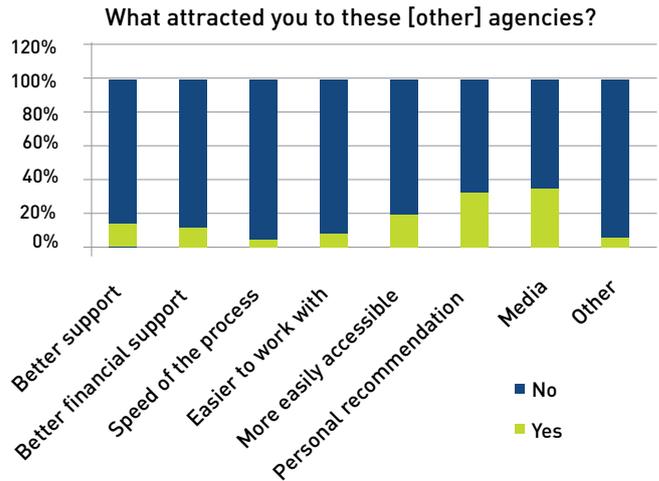
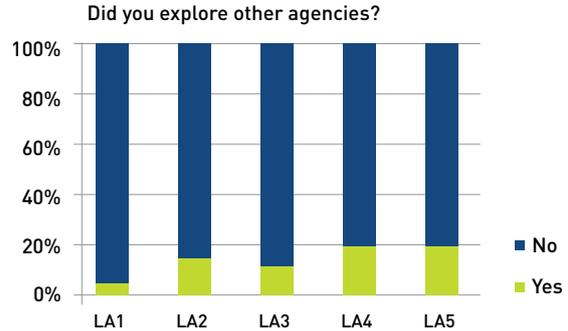
# The foster carer journey

## Inspiring interest

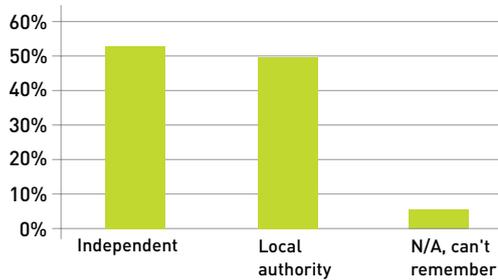
The first task of a fostering agency is to generate high quality enquiries, 'high quality' meaning that the enquiry is from someone who understands what is needed, what is involved and has pre-qualified as far as possible that they have the willingness and ability to help. The higher the quality of the enquiry, the less time and effort is wasted at the 'front door' in qualifying and filtering it, and the more likely the enquirer is to 'convert' into an approved foster carer.

In the context of the target values cohort, the Family Values programme explored through surveys, depth interviews and focus groups how the local authority is positioned to generate enquiries. We have picked out the findings in the tables that follow.

Overall, only 4% of local authority foster carers explored other agencies first.



% of those who had explored other agencies across all councils



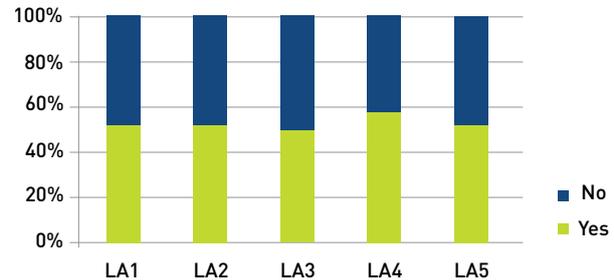
Of the minority of LA carers who did explore other agencies first:

- 49% of those explored other LAs
- and other personal recommendation was one of the primary attractions.

## The journey to approval

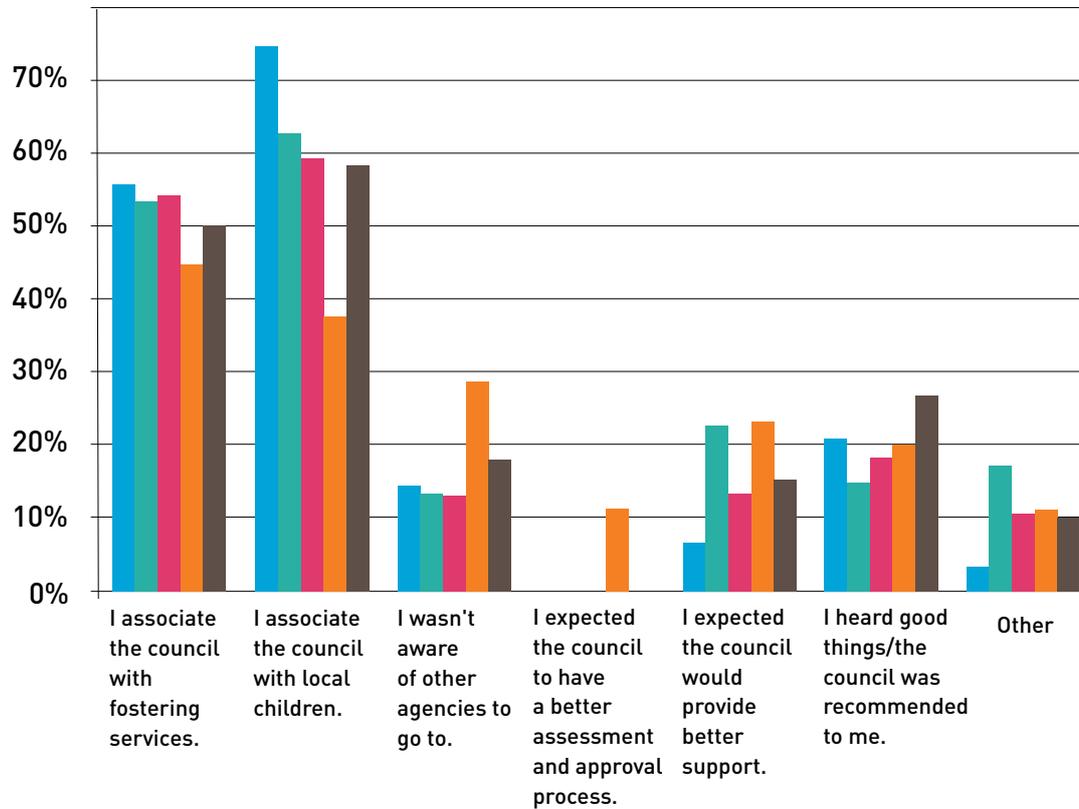
A process of screening, training, assessment and panel approval follows the receipt of an enquiry. Some findings from Family Values on this part of the journey can be seen on pages 20–23.

Were you able to discuss the expectations you had about the assessment and approval process



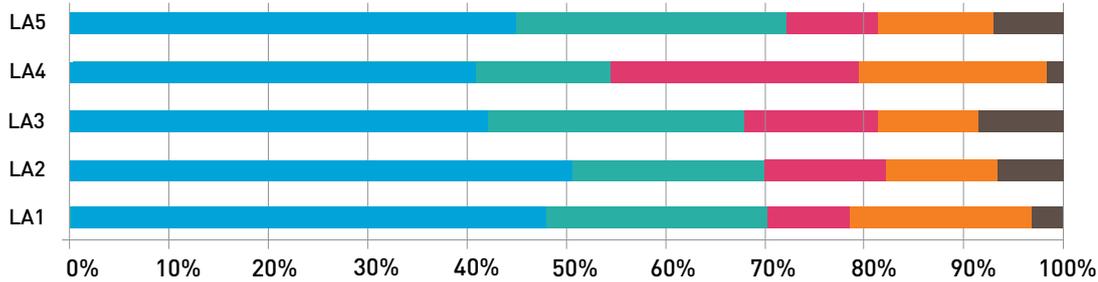
- 56% reported that their experience didn't match their expectations and 53% that the process didn't make them trust the council.
- Over half of LA agency foster carer respondents said that they associated the council with fostering and vulnerable children.
- 46% of foster carers told us they were not able to discuss their expectations of the assessment and application process.

## Why did you choose this local authority?

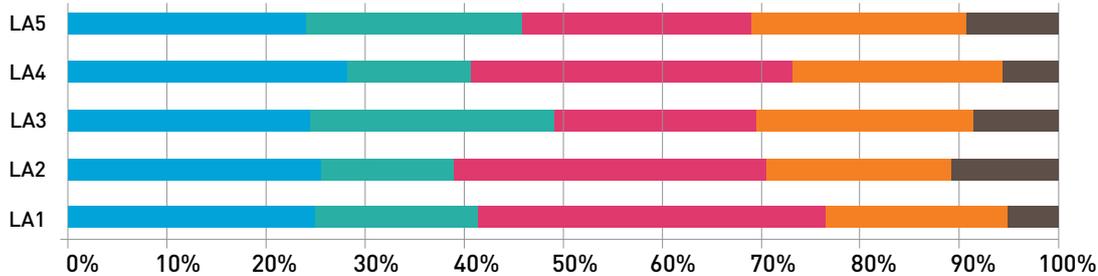


How satisfied were you with the following aspects of the assessment and approval process:

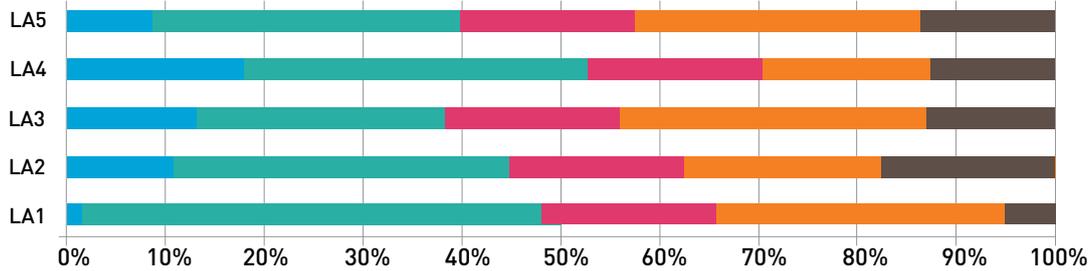
Made me feel trusted



Matched my expectations

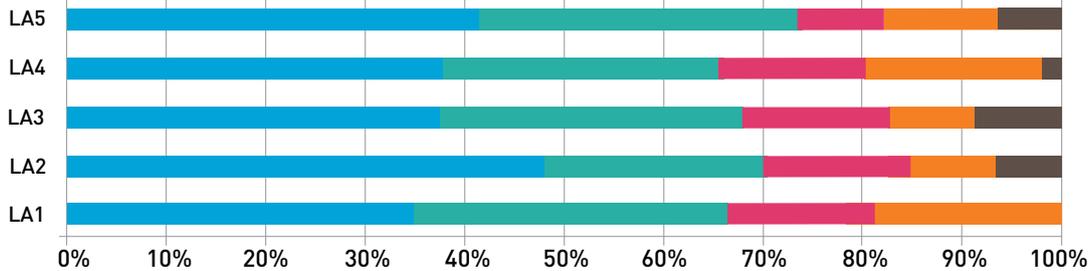


### Speed of the assessment process

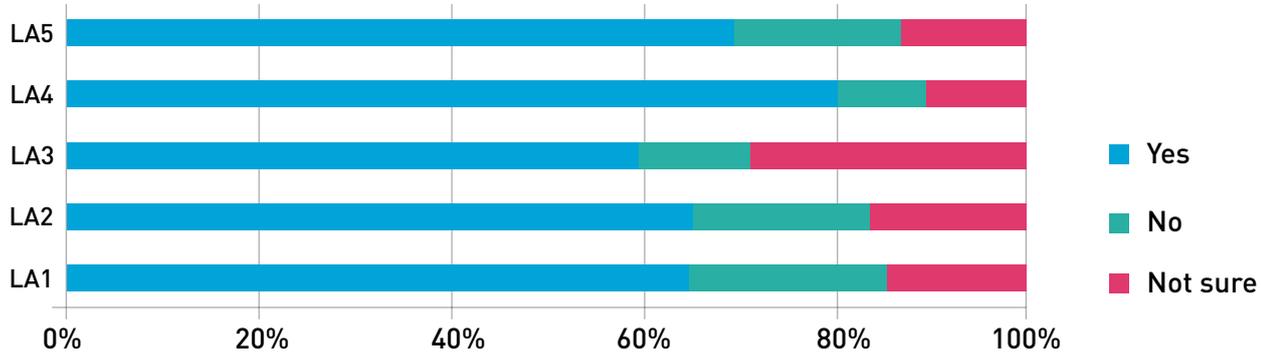


- Very satisfied
- Quite satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Quite dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Can't remember/Don't know/N/A

### Made me feel valued



### Would you be willing and able to be involved in the assessment and approval process of other foster carers?



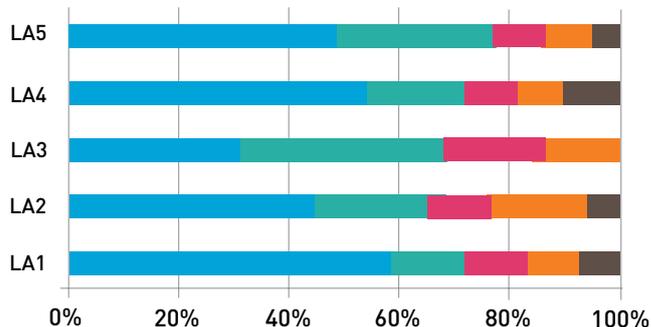
- Only 16% said they would not be willing and able to be involved in the recruitment, assessment and approval of other foster carers.
- Only 53% of respondents were positively satisfied with the speed of the process.
- After improving the pace of the process (44%), more access to FCs was reported as the single biggest improvement that could be made (23%).

## Support

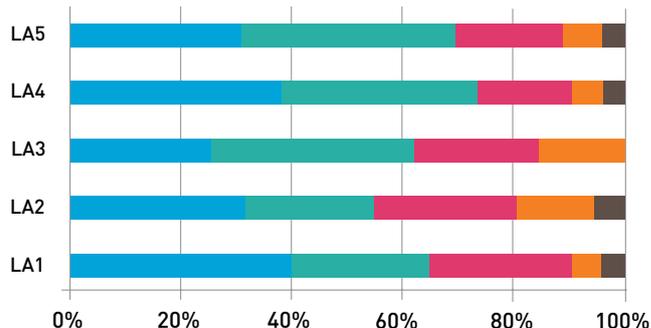
Many elements of fostering support and supervision are a matter of professional expertise. We do not seek to offer practice evidence on these aspects in this paper. Rather, we look at the experiences of foster carers of that support and aim to codify what they value about how that support is provided. Some of the findings in this area were:

- 58% were not able to discuss expectations of post-placement support
- only 17% would not be willing and able to support other foster carers
- 52% reported support services did not make them trust the council.

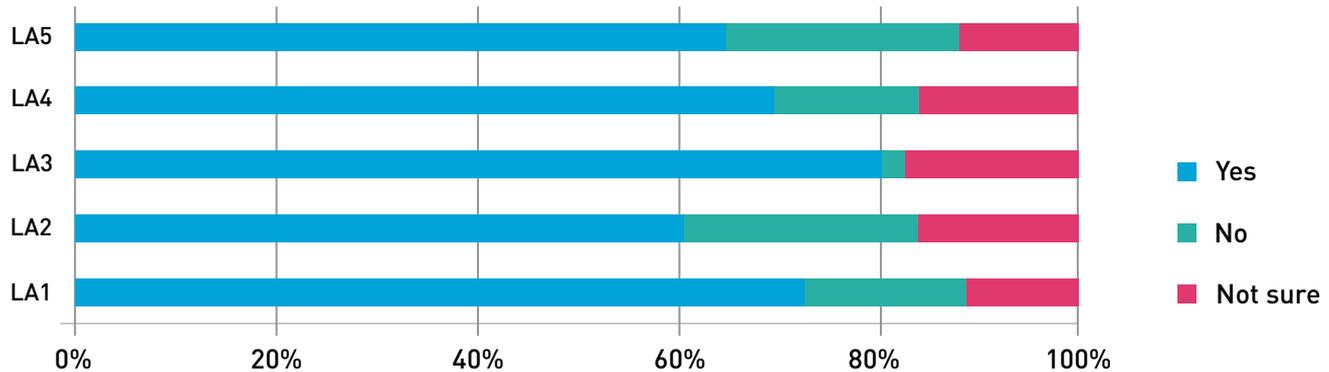
Made me feel trusted



What attracted you to these [other] agencies?



### Would you be willing and able to be involved in the assessment and approval process of other foster carers?



- Only 17% would not be willing and able to support other foster carers.
- Over a third said that support services did not match their expectations.

## CHAPTER 3

Here we consider the implications of the values findings and foster carer feedback in Chapter 2 for local authority fostering agencies.

### Values

Without any other information, the findings in Chapter 2 tell us something important about foster carers and about how to develop and provide a service that effectively and efficiently meets their needs.

Foster carers are overwhelmingly Pioneers. They are characterised by a strong internal sense of right and wrong, are concerned with fairness and equity and have a motivating desire to advance the public good. Accordingly, Pioneers actively look for ways of getting involved in and influencing debate and decisions about their community. They have a need to know that what is being asked of them is 'the right thing to do' and, unless they believe it is, they will take steps to

“I heard there was a shortage.”



set up barriers. To give Pioneers a chance to make this judgment, it is important to engage this group in dialogue, to share information, ask questions and provide an opportunity for debate. If something does seem like 'the right thing', Pioneers will respond to a call to action and contribute with a high level of confidence that they will achieve the goal. They are likely to be the first of the values groups to venture a major change in response to what they see as a social imperative. They often have a role in the local community and, in fact, the foster carer values profile closely resembles that of charitable activists. That is, those who give over time to charitable causes, rather than providing passive financial donations.

In practical terms, what this finding means is that foster carers (Pioneers) must be engaged in a way which allows them to fully appreciate the community need and to see clearly how they can contribute to it. This must be done authentically and allow for conversation on what is required from them and from others. It is perhaps self-evident that certain forms of

communication and messengers will lend themselves better to this than others. Edicts and instructions from distant council officers, for instance, will be less effective than a chat with someone who is trusted and has first-hand experience. Pioneers will always prefer a 'personal touch', whether that is in the message itself or the manner of its delivery.

“I like helping people through life - it's satisfying.”



“You can't come into fostering for the money.”



## Enquiry generation

### Latent brand power

The values-based insights are consistent across multiple sites and are reflected in the national survey we conducted with the Department for Education and the Fostering Network<sup>6</sup>. This information offers some clear practical guidance on how to best generate enquiries.

The first of these is the latent strength of the council 'brand' in fostering. That so few foster carers looked at other agencies before enquiring to the respective local authority agency was a surprise to many in the Family Values programme. However this chimes with a Pioneer thought process. For all the reputational issues that councils are well known for, Pioneers still consider them a de facto or 'go-to' option in fostering. Depth work (focus groups and interviews) played out these quantitative findings in that, when Pioneers think of vulnerable children, they think of the council. This is a powerful competitive advantage which can be developed and leveraged.

Foster carer quote: "I see working with the Council as working with family."

Personal recommendation was a primary driver of enquiries to other agencies. This resonates with the Pioneer need to hear first-hand and personal experiences from others and the opportunity for discussion that goes with that.

Foster carer quote: "My daughter suggested it"

Foster carer quote: "It was my neighbour. She put my name down, then she told me."

The above finding was also borne out in the 2013 Fostering Network and iMPower national report. It is worth noting that this research also showed that foster carers who applied to both LA and IFA agencies cited perceptions of support as another primary reason for their enquiry to that agency as opposed, say, to the financial offer. This corresponds to the reason for their interest – the difference they can make to the lives of children in need of a family.

Foster carer quote: “I didn’t like the idea that there were agencies out there making money from the local authority”

Taken together, we believe the above insights provide a strong framework for foster-carer-centred enquiry generation.

## Subliminal pull

The local authority holds latent brand power that can influence the choices of individuals. From our evidence this is certainly the case with prospective foster carers. To make the most of this effect local authority agencies need attune this brand, both visually and behaviourally, to appeal to Pioneer values an attributes. When correctly attuned the influencer power of the agency’s brand is enhanced and creates an effect we call subliminal pull.

There are three key aspects that create the subliminal pull effect; the messages, the methods of communication and the messengers.

## Messages

Messages should be centred on the local need for foster carers and the difference Pioneers can make, with the help of the local authority agency and a community of foster carers. Messages should use a personal tone where possible (‘you’ and ‘me’) and favour impact headlines over detail. Our toolkit contains specific guidance on words and content.

## Methods

In the Family Values programme, perhaps the greatest change opportunity identified was in the methods through which the agency engaged the local community on the issue of foster care. Together with general marketing research, our analysis highlighted the power of **word-of-mouth methods and peer to peer networking**. These provide a space for discussion and self-qualification and have proved effective at inspiring enquirers to come forward.

Local authority agencies have a strong advantage in

this space, in that they have an unrivalled reach into those parts of the community where campaigns are best targeted.

In their foster carers, they also have a large potential advocacy base – only 16% reported that they were not willing and able to get involved in recruitment – that can be mobilised quickly at low cost.

By generating word-of-mouth opportunities through public sector networks – councillors, staff, district councils, schools, third sector links, health, police and other networks – and ‘activating’ willing foster carers to advocate, local authority agencies can do what no other local agency can. These campaigns can be integrated with and supported by other peer-to-peer campaign methods, utilising social media and traditional communication channels, to take greater advantage of this reach and advocacy.

Foster carer quote: “You learn more from a foster carer than you can from a social worker.”

In Hertfordshire County Council, where this principle formed the basis of several campaigns, word-of-mouth enquiries converted to approvals at a rate of 14%, as opposed to 9% for enquiries triggered through other means.

## Messengers

Messengers should provide an authentic voice and, where possible, we would recommend advocacy through foster carers. Foster carers are driven by a need to share in the community endeavour and that goes beyond the immediate child(ren) in placement. This comes through in the quantitative and qualitative analysis and, as such, we would describe it as a core customer need.

In summary, prospective foster carers want to hear from experienced foster carers, experienced foster

carers want to help, and word-of-mouth enquiries yield better results.

Foster carer quote: “One of best things about being a foster carer for the Council is the friends, the network.”

Once accepted as a key marketing principle, this changed the strategy significantly among Family Values participants. Whereas resources were previously focused on mass media channels – advertisements on buses and roundabouts and in newspapers – a different thought process meant that ‘foster parties’, peer advocacy campaigns in places of worship and newspaper editorials or blogs will now be prioritised.

Foster carer quote: “I have offered to go and speak to people.”

This ‘community mobilisation’ or networking approach is a very different form of marketing which takes a different skill set often being produced at lower cost.

When done correctly it creates a form of behavioural contagion we call network stimulus, whereby those inducted into a peer grouping are simultaneously primed to promote and expand that network themselves.

As Hertfordshire has shown, it can produce transformational results when done correctly: in the generation of high quality enquiries, in providing an opportunity for foster carers to provide a greater contribution and in developing a culture of peer-to-peer advocacy in which foster carers, staff and the wider public sector network play a role in this priority local issue.

## On to approval

We know Pioneers need to feel engaged, heard and involved. Initial expectation-setting and frequent, personalised two-way communication are an important part of this. So, when so many foster carers reported that they weren't able to discuss their expectations of the assessment process, and that it felt like it took too long, we believe that explains why so many did not feel valued during the experience.

**Foster carer quote:** "Ours dragged on, we nearly left."

The negative feedback on the pace of the 'journey to approval' stands out in all our fostering surveys. However, when speaking about this, and about how valued they felt as a result of their experience, foster carers commonly talked about communication. It was in this respect that they expected better service through more frequent contact and greater transparency of the processes. Both were considered necessary areas for improvement.

**Foster carer quote:** "The length of time would be

acceptable if work was clearly being done between interviews."

What this tells us is that prospective carers must be aware of what is happening at all times, ideally through personal contact. Where lulls do occur in the process, this provides another opportunity to connect prospective carers with other prospective and approved carers, and to build a sense of stake in the 'community' that goes with being a foster carer. Pioneers have high levels of self-efficacy and will be the last to withdraw due to feelings of vulnerability, however here is a clear indication that many are proceeding in spite of the experience (as they perceived it) rather than because of it.

**Foster carer quote:** "Perhaps giving people a written schedule and also keeping in touch between things happening because you go through long periods when you have no idea what is going on in the background."

Clearly, early expectation setting and frequent contact are important in the journey to approval. It is also

evident that prospective foster carers value contact with other prospective and approved foster carers. These are customer service principles which can be applied in tandem and which point to quick, low cost ways of improving experience and perception.

Foster carer quote: “They should be honest from the start regarding how much detail social services will go into during the assessment process.”

When re-thinking expectation setting Family Values participants generally found that there was already a process in place. It was, perhaps, only a transactional process – usually involving provision of a booklet, a letter, or another document – and was often through an impersonal channel. The findings tell us that this wasn't effective. And, again, the values insight tells us why.

Foster carer quote: “The key thing is the consistency and follow-through with you that comes from a regular contact and a relationship built on trust.”

With the Pioneer values cohort, fostering cannot be a transactional service. Pioneers need a conversation – what might be characterised as a personal service – and will not be naturally inclined to read detailed documents. We may be able to say “we sent them a letter” but that is insufficient. These carers will place a disproportionate value on the experience above all else.

Perhaps the most straightforward Family Values initiative to address this was a ‘planning meeting’ in which the officer and carer co-produce the plan and timescales, ideally with another foster carer present. A co-signature of this plan after the conversation to confirm it reflects the carer's understanding and expectations was designed to affirm this point in the carer's mind.

The Pioneer need for dialogue and understanding is a persistent one which applies throughout the carer journey. Frequent, personal, two-way contact is required at every step. We are not talking about smothering applicants, simply making a deliberate effort to avoid communication ‘blackspots’. In

response to this, a number of programme participants have adopted contact frequency as a key quality measure. With the above plan serving as the basis for 'check ins', the services will now meet with or call carers at least every two weeks – whether or not they are meeting for screening, training or assessment purposes – to confirm they know what is happening and that it is what they expected, and to give carers a chance to ask any questions or provide feedback. In one local authority, which saw this as a fundamental feature of customer care, those contacts will be made by the team manager.

Allied to this consistent and considered professional contact is the peer-to-peer connection. Family Values has been especially creative in this space with initiatives ranging from carers attending initial visits and leading training sessions, through early buddying/mentor schemes, facilitated social events for application cohorts, carer experience blogs, to connecting prospective carers with approved carers via support groups, social events and online forums.

## Support

### What you say and what you do

When it comes to support, foster carers often feel like they have been misinformed. “Over-promised and under-delivered” might sum it up. This runs so deep that it has led to mistrust, after which it is difficult to restore any relationship based on goodwill. And goodwill is the currency on which much of foster care is based.

Foster carer quote: “Communication is not good. Information doesn't come out very clearly or quickly.”

While local authority agency managers often hear foster carers feeding back points about financial remuneration, this, in our experience, is often a proxy for complaints about fairness. Although it is an enabler – it makes foster carers **able** to provide foster care – our analysis tells us local authority agency foster carers are not motivated by money.

For indicators of fairness, foster carers look to annual

fee increases, other LA agency fees and allowances or speed of payment. Specifically, they do not look to IFA rates of pay, which are often higher.

The point we make here is that foster carers value the difference they can make to children's lives above financial reward. They consider support a major part of that difference and a failure to be open and transparent about what is accessible is both unnecessary and damaging. Pioneers will, more than any other values group, work with what is available to achieve their moral objective. We encourage LA agencies to work with them openly to do so.

## Foster carers care about each other

The final finding in Chapter 2 is a self-evident and recurrent one – foster carers want to do more to support other carers.

Foster carer quote: "Carers tend to support each other in groups of friends or who you get close to."

As with the journey to approval, these insights point to another opportunity; to 'architect' a network of peers who want to give help to, and who value help from, one another. A well-connected network also shares information and, in turn, guards against false expectations.

Most LA agencies have achieved a level of 'foster carer community', often through supporting the local Foster Care Association (FCA) and through initiatives such as support groups. Family Values sites are taking this a step further through a range of innovations including:

- resource banking facilities e.g. toys, books, services e.g. babysitting, handyman, IT

- facilitation and promotion of social networks and events
- development of open and closed web / social media forums
- mentors and buddies
- foster carer 'teams'
- carer-led out of hours support.

These models of mutual support empower foster carers to make active choices about where they access support, create resilience through flexible peer networks and perhaps most importantly provide an infrastructure through which foster carers can contribute how and as much as they like. They grow and maintain themselves organically, in large part due to the network stimulus connecting with other individuals with a similar values profile.

A growing number of Family Values sites also see this thinking as the foundation block for further innovations such as a local version of the 'Mockingbird'

model, in which teams of carers are developed around specialist needs, placement capabilities or localities. Others foresee the development of a 'foster care plus' model focused on older children with complex needs or the use of foster carer teams to 'upstream' placement expertise to provide help to families with children at the edge of care.

In short, much of the thinking we have outlined in this report places the authority as an agent and peer alongside carers and prospective carers. We believe this is the future not just of fostering, but of local public service generally.

“The support group is very good, you get to know other foster carers. You can share experiences.”



“I generally go to other carers when I want to know what to do and we talk it through together.”



## Conclusion

This report sets out how adopting a forensic behavioural analysis and approach can provide a framework for doing things differently in fostering. Not only does this achieve better life outcomes for vulnerable children, it also improves community relationships and acts as an effective means to counter service cuts.

The assertions and perspectives are anchored in the values of foster carers and put forward on the premise that local authority fostering agencies could and should actively work with the grain of their motivations. By doing so, agencies can magnify their subliminal pull and then prime a network stimulus effect to make a powerful change.

As a result of these insights the five Family Values sites are now heightening their ambitions in fostering and on average have committed to moving to a position where 81% of fostering placements are delivered in-house, providing 60 more placements each at any one

time and saving £900,000 per year.

Hertfordshire County Council has demonstrated the benefits of this approach. After making changes throughout the customer journey, they have transformed service outcomes, doubling the number of foster carers recruited in the space of only two years, to 83 in the year ended 31 March 2014. Sector-wide, this points to an opportunity to improve the lives of 9,000 children. The financial case is also clear – a national saving of £150m each year, almost £1m of additional funding per local authority service. This is the equivalent of a one-off sector-wide windfall of over £3bn.

Through Family Values and other advisory work we have collected over 100 innovative ideas for introducing values-based change across the foster carer journey. Performance across each element of this journey can be measured and, therefore, so can the impact of the change. In our view this discipline is an important aspect of the cultural and skills shift required to improve fostering services nationwide.

The values of social work staff mirror those of foster carers and they too need to know they are making a difference and achieving their goals.

This shift to a carer-centred mind set is an essential part of delivering lasting change and that is why we work alongside local authority agencies over a longitudinal period. We provide the tools, techniques and training to embed this thinking in the service and allow the teams (and foster carers) the space to develop and take forward innovations that they own.

We believe this behavioural approach provides a blueprint for the local public service reform required to meet growing service user expectations in the context of reducing budgets. In the fields of community mobilisation and volunteering, co-operative delivery models, mutualisation or indeed any area of service in which service user behaviours are a key driver of outcomes, we hope this paper will provoke discussion and encourage new ideas.

To talk with us about our work in fostering, to hear

about how we have applied behavioural approaches in children's and adults services, health and other areas, or to join in the conversation please contact: iMPOWER Director Jeremy Cooper at [jcooper@impower.co.uk](mailto:jcooper@impower.co.uk).

## Background to this report

This paper reports some of the findings, insights and implications which have emerged from Family Values. Family Values is a programme in which council services work together to apply a behavioural approach in fostering and adoption, to achieve improvement and provide a greater number of options for children who need caring families. We focus here on the fostering element only.

Prior to the Family Values programme, iMPower had worked with a number of other councils to formulate this behavioural approach. Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire County Councils were among the 'early adopters' and the outcomes of that work have now become clear. For this reason we also refer to these projects in this report.

We have also worked with the Fostering Network, on behalf of the Department for Education, to conduct UK-wide research in this field. This includes a national survey of foster carer values and a national

performance benchmark of council fostering services. Where it is helpful, we refer to this information too.

The Family Values programme on which we report here comprised eight councils and five sites:

1. London Borough of Barnet
2. London Borough of Ealing
3. Achieving for Children (the combined service of London Borough of Richmond and Royal Borough of Kingston)
4. The London Tri-Borough (comprising the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the City of Westminster and London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham), and
5. Surrey County Council.

The Family Values programme ran from January is running from January 2013 to May 2015 and involves local research and analysis, and cross-council information sharing and learning activities. The Fostering Network, the Centre for Child and Family

Research and Coram contributed to the Programme Reference Group.

This paper does not report on subsequent phases of Family Values, which at the time of writing involve three further councils.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>2012/13 DfE fostering service benchmark data shows that most local authorities aimed to recruit and retain more foster carers in 2013/14

<sup>2</sup> Ofsted fostering QA and data assurance forms from 2011/12 and 2012/13 and annual DfE fostering service benchmarks from 2012/13 and 2013/14 show that independent agency 'placement share' is growing

<sup>3</sup> Ofsted fostering QA and data assurance forms, 2012/13

<sup>4</sup> DfE fostering service benchmark, 2012/13

<sup>5</sup> Average annual cost differential between local authority and independent fostering agency placements in Family Values programme

<sup>6</sup> Why foster carers care, Fostering Network and iMPOWER, on behalf of the Department for Education

<http://www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/uploads/pdf/why-foster-carers-care-report-v5.pdf>



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