

Fosterline

0800 040 7675

your fostering advice service

www.fosterline.info

Annual Report

1st July 2014 – 30th June 2015



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Funded by



Department
for Education

Forward

“I am pleased to be able to congratulate FosterTalk on another successful year of delivering Fosterline in England on behalf of the Department for Education.

Fosterline is a free, confidential helpline and dedicated website, offering advice, support, information and signposting on a wide range of issues to foster carers and those interested in becoming foster carers.

It is very encouraging that Fosterline has provided a service to over 40,500 people by telephone, email and via the website www.fosterline.info during the second year of operation and it is notable that over 5000 of these enquiries were from people interested in becoming foster carers, which is one of the government's key priorities.



The Government is committed to promoting the best possible outcomes for children and young people in care and recognises the importance of stable placements within foster families in achieving this. I know from my own experience that foster carers do an amazing job caring for some of the most vulnerable children within our society and they deserve to be applauded for the specialised, dedicated work they do.

Fosterline continues to be an invaluable source of independent advice and support to current and prospective foster carers and one which the Government wishes to see continue in the future.”

Introduction

Welcome to the Fosterline Annual Report 2014/15. Fosterline is managed by FosterTalk on behalf of the Department for Education.

FosterTalk completed its second year of delivery of the service for all foster carers and prospective foster carers in England, on 30th June 2015.

Every year there is a reported shortage of foster carers needed to support the number of children that enter the care system. Figures vary but with approximately two thirds of the children and young people in care being placed with foster carers we still need up to 10,000 more foster carers.

Foster carers provide an amazing service supporting some of the most vulnerable children within our society and very often foster carers receive little recognition for the dedication it takes to be a good foster carer. Fostering is an immense commitment for the whole family, requiring a need to work with a number of people across many professions. This in itself can add to the wide range of issues and challenges faced every day by foster carers. These challenges can lead to foster carers seeking extra help and support.

Fosterline helps to retain foster carers by giving them that little extra support just when they need it most, encouraging foster carers to explore a solution and remind them just how valued and what an essential commodity they are in the welfare and promotion of outcomes for the children in England.

Fosterline strives to reduce the shortfall in the number of foster carers needed by supporting prospective foster carers to investigate the right type of fostering and to be assessed by the service that enquirers feel best matches their expectations and requirement to foster.

As a foster carer you will more than likely have to deal with tears, tantrums, arguments, challenges, vulnerabilities and disappointments, but this is outweighed by a single word, smile or acknowledgement from a child or young person in placement. All children have the possibility to thrive in the right environment and Fosterline is there for the foster carer to seek reassurance and professional independent support and guidance.

I am proud of Fosterline and the impact it has had on fostering during the past year. FosterTalk continues to develop the service to benefit its service users and fostering in general.

Steven Stockley – Fosterline Manager

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Executive Summary

Fosterline provides free confidential, impartial, advice information and signposting on all issues of concern to foster carers and prospective foster carers in England. With the increased need for good quality placements for the number of children entering the care system outweighing the recruitment and retention of foster carers, Fosterline provides a service to empower foster carers and encourage prospective foster carers to come forward for assessment for the right reasons and to try to alleviate some of the pressure on fostering service providers.

Fosterline is funded by the Department for Education and delivered by FosterTalk. FosterTalk is a not-for-profit independent foster care support organisation, offering comprehensive membership packages to foster carers and their families.

Fosterline consists of a **Freephone telephone helpline** operating between the hours of 09:00 and 17:00, Monday to Friday. Callers can speak to skilled, trained, and experienced Fosterline Advisors in complete confidence. Fosterline also operates the Freephone telephone helpline every second Wednesday of each month between the hours of 19:00 and 21:00.

Callers are able to leave a voicemail message if the line is busy and a Fosterline Advisor will return the call on the same or the next working day. Callers are also able to leave a voicemail message out of hours; receiving a return call the next working day.

The telephone helpline also operates a textphone system to support those with hearing impairment and can be accessed through the use of interpreters in conference calling mode, enabling multi-lingual capabilities.

Fosterline also provides a **dedicated, interactive website** - www.fosterline.info

The Fosterline website consists of information of interest to foster carers and prospective foster carers, and includes a mapping facility to enable users to "find a fostering service". Visitors to the website are able to participate in online forums and also have the opportunity to contact the Fosterline Advisors via webforms and emails which are responded to the same or next working day.

Key Findings

The Fosterline annual report covers the period from 1st July 2014 to 30th June 2015 and reflects the impact that Fosterline has had upon users of the service as identified in an independent evaluation of Fosterline carried out Dr Carolyn Blackwood of Birmingham City University in March 2015.

The report takes into account information received from both prospective and current foster carers with consideration to the following:

- Measurement against agreed KPI's

- Call statistics
- Call information recorded on database
- Demographics supplied by enquirers
- Analysis of issues identified by enquirers
- Analysis of the visitors to the website www.fosterline.info
- Service user feedback via webforms
- Survey of prospective foster carers who contacted Fosterline
- Survey of current foster carers (both local authority and independent agency carers in all aspects of foster care including kinship etc.)

In producing this report FosterTalk has sought to establish the effect Fosterline has on encouraging prospective foster carers to complete the assessment and approval process, and to analyse the issues raised by current foster carers in order to inform and influence policy in the future.

Data will be provided on:-

- Number of service users
- Their role in fostering
- Key issues raised
- The impact of advice given by Fosterline.
- Where the service might be improved.

Fosterline has been accessed via the Freephone telephone number, website, email, and webform on over **40,500** occasions in year ending June 2015. A dedicated encrypted database is used by advisors to record information with all telephone calls to the service being recorded on a separate encrypted voice over internet system. FosterTalk maintains all records electronically and these can only be accessed by senior managers. These records serve as quality assurance and management oversight of the service as a whole, and comply with Data Protection and Department for Education requirements.

Fosterline is contacted on a wide and varied range of concerns that foster carers experience and many of the discussions are both complex and sensitive, requiring knowledgeable empathetic and attuned helpline advisors that are able to listen and not judge.

It is important to recognise that contact or the search for information is usually prompted by enquirers who have a particular issue or point of concern. For this reason Fosterline will receive enquiries with a bias as foster carers often contact the service when they are unhappy, unsure or in crisis and not when they are pleased with the traditional means of support they receive. Foster carers do not contact the service just to compliment their fostering service or associated social workers. Foster carers turn to Fosterline often when they have exhausted their usual routes of support. For this level of support and understanding Fosterline has been recognised as providing a low-cost early intervention service that provides a high social return on investment for children and young people that enter the care system.

The main topic of enquiries to Fosterline is finance. Although financial reward is not the main reason for people to be assessed as foster carers, it is an enabler for foster carers to act upon their altruistic drivers and motivators. Finance has a role in the majority of issues discussed with the service; whether it is the lack of allowances during the investigation of allegations, the change in financial

circumstances and irregular income when a person becomes a foster carer or the payment and spending of disability living allowances paid to the child.

Some of the main challenges reported by foster carers in their fostering role related to communication and relationships with Local Authorities, Independent Fostering Agencies and social workers as well as the communication between professionals within these organisations. A lack of clear information can impact on the decision making ability and judgement of foster carers. Fosterline is able to empower carers by providing information about legislation, policy, good practice and encourage the re-establishment of good communication between foster carers and fostering services.

Fosterline's role in recruitment of foster carers has grown during the reported period from **11% to 16%** which equates to a possible **5,000** plus potential foster carers seeking information on finding a service and the assessment process. Prospective foster carers felt that Fosterline could provide them with independent advice about the type of fostering that would be most suitable. Fosterline Advisors regularly deal with enquiries from prospective foster carers only wanting to foster babies and want independent advice about the feasibility of doing so.

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.

Fosterline can continue to play a fundamental role in the recruitment and retention of foster carers in the future 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 view of this FosterTalk set up the Fosterline Foundation to raise funding to support the sustainability of this free to access service for all foster carers and prospective foster carers in England.

Fosterline is able to promote good working relationships between foster carers and fostering service providers. Foster carers' reports of serious situations such as allegations and issues with care planning for their foster child, suggests that such situations make them feel isolated, especially when social workers, LAs and IFAs do not communicate with them or each other in a way that foster carers find helpful. Relationships may deteriorate over time and affect the working communications bringing personal and emotional feelings into a professional relationship. This has the potential over time to impact on the motivation of foster carers to stay in fostering.

Foster carers are generally motivated to foster by intrinsic and altruistic reasons with the overriding desire to improve the well-being of children and young people that enter the care system. Often the desire to provide support and care comes from personal experience and the people that have entered into their lives including in a professional capacity. By providing access to independent advice and support, Fosterline supports them in this crucial role.

Fosterline Task Force

Fosterline Task Force was formed through the natural evolution of the Steering Group. A review of the function of the Steering Group found that since its inception the remit of 'advising and supporting' the establishment of Fosterline had naturally come to an end. The Task Force became the vehicle to help promote the awareness of Fosterline and the interests of the Fosterline Foundation.

Fosterline Task Force aims and objectives

The purpose of the Task Force is two-fold:

- Raise awareness of Fosterline to the current and prospective fostering population of England
- Establish and develop a solid and sustainable Fosterline Foundation

The group offers advice and challenge to FosterTalk in the provision of Fosterline. Each member of the Fosterline Task Force actively contributes to the development of Fosterline using their own specific skills, knowledge and experience to help the group reach sound decisions.

The group offer support and advice on risk and key issues associated with Fosterline services and are instrumental in the development and implementation of Fosterline's sustainability plan.

Membership

Fosterline Task Force members have been appointed following a review of the previous Fosterline Steering Group membership and open recruitment. The Fosterline Task Force is made up from representation of the following areas:

- Foster Carers
- Fostering Service Providers
- Professionals and/or Academics working in the field of fostering/child care
- Professionals and/or enthusiastic people with fundraising/marketing skills
- People with relevant contacts to assist with 'reaching our target audience'
- Confederation of British Industry company representative (or equivalent)

Tasks and duties

The Task Force has actively raised awareness and driven projects to support the Fosterline Foundation in its role to ensure the sustainability of Fosterline as a free to access service.

We proposed to: identify potential patrons, sponsors, ambassadors and supporters who can be nurtured to assist Fosterline in its marketing and fundraising development

We achieved:

- The appointment of Lorraine Pascale as an official supporter of Fosterline and the Fosterline Foundation.
- We established links with Manchester United and Worcester County Cricket Club to donate items of sporting interest that could be used to raise funding for the Fosterline Foundation.

- Partnerships with Morrisons Supermarkets and Springhill Garden Centre enabled Fosterline Foundation to promote Fosterline in the community and receive donations to the Fosterline Foundation

We proposed to: secure foster carer and foster cared for advocates willing to 'share their story' via an array of mediums (e.g. radio, website, newspaper, TV, events)

We achieved:

- Links with multi-faith independent fostering services enabled Fosterline to promote fostering within different religious backgrounds including Christian, Muslim, Jewish and agnostic.
- Fosterline has linked with schools to raise awareness from accessing the electronic communications used by most establishments to inform parents. This received positive press coverage in the local areas that participated.
- A variety of foster carer stories and experiences have been expressed through the Fosterline website, news links and the Fosterline Lowdown newsletters circulated to all fostering teams within England

We proposed to: actively seek opportunities for Fosterline to engage with key opinion formers and politicians, trade associations and bodies involved in children services

We achieved:

- Fosterline representatives participated in the 'Focus on Fostering' consortium to inform on the issues experienced by foster carers.
- Fosterline has attended at a number of local authority and independent recruitment events.
- Fosterline has attended foster carer support groups in Staffordshire, Liverpool, St Helens, Wolverhampton and Slough.
- Fosterline has had a presence at New Family Social organised fostering conference and the Department for Education recruitment and retention conference held in Manchester

We proposed to: offer comment and opinion from an authoritative viewpoint on key issues affecting foster carers and their families

We achieved:

- Fosterline has reported fostering issues raised by carers during the year to the Department for Education on a quarterly basis making recommendation to the department.
- Fosterline has represented the foster carer's viewpoint as a member of fostering consortiums.

We proposed to: utilise relevant professional and personal contacts and networks to engage strategic partners selected because of their ability to widen audience reach

We achieved:

- Links with certain educational establishments such as York and Birmingham University to help promote Fosterline.
- Links have been forged with Unlock, BAAF, Be My Parent, E.R.I.C. (*UK charity, Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence*) Who cares? Trust, Contact a Family (families with disabled children), Silverlined Horizons (previously looked after children) and I CAN (development of speech and language in children)

Fosterline Foundation

The Fosterline Foundation was officially launched by the Minister for Children and Families, Edward Timpson MP October 21st 2014. The Fosterline Foundation has been established to carry out fundraising activities on behalf of Fosterline to generate donations primarily to ensure the long-term sustainability of Fosterline.

The Fosterline Foundation is supported and co-ordinated by FosterTalk and the DfE who currently fund Fosterline. Fosterline Task Force is committed to supporting the Fosterline Foundation.

Fosterline Foundation aims and objectives

Fosterline Foundation aims are:

- To secure the long-term sustainability of the Fosterline freephone number and website to continue to offer advice and information to foster carers and those interested in fostering
- To help to shape the future of fostering by listening to and consulting with those that foster
- To support foster carers to achieve better outcomes for looked after children
- To recruit and maintain a team of volunteers and advisors with experience of fostering to help support and advise their peers at a national level

We raised funds by:

- Registering on a social media shopping website
- Approaching local businesses to raise funds via public donations
- Approaching fostering service providers to donate
- Auctioning gifts donated by celebrities and sporting clubs on social media
- Organised participation in sponsored adrenaline events

Review of Fosterline performance & statistics

Fosterline Helpline

Callers are able to contact the helpline via the freephone number 0800 040 7675.

Of the **1,980** hours that the service was advertised as open, Fosterline achieved **99.6%** availability. Fosterline closed only on public holidays recognised in England and on quarterly advertised designated training days for Fosterline Advisors. Outside the advertised hours an answerphone message invites callers to leave a voicemail or advises the use of the website and webform facilities.

Fosterline Advisors give impartial, independent and confidential support to all enquirers to the service. All Fosterline Advisors attend training and are regularly notified of legislation and regulation changes affecting fostering. Up-to-date training and monitoring ensures Fosterline Advisors able to advise, make suggestions and signpost to relevant information and services. This information is reinforced by legislation and information obtained from the Department for Education and FosterTalk's Professional

Advisor. The Fosterline Advisors do not offer personal opinion or criticise fostering services. The Fosterline Advisors support foster carers and prospective foster carers within England and will signpost enquiries from outside England to the relevant helpline services for their geographical area.

Fosterline Advisors work on a rota system and are monitored and supported by the Fosterline Manager.

Fosterline encourages good practice within all aspects of foster care and actively promotes the retention and recruitment of foster carers via empowerment, information and signposting.

Quality is assured by regular consultation and coaching from the Fosterline Manager accompanied by quarterly training days to tackle specific issues and topics encountered from enquiries. Bespoke external training has also been provided by the Helplines Partnership.

Fosterline performance data

Monthly reports are produced for the Department for Education monitoring the provision of the service against KPI's as agreed by the Department for education.

Fosterline meet quarterly with the Department for Education to present reports on the performance of the service and to inform on the issues experienced from both current and prospective foster carers. Fosterline is able to make recommendation to the Department for Education on their findings for each quarter

Fosterline call volumes

Fosterline continues to promote the objective of Fosterline as being to support prospective and current foster carers in England. Other enquirers are signposted to other relevant sources of information. The 3% reduction in fostering service staff calling Fosterline indicates that the service is reaching its required target audience.

There has been an increase in the number of callers leaving voicemail messages since the message was changed to reflect a commitment to respond within 24 hours or on the next working day if out of hours or at weekends. Monitoring of the calls arriving out of hours to the service prompted the introduction of an evening service.

	Calls Received	Calls received out of hours	Voicemails left in hours	Voicemails left outside operating hours
Quarter 1 Jul 2014 – Sep 2014	1078	71	54	7
Quarter 2 Oct 2014 – Dec 2014	874	44	36	1
Quarter 3 Jan 2015 – Mar 2015	939	68	29	5
Quarter 4 Apr 2015 – Jun 2015	918	182	44	22
Annual Total	3809	365	163	35

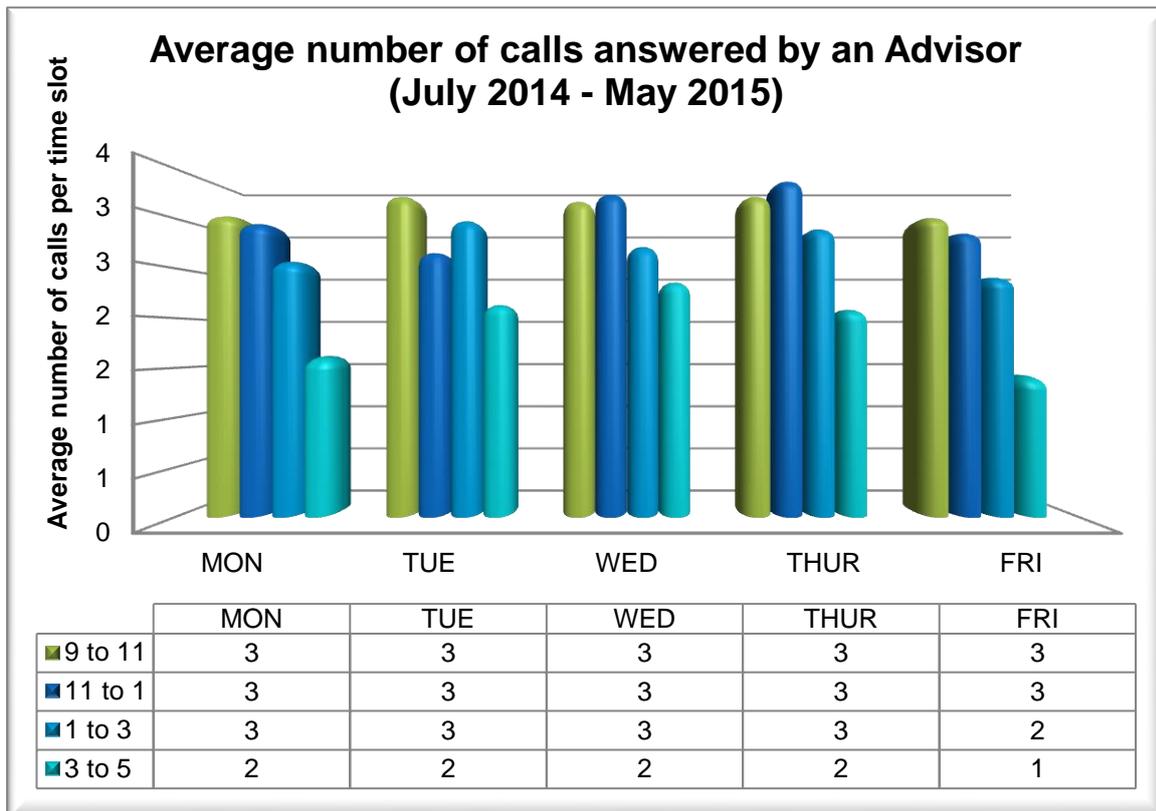
85% of all calls to Fosterline were answered **within 1 minute** (including time taken to listen to the recorded message).

Fosterline peak call times

Call patterns remained consistent throughout the reported period. The highest volume of calls to the service is received between 10:00am and 14:00pm each day. On average the service is contacted outside the advertised opening hours 30 times a month. Analysis has identified no set pattern to these calls. Over 25% of these calls have been identified as contacting the service again and speaking to a Fosterline Advisor (some enquiries to the service withhold their number, remaining anonymous or will contact the service from another phone so are unidentifiable in analysis).

On average the service receives one call per day outside the operational hours and which indicates that the service is meeting the majority of callers access needs. . One evening session per month has been introduced and are promoted via the website and social media to provide enquirers with access to an advisor outside of normal office hours. .

Fosterline encourages enquiries from all aspects effecting fostering. Fosterline also promoted particular topics to encourage engagement dependent on time of year such as the end of the tax year and media fostering stories broadcast on television and in the news.



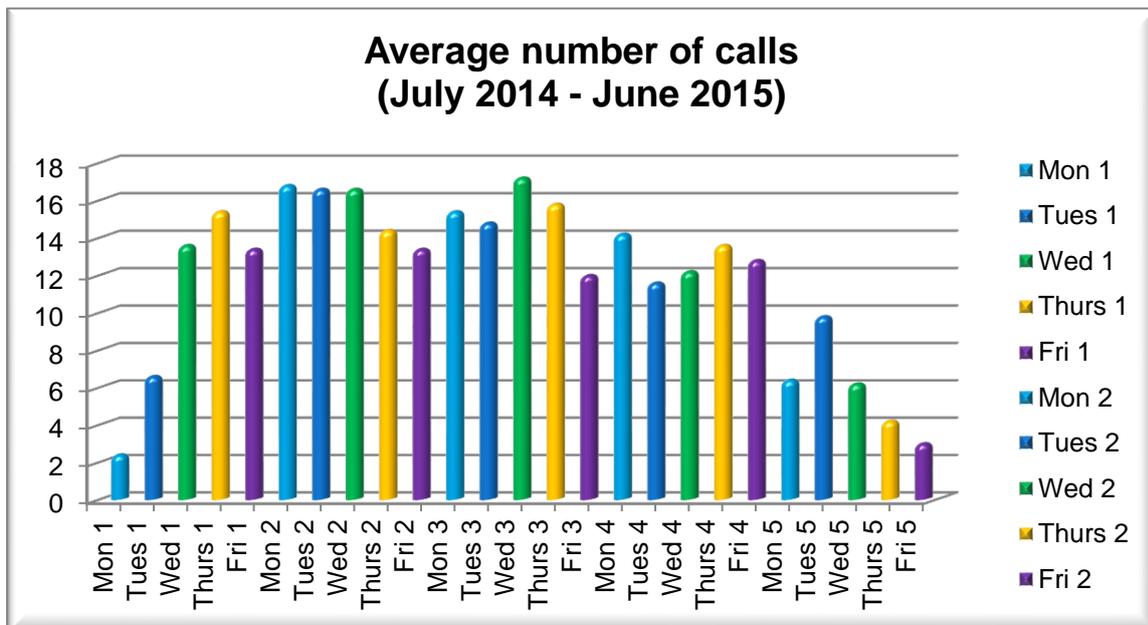
Fosterline call analysis

The call patters have remained similar throughout the reported period for each month. Calls tend to peak weekly around Wednesdays with the second and third weeks of every month being the busiest period for incoming calls.

School holidays affect the volume of calls to the service. This was confirmed during surveys by foster carers expressing calls are more confidential and less likely to be interrupted when the children and young people were in school.

When callers telephone Fosterline they are greeted with an initial voice recording (IVR) advising them that their call will be recorded for monitoring purposes. At this point 6% of callers end the call and of those 33% will call the service at another time and continue to the point where they will speak to a Fosterline Advisor.

The average call to Fosterline lasts 33 minutes giving enough time for complex issues to be discussed fully with an Advisor.



Fosterline website

Visitors to the Fosterline website continue to rise each month. New users of the website have risen from over 1,200 in June 2014 to an excess of almost 5,000 new users in July 2015.

Website content is regularly reviewed and updated in line with changes in legislation, guidance and good practice including information and current news items promoting the role of fostering to the community as a whole

Fosterline Advisors use the website as a directional tool to provide information relevant for fostering. During a call; the Fosterline Advisors are able to explain and discuss information using the website for reference and for confirmation of legislation or other information provided.

Fosterline website visitors

Fosterline website has been operational for 99.9 % over the past year. **28,000 new users** have visited the website over the past year with over **8,000 repeat users**. Email and social media campaigns have driven people to specific information on the website which can be seen by the pages the visitors to the website land on and ultimately exit the website. Social media has been an inexpensive and valuable means of promoting relevant messages to foster carers and raising awareness about fostering in the wider community.

	New Users	Returning Users
Quarter 1 Jul 2014 – Sep 2014	3934	1502
Quarter 2 Oct 2014 – Dec 2014	4727	1534
Quarter 3 Jan 2015 – Mar 2015	7722	2094
Quarter 4 Apr 2015 – Jun 2015	11594	2872
Annual Total	27977	8002

Fosterline online forum usage

The forum has seen regular use and has become a discussion board for a small number of foster carers and Fosterline Advisors. However, enquiries have shown that foster carers who are concerned about a particular issue resist posting the information on the forum. Foster carers feel they may be identified from a particular enquiry if it is open to public scrutiny and much prefer to talk in confidence to a Fosterline Advisor to gain a real insight into their issue rather than a general overview.

Fosterline webforms and emails

	New Users	Returning Users
Quarter 1 Jul 2014 – Sep 2014	3934	1502
Quarter 2 Oct 2014 – Dec 2014	4727	1534
Quarter 3 Jan 2015 – Mar 2015	7722	2094
Quarter 4 Apr 2015 – Jun 2015	11594	2872
Annual Total	27977	8002

Complaints

Fosterline has received no complaints relating to the service in this reporting period.

Safeguarding issues

2 potential safeguarding issues were reported by Fosterline Advisors during this reporting period. On further discussion and in accordance with the FosterTalk's robust safeguarding policy; one issue was reported to the relevant local authority while the other did not meet the safeguarding criteria.

Fosterline maintains a Safeguarding Log on which any concerns, the action taken, and outcome are recorded.

Key issues arising from enquiries

Overview: Enquiries to Fosterline reflect similar topics each month. Finance is a common theme that has seen the greatest increase in calls, running through many other topics. Finances have been in the background of issues discussed around kinship care, special guardianship orders, disability living allowance, benefits, and staying put arrangements. Foster carers are relaying their belief to Fosterline Advisors that fostering services are making decisions based on budgetary constraints rather than in the best interest of the child in care.

Private fostering arrangements has become a more prominent issue with callers believing they have entered into a fostering relationship expecting financial support from the local authority when the support should be coming from the birth parents. Private foster carers are often unaware of their responsibility to inform the local authority.

Fosterline Advisors are frequently being made aware of the lack of allowances for connected carers (also known as Kinship or Family and Friends carers) due to the fact that the carer has intervened either before or during an assessment into the needs of a child, rather than the child having been placed with them by the local authority.

Finances

Finance and tax are the topics that generate the highest volume of enquiries to the service. Over **17%** of all enquiries are about tax, finance, benefits or the allowances paid to foster carers. Many of these enquires require signposting to relevant HMRC and DWP sources of information. Many enquiries around finance require specific and direct information from experienced tax advice specialists. The majority of these calls tend not to be time consuming as they are more factual.

Enquiry themes

Tax and National Insurance

- Foster carers unaware they are required to register as self-employed with the HMRC
- Foster carers do not understand their responsibility for national insurance. This has led to foster carers being audited by the tax office.
- Foster carers expressed difficulty in obtaining mortgages and personal loans due to the lack of regular income.
- Lack of information during assessment process of how fostering will affect prospective foster carers' finances.

Benefits

- The delayed roll out of universal credit has contributed to the confusion around benefit entitlements for current and prospective foster carers.
- Foster carers who are without an income between placements are seeking information in relation to access to Income support Allowance and Jobseekers Allowance.

- Long periods between placements can force foster carers to leave fostering and seek alternative forms of income. Foster care is a “qualifying remunerative work” and foster carers are entitled to apply for but not guaranteed to qualify for benefits as payment is determined by other factors and incomes.
- Foster carers enquire about Child Tax Credits, especially when foster carers are considering the role of special guardianship or are kinship carers.

Disability Living Allowance

- Some service providers are asking foster carers to transfer a proportion of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) received for a particular child to respite carers. Conflict has arisen between service providers and foster carers as to what the DLA can be spent on and some foster carers are resistant to complying with requests from social workers for a breakdown on what the funding is spent on.

Fostering allowance

- Foster carers have said that some local authorities are removing skills based payments without consultation and notification as recommended in NMS 28 and in particular NMS 28.3, 28.5 and 28.6. This has led to foster carers considering switching provider which will ultimately increase spending to recruit new foster carers to replace those that do switch.
- Some fostering services are offering financial or other inducements to foster carers who switch fostering services.
- Mother and baby placement causes concern as to whom the allowance relates. Clarification has been sought as to whether the payment of the allowance was for the mother, the child or even both.
- Kinship carers have said that they feel discriminated against after they have intervened to stop a child entering the care system only to discover they are not entitled to an allowance.
- Kinship carers argue that the child would enter the care system without their support and hence a foster carer would receive an allowance. Kinship carers feel aggrieved that support is not freely available to them without the child actually entering the care system.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

- Some foster carers believe SGOs are being used as a means of reducing costs, rather than in the best interest of the children.

Finance queries also tend to cross over into many other topics discussed such as benefits for young people entering staying put arrangements and financial packages for special guardianship orders.

Allegations

Many enquiries to the service are from foster carers who are in crisis which is reflected in the service receiving over **10%** of its enquiries from foster carers experiencing an allegation. Service providers are directing their foster carers to Fosterline for initial independent support as recommended by national minimum standards 22.12. This was also highlighted in the independent evaluation of Fosterline by Birmingham City University that found that **Fosterline is a low cost early intervention service.**

Enquiry themes

Information on procedure

- Foster carers are unsure of the process that will be followed and feel that support is withdrawn by their fostering service.

- The lack of information or detail surrounding the allegation increases the level of anxiety of the foster carer.
- Confusion often exists between an allegation and a standards of care concern and the independent support available for both situations.

Independent support

- Foster carers' call Fosterline when they are not offered independent support by their fostering service.
- When provided with independent support; some foster carers believe the support they receive is not as independent as expected. Some foster carers question whether the provision of social workers employed by the fostering service is truly independent.
- Some foster carers complain when some fostering services use other experienced foster carers to support foster carers. This type of support questions the confidentiality of another foster carer being aware of their situation.
- Some foster carers have found it difficult to obtain independent support when an allegation is made.
- Some foster carers feel they should have been made aware of the right to seek independent support when they were informed of the allegation.
- In some cases the foster carer said they had been refused independent support when the allegation was made and only offered it at the review and panel stage of the process.
- It has been expressed that some callers believe independent support is withheld and hence they are unaware how to challenge or redress situations and are ultimately de-registered.
- Some foster carers believe that the independent support offered by fostering services is disproportional to the crisis they are facing and not enough.

Removal of children

- Fosterline has been made aware of foster carers experiencing children being removed at short notice, and carers felt that it was not always necessary.
- Many foster carers go through a grieving process due to the children not being returned following an unsubstantiated allegation.

Information gathering

- Many foster carers don't understand why children are not involved in the information gathering stage and are not interviewed. This could sometimes avoid them being removed unnecessarily.

Payment during investigation

- Lack of payment during investigation can lead to foster carers resigning due to financial pressures.
- Some foster carers have asked about compensation for loss of earnings following an allegation not being upheld.

Timescales

- The lack of a set timeframe for completing investigations into allegations frustrates foster carers and can lead to foster carers disengaging from the process and ultimately resigning.
- Foster carers are advised that even if they resign, the process will continue with the outcome being recorded on their fostering file. Better communication between fostering services and foster carers about this would benefit all parties.

The confidential nature of Fosterline enables foster carers to speak freely about the allegation they are facing. Foster carers often call in an emotional state and are comforted by the empathy, support

and information provided. Fosterline has an important role during allegations as the foster carers feel they can't approach their fostering service or supervising social worker

Becoming a foster carer

Over **16%** of all enquiries to Fosterline are from people looking for information on how to be assessed as a foster carer. This figure has grown from the 11% seen in the reported year July 2013 – June 2014 to the current 16%.

Prospective foster carers are encouraged to look at a variety of fostering services and compare what they can offer in the way of training, support and payment, what ages of children might need to be fostered and whether there are any restrictions on applicants to a particular service.

Enquiry themes

Who can foster

- Prospective foster carers discuss their suitability to foster.
- Many misconceptions of who can and cannot foster are discussed

Application process and appeals

- The right to appeal needs explanation to prospective foster carers who have failed the assessment process. This can heighten frustration due to media coverage promoting the need to recruit more foster carers.
- The right to appeal during level 2 assessment of prospective foster carers often needs to be explained by Fosterline Advisors.
- Prospective foster carers discuss whether or not to make an application to another fostering service having failed assessment.
- Callers fear that by being totally open and honest about the prospective foster carers past would jeopardise their assessment.

Service provider

- Prospective foster carers contact Fosterline to discuss whether to apply to a local authority or independent fostering service.
- Some prospective foster carers can have a fixed idea of the differences between independent agencies and the local authorities, while others are unaware that there may be a choice.

Health

- Many prospective foster carers who have experienced mental health issues and depression enquire whether this would automatically preclude them from any assessment.

Preconceptions

- Prospective foster carers often have a fixed idea of the age, gender or type of fostering they wish to pursue.

Finances

- Financial incentives for prospective foster carers to apply to a particular fostering service to be assessed (and existing foster carers to switch fostering services).

Fosterline Advisors have been able to help prospective foster carers to investigate what is important to them as a foster carer.

Care planning for looked after children

The overriding frustration expressed by foster carers is their lack of involvement in the care planning for the children within their care. Foster carers want to be treated as professionals and have an influence in the care planning as foster carers feel that they are in a position to advise having the responsibility of care 24/7.

Enquiry themes

Communication and relationships

- Personalities and emotions can affect the decisions being made during child in care, looked after child reviews.
- A lack of communication and working together on both the foster carer and service provider impacts on the planning and interests of the child in placement.
- Decisions made in planning reviews can be undone and disregarded for the sake of an innocuous incident with the foster carer irrelevant to the care plan. This can ultimately affect the application of the plan by a failure to communicate or work together.
- Breakdowns in communication between social workers and foster carers can have harmful consequences for the child such as their unnecessary removal from placement.
- Difficult relationships are compounded when social workers are changed or are not in post.

Advocacy from foster carers

- Foster carers feel that their views on the child in placement are frequently ignored.

Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

- IROs fail to fulfil their obligation to the child by not being independent and ensuring the local authority performs their responsibilities in the view of foster carers.
- Foster carers fail to see the IRO as a source of support when foster carers are trying to promote the needs of the young person in placement.
- Changes in the care plan exacerbate difficult relationships with foster carers and social workers and more often than not the situations reported to Fosterline have become emotional and personal rather than in the best interests of the child in care.
- Foster carers seek information on how to challenge some of the decisions within the individual care plans or the lack of progression with the agreements.

Compliance with regulations and standards

- Foster carers have reported a number of breaches of confidentiality on the part of health professionals giving out the foster carer's details to birth parents and sending important letters and documents with secure addresses being revealed.
- Foster carers wish for more information during the initial placement of a child
- Post placement meetings not happening within the expected timeframe with some foster carers not having a post placement meeting.
- Foster carers expressed that some local authorities take action to move children on a financial basis rather than in the best interests of the children.

Pathway planning

- Within the care planning there is a lack of detailed pathway plans, delayed and even non-existent planning for transition into independence.
- Pathway planning has been identified as commencing only a month or two before the young person is due to leave care.

A high proportion of the care planning enquiries result in the foster carer seeking an advocate for the child within their care.

Staying put

A great deal of confusion still exists around the issue of “Staying Put” and it appears that foster carers are not being given all the information they need on which to make an informed decision, for example; confusion exists as to the status of both the young adult and the previous foster carer. Enquirers fail to understand that once entering into a staying put arrangement they are no longer a foster carer for the young person and that fostering regulations no longer apply. Enquirers fail to realise the young person leaves the care system at 18 and the staying put arrangement is an agreement between two adults.

Enquiry themes

Finances and benefits

- There is still a belief amongst some foster carers they will receive an allowance at the same rate as they did as a foster carer.
- Foster carers fail to understand the contribution the young person is to make to the arrangement from benefits, their allowances and earnings.
- Foster carers seek information on the benefits and support available to the young person. There is a reported lack of financial advice available for care leavers entering into a staying put arrangement.

Pressure felt by the foster carer

- Last minute arrangements puts unnecessary pressure on an already difficult transition.
- Foster carers feel emotionally pressurised to make the decision as to carry on supporting the young person in a staying put arrangement.
- Foster carers have to decide whether to withdraw support and continue to offer their support to another foster placement due to a reduction in funds entering the household.

Fostering regulations

- Foster carers still believe they are foster carers. Staying put is an agreement between two adults and is not regulated
- Foster carers fail to understand that the young person is no longer fostered possibly due to media coverage using the phrase “staying with their foster carers until 21”.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

Service users are reporting to Fosterline that local authorities are increasing the number of special guardianship orders as their preferred route towards permanency for the children in placement.

Enquiry themes

Pressure felt by the foster carer

- Foster carers express a feeling of being pressurised into taking out special guardianship orders
- Foster carers feel threatened that children would be removed from placement if an SGO was not taken out.

Finances

- Service users feel some SGO's are not necessarily in the best interest of the child but being used as a way to reduce the budget commitment of the local authority.
- Independent agency foster carers have reported that children would be moved to local authority carers to save the cost of placing with an independent fostering agency if they didn't take out the SGO.
- Foster carers seek information about building the support package of a SGO.
- Means testing frightens foster carers that their SGO allowance will be removed.

Ongoing support

- Some foster carers that are considering special guardianship have expressed concerns on how to control and conduct supervision and contact with birth parents.
- There is a need for potential guardians to understand how to access future therapeutic support that may be required by the child.

A number of special guardians have contacted Fosterline and reported financial hardship. The failure to negotiate the correct financial support in the early stages of preparing the SGO is now impacting the arrangement.

Private fostering arrangements

During the final three months of the reported year most of the enquiries relating to Kinship care involved issues of private fostering. The callers identified situations where a family member or connected person has provided accommodation for a child.

Often the case has been a family member stepping in to help a child when they believe them to be at risk.

In many of the cases the local authority are involved or are aware of the situation but the relatives have provided accommodation before an assessment of the child has been carried out. Although the local authority will continue with an assessment they follow the guidelines of a private fostering arrangement and once the child is deemed to be in a safe environment their involvement is dramatically reduced including the requirement to provide financial support.

Enquiry themes

Finances

- The Family member needs to access some financial support and argue that the child would be in care if it were not for their intervention.

Benefits

- Family members need confirmation on how to apply for Child Benefit.

Local Authorities responsibility

- Private foster carers need to know the requirement to inform the local authority that they are looking after someone else's child.

Fosterline Advisors will explain the family member can seek funding from birth parents. They will also advise the carer to explain the situation to local authority but are reminded that any support would be discretionary. Callers are also directed to other sources of support, such as the Family Rights Group and Grandparent's organisations.

Feedback

Fosterline received feedback from service users via webforms. Many callers to the service will verbally praise and thank the Fosterline Advisor at the end of the call.

Examples of feedback received are as follows:

25.11.14 - Spoke to someone he was very helpful and polite it makes a change to speak to someone who does not put you through to other departments and can help straight away

21.05.15 - just keep going, don't be part of the austerity measures!

08.04.15 - The advisor I spoke to was incredibly helpful and polite, she answered my questions and gave me a lot of information. Thank you very much!

08.01.15 - Great service thank you for your help

18.06.15 – the advisor was a mind of useful information. He was very understanding of the problem we were facing and had some very useful suggestions as to the best way forward with the problem we were experiencing.

05.02.15 - I phoned Fosterline today and was helped by an extremely pleasant staff member, who importantly sounded friendly and interested from the outset - which was excellent. I am a professional who accidentally phoned thinking it was for professionals, so although he was unable to help me, I was impressed with his attitude and he gave me an alternative number to speak to. I will recommend you to my foster carers as the positive approach showed was just what families need thank you

01.06.15 - Just to say thanks, due to your advice I wrote up my notes to your suggestions and took them to LA who took it seriously and held a professionals meeting. To my amazement they have made substantial changes to the plan based around my concerns. This was a lot due to the professional way I handled it after advice on how to do this from Fosterline. Much appreciated.

Fosterline User Surveys

Fosterline service users were surveyed during the review period.

Emails were sent to the following service users for the following surveys.

Period July 2014 to March 2015 – independent evaluation by Birmingham City University

Period April 2015 to June 2015 – Prospective and current foster carers that had contacted the service and consented to being contacted via email. The survey returned a 12% response rate.

Fosterline user survey

An online survey was sent to capture responses from service users from whom permission had been granted at the time of contact. The aim of the survey was to gain responses from users that didn't have the opportunity to participate in the independent evaluation. All responses were confidential and the identity of the respondent remains anonymous.

240 surveys requests were sent out with 28 replies received, a response rate of 12%.

The following results were obtained:

55% had contacted the service only once

36% had contacted the service between one and five times with 9% contacting the service more than five times

Fosterline Advisors were rated **4.2 out of 5** on their knowledge and **76%** said that their issue had either been resolved or moved forward based on the information received from Fosterline. **21%** said that the information received had clarified the position and enabled them to accept the issue could not be progressed.

91% rated the overall service as either good or excellent with 90% stating they would recommend the service to a friend, fellow foster carer or colleague.

From the prospective foster carers that responded to the service **25% had continued and been approved** while 50% will progress their application to foster as a result of the information received from Fosterline

The service as a whole was rated 4.4 out of 5.

Fosterline continues to receive positive results from all surveys and the results have been echoed and supported by the independent evaluation of the service and its impact on fostering recruitment and retention.

Independent evaluation

FosterTalk commissioned the independent evaluation of the Fosterline service during January 2015 – March 2015. Invitation was sent to all the Fosterline users that had provided the service with an email address and open invitations were placed on the Fosterline website and in social media.

From those that replied the evaluation was conducted and included a series of interviews with 12 respondents to compliment the survey results. A brief overview follows with the full evaluation available on the Fosterline website <http://www.fosterline.info/independent-evaluation-report/>

Independent evaluation of Fosterline conducted by Birmingham City University

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 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. 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.

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.

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'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 within the evaluation. 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.

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.

Key findings:

70.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the advice and support they received from Fosterline was useful, whilst 18.8% were undecided

75.1% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the helpline advisor was knowledgeable and helpful, with 16.7% undecided

70.8% of participants received information from Fosterline that enabled them to decide what to do next and 64.6% of foster carers agreed or strongly agreed that their problem was progressed after contacting Fosterline

81.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that without Fosterline there would be a lack of appropriate independent support for foster carers in England.

77.1% agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline provides independent advice and support that is crucial to the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England with 14.6% undecided

81.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Fosterline is an independent organisation enhancing support available to foster carers from their fostering service providers

66.7% of all participants agreed or strongly agreed that after contacting Fosterline they felt valued and supported as a foster carer

Fosterline Delivery Plan 2014 – 2015

Regular monitoring and review of Fosterline service delivery takes place against the Delivery Plan, Marketing Plan, KPI's and service aims and objectives.

The website is regularly monitored and updated to include new information of relevance to foster carers and to ensure ease of use. Helpline staffing kept under review in line with call patterns and to ensure a consistent and efficient service.

FosterTalk outlined the following Delivery Plan for Fosterline for 2014 - 2015

We proposed to: Increase and develop Fosterline's online presence and social media networking

We achieved:

- Incorporation into school electronic mailing systems.
- Fosterline ran a `call us` campaign promoting the service from fellow professionals, businesses, public services and various organisations displaying the Fosterline poster.
- Fosterline produced statements for various websites and social medias including BAAF, Bemyparent, and Fostering Information Exchange

We proposed to: Increase the use of the Fosterline forums

We achieved: The number of posts to the forum rose by 94% despite this not being a favoured line of communication expressed when interviewing service users.

We proposed to: Evaluate the need and provision for online chat facility as an additional tool for answering foster carers queries in real time

We achieved: Scoping into interactive Fosterline online chat facility prompted work into the development of the wireframe to support the launch of website chat facility with schedule to implementation by the end of December 2015

We proposed to: Increase the information on disability available to visitors of the website

We achieved: the inclusion of extra pages to the website to reflect the changes in legislation around special educational needs and disability.

We proposed to: Support the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England

We achieved:

- Fosterline ran specifically targeted campaigns to all fostering service recruitment teams as well as the general public by launching accompanying posters featuring existing foster carers on posters and social media titled 'can you picture yourself as a foster carer' and 'What does a foster carer look like'
- Fosterline increased the use of the service from 11% to 16% of prospective foster carers by increasing the case studies on the website and content in 'Lowdown' newsletter from foster carers.

We proposed to: Reflect the views of the service users to the Department for Education regarding policy and legislation

We achieved: Fosterline reported issues faced by foster carers and prospective foster carers via the quarterly reviews held with the Department for Education. Fosterline were able to make recommendation.

We proposed to: Evaluate the impact Fosterline has on the enquirers to the service

We achieved: FosterTalk commissioned an independent evaluation of Fosterline to report on the experiences of Fosterline users and the impact the service had on the issues they faced.

We proposed to: Communicate with all fostering service providers from both local authority and independent services to develop the support of Fosterline to foster carers

We achieved:

- All fostering service providers were periodically informed about the activities of Fosterline throughout the review period.
- Fosterline information has been shared on some local authority and independent services websites and communications to their own foster carers.

We proposed to: Enhance the website to include information relating to the looked after child on matters such as education and children's rights

We achieved: the inclusion of extra pages to the website titled 'Education of children in care'

We proposed to: Ensure we continue to provide an efficient, effective and responsive support service to prospective and current foster carers

We achieved: 85% of all calls to the service were answered within 1 minute. Feedback has remained positive throughout the review period.

We proposed to: Steering group to function via both physical and virtual meetings

We achieved: the evolution of the steering group into a dedicated Task force throughout the country to explore and utilise

We proposed to: Gain The Helplines Partnership Quality Standard Accreditation

We achieved: Accreditation gained in March 2015

Conclusion

In the reviewed period Fosterline has been able to provide information to **over 40,500** users through the Freephone Advice, website and email services.

Fosterline is able to inform the Department for Education of the issues raised by prospective and current foster carers during quarterly reviews of the service provided by Fosterline. Fosterline is conscious of the role it has to play for both current and prospective foster carers in England. Despite some service users asking Fosterline to become more of an advocacy service; Fosterline adheres strictly to its role of impartial and confidential advice.

Fosterline is not a lobbying service but realises its responsibility to represent the voice of the foster carer and will continue to report the issues responsibly. It is hoped that by raising the awareness of the issues foster carers and prospective foster carers have that policy can be informed and advised in the future to enhance the well-being of foster carers and promote good outcomes for the children and young people within the care system.

Feedback and independent evaluation has highlighted that Fosterline fulfils a clear need for an independent, impartial advice and support service to enhance the services offered by LAs and IFAs to foster carers and assist government in the important role of the recruitment and retention of foster carers. FosterTalk will therefore continue to develop Fosterline in consultation with its service users and other stakeholders in pursuit of this goal.

Appendix

Fosterline demographics

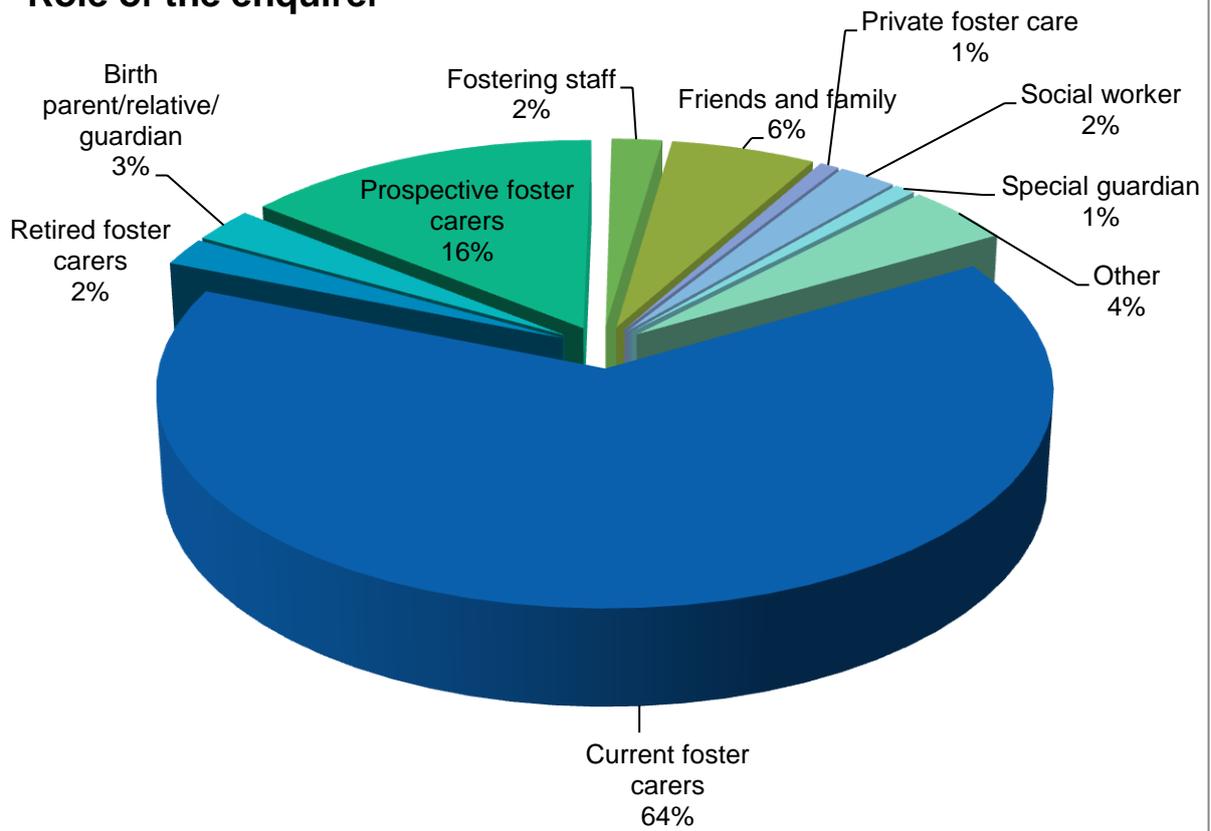
Demographics are collected for each caller wherever possible, although there is no requirement for callers to divulge any personal information to Fosterline.

Advisors are also able to use their discretion as to whether or not to collect the data due to the nature of the call. Advisors will not increase or cause stress and anxiety to any caller whose situation is of a sensitive nature and they believe it would make the caller feel uncomfortable. Enquiries via webform and email invite users to provide demographic information but the option is not always taken, hence all the following results are from the information available and not from 100% of the contact with Fosterline.

Role in fostering

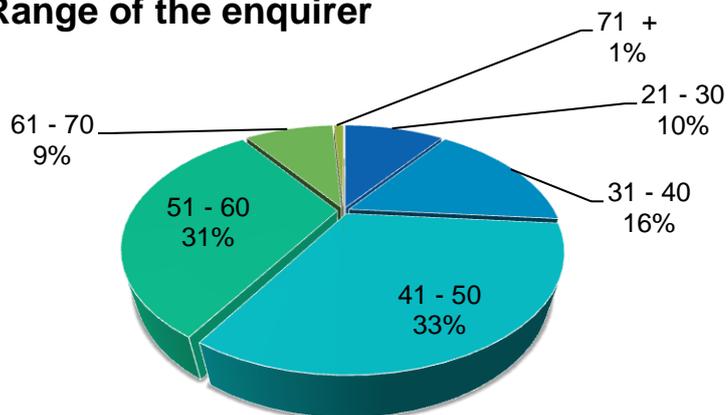
The majority of callers to the service are existing foster carers and this is very much reflected in the reasons for contacting the service. The information gleaned from the role of the caller to Fosterline demonstrates the service is reaching the intended audience.

Role of the enquirer



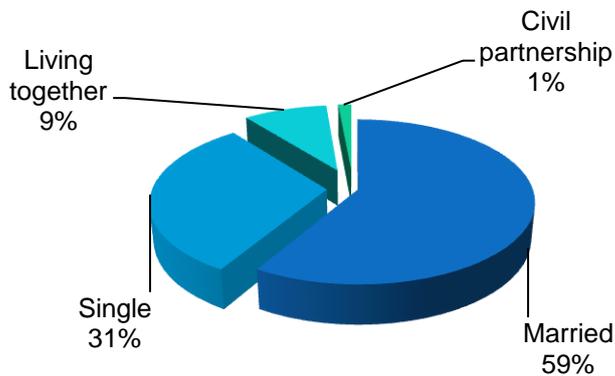
Age of enquirer

Age Range of the enquirer



Marital status

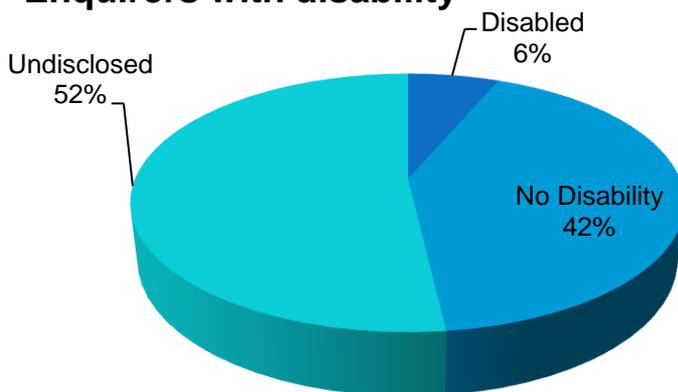
Marital Status of the enquirer



Disability

Disability is not defined when taking demographics. The enquirer decides for themselves if they deem themselves to have a disability or not.

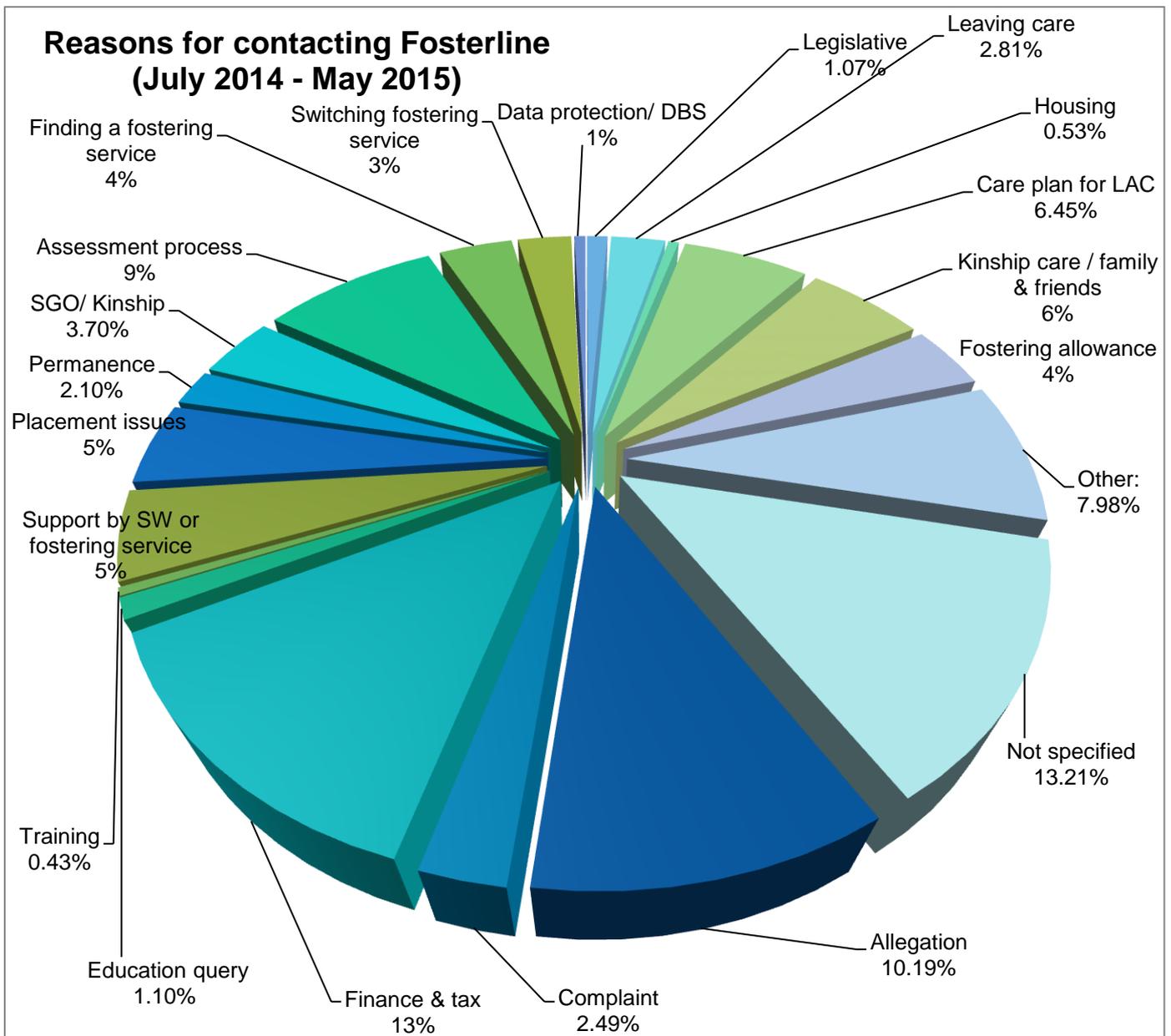
Enquirers with disability



Reasons for contacting Fosterline

Fosterline has responded to a very broad range of enquiries of concern to foster carers and often they do not fit into discrete categories. The following represents a general description of the topics and many cross over into the realms of another topic.

Although the top ten recorded topics that are enquired about remains fairly constant the frequency with which they are raised fluctuates according to: the time of year, the news items relating to foster care and legislation changes, and also media coverage such as dedicated television documentaries and topics on popular soap operas.



Ethnicity of enquires to Fosterline

Figures shown below represent the caller's own description of their ethnicity. Confusion is seen where some enquirers mistake their religious background with their ethnicity.

**Ethnicity of Enquirers to Fosterline
July 2014 to June 2015 (as expressed by service users)**

