

Fosterline
0800 040 7675
your fostering advice service

www.fosterline.info

Annual Report

1st May 2019 – 30th April 2020



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Department
for Education

Introduction

Welcome to the Fosterline England Annual Report 2019/20. Fosterline is delivered in England by FosterTalk on behalf of the Department for Education. FosterTalk has now completed its seventh year and it continues to develop to meet the needs of the fostering community. Fosterline aims to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers by providing free, confidential, advice, support and information about fostering and the many issues that foster carers face. Fosterline's service user engagement via website and helpline, social media and live chat by the end of year 7 was over 416,531. The year was impacted by the pandemic and the introduction of restrictions and "lock down" in March 2020. Fosterline continued to offer its full range of services throughout this period as advisors were able to work from home safely and were on hand to offer advice to foster carers anxious and/or confused about the implications for their role.

Fosterline has continued to focus campaigns during 2019/20 on the recruitment of more foster carers from a diverse range of communities to meet the needs of children and young people entering the care system. Fosterline is also committed and focussed to support the retention of skilled foster carers and all advisors are trained to offer impartial and confidential advice upon presenting issues and concerns. Fosterline had seen an overall growth of their National Recruitment Noticeboard which is a free service offering fostering services the opportunity to advertise recruitment and training events on the Fosterline website. However during the lockdown introduced in March 2020 it was suspended as recruitment events were cancelled in light of government guidance on gatherings.

Fosterline continues to respond to a large number of service users looking for information on becoming a foster carer and seeking advice around the assessment process. There was a marginal increase in fostering households in England compared to the previous year but the number of children in the care system increased by 2% resulting in a reduction in places available with foster carers. Unfortunately, whilst interest is significant, many prospective carers do not pursue applications or complete the process of assessment and Fosterline continue to try to gain insight into the reasons for this and raise any themes or barriers with the Department for Education to help influence any future changes in policy.

In 2019/2020, **22%** of all website searches on www.fosterline.info were to pages containing information on how to become a foster carer or actively searching for a fostering service near them or a recruitment advert. Additionally, the helpline received **21%** of all calls from people enquiring about becoming a foster carer. Foster care provides care for over 56,500 children in England (as at 31 March 2020¹). Caring for vulnerable children as a foster carer is an important, rewarding but often challenging role. Fosterline is committed to support the retention of existing foster carers by offering impartial advice and support to empower carers to make informed decisions on a wide range of fostering matters. Many carers tell our advisors they value having this confidential support available as often they may feel isolated or unsure how to proceed in the event of a concern.

Many family and friends or kinship/connected carers also contact Fosterline for information on becoming a carer for a specific child or children and they often share that up to this point the information available to them has been scarce or confusing. There has also been a steady increase in enquiries relating to carers wanting information about special guardianship and advisors have had additional training this year to ensure the service can advise and signpost effectively.

Fosterline advisors are available to provide a listening ear, offer support and information to carers and prospective carers. Many service users revisit Fosterline throughout their fostering career. All callers are given the opportunity to

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2019-to-31-march-2020>

leave feedback on their experience of using Fosterline and over 95% tell us they would use the service again and would recommend it to a friend. The average ratings score out of 15 given by users of the service across 2019/20 was 14

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families Minister Vicky Ford has recently commented on the Fosterline service:

“The support Fosterline provides has enabled foster carers to continue to provide much needed support to vulnerable children within their care. I acknowledge this has been particularly important during the Covid 19 pandemic as many foster families have faced significant challenges during this year.

It is vital that we continue to support foster families both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, to keep them together and enable them to continue to provide safety and stability for vulnerable children.

I am humbled by the way foster families have responded to the challenges of Covid-19 - their unrelenting commitment, passion and dedication has been inspirational. I am also grateful for the support that has been given by local services.”

FosterTalk will continue to develop the Fosterline service responding to the needs of carers and prospective carers with the aim of supporting a stable and resilient foster carer workforce that benefits the vulnerable children and young people within our care.

Sharon Thompson – Fosterline Co-ordinator

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Executive Summary

Fosterline provides free confidential, impartial advice, information and signposting on issues of concern to foster carers and prospective foster carers in England. The demand for foster carers continues and Fosterline provides a safe space for prospective carers to gain information to enable them to make informed decisions about whether fostering may be a career for them.

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 support fostering services and their foster carer households.

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.

Out of hours, or if the lines are all busy, a recorded message will invite the caller to leave a voicemail message, this message will also direct them to the Fosterline website where they can request a call back from an Advisor. All calls and messages are returned on the same or the next working day.

The telephone helpline also operates a text-phone system to support those with a hearing impairment and we offer interpretation services via a language line facility for callers when English is not their first language.

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

The Fosterline website was relaunched in September 2019 and is packed full of information of interest to foster carers and prospective foster carers. It provides a mapping facility to enable users to “find a fostering service”. Visitors to the website can also contact our Fosterline advisors via web-forms, emails, call back facility and simple contact forms – all of which are responded to on the same or next working day. Website users are also able to contact a Fosterline advisor through live chat messaging weekdays between 9am and 17:00pm

Fosterline advisors can also answer queries and messages that are posted on Fosterline social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

Key Findings

The Fosterline annual report covers the period from 1st May 2019 to 30th April 2020 and reflects the impact that Fosterline has had upon users of the service. March and April 2020 were the beginning of the pandemic and lockdown measures were introduced to slow the spread of Coronavirus. The Fosterline service continued throughout this time with advisors working from home. The advisors dealt with a high volume of Covid-19 related enquiries from foster carers during this time and also saw a surge in interest in fostering that will be reflected in the report.

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
- 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 web-forms
- Survey of prospective foster carers who took the fostering criteria questionnaire on the Fosterline website
- Survey of fostering services (both local authority and independent agencies)

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 future policy.

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 helpline, website, email, live chat and web-form and social media on over 416,531 occasions in the reporting period, May 2019 to April 2020. Whilst this figure demonstrates considerable reach into the fostering community it is down from the previous year. This is a reflection of initial difficulties with accessing the newly launched website in November 2019 that impacted upon visitor figures in quarter 4. The new website was amended to include additional landing sites when this issue came to light and figures began to recover. There were also an additional 46,767 engagements over the year as a result of the distribution of our quarterly newsletter The Lowdown that is circulated to all fostering services and to carers or prospective carers who have consented to have contact from Fosterline.

The Fosterline website was relaunched in the autumn 2019 and in February 2020 the designers won a UX Design Award by the CSS Design Awards Community and a Special Kudos Award by the CSS Design Award Judges in respect of the website. The service has a secure encrypted database to record enquiries and helpline calls are recorded on a separate encrypted voice over internet system. FosterTalk maintains all records electronically and these can only be accessed by advisors and senior managers. These records serve as quality assurance and management oversight of the service as a whole, and comply with General Data Protection Regulations and Department for Education IT security requirements as set out in the contract.

Fosterline continues to be contacted on a wide range of fostering issues. All Fosterline trained advisors are suitably qualified and experienced to offer advice that is empathetic yet impartial and seeks to identify options for the caller to decide for them self how they wish to proceed. Advisors avoid expressing personal opinion and seek to equip callers with information to make informed decisions. In addition to enquiries from prospective foster carers, enquiries from approved foster carers including kinship carers, enquiries generally relate to clarification around fostering regulations, legislation, finance, policies and procedures and queries with their fostering service. Foster carers will often present in a distressed state, stressed, anxious, angry or insecure when for example they are subject to a complaint, allegation or standard of care concern. In general the foster carer has exhausted their usual support network which includes their fostering service or are bewildered and unsure where to turn to for support and advice and for these reasons the service user's emotions are often heightened.

Fosterline advisors are aware they only receive the perception of the service user and are not always privileged to have a balanced account of the situation. The advisors sensitively manage the expectations of the service user as foster carers may only call Fosterline with the expressed interest of seeking clear direction and guidance. The emphasis is upon active listening and identifying any appropriate support and clarifying any options available for a foster carer.

As reinforced by the results of the Independent evaluation on the Social Return on Investment of Fosterline between 2016 and 2017, Fosterline provides a high level of support and understanding to service users and is recognised as providing a low cost, early intervention mechanism that empowers foster carers and promotes positive outcomes for children and young people who are fostered.

The main topic of enquiries to Fosterline this year been from prospective foster carers seeking information about fostering. This is followed closely by enquiries and issues that foster carers face around Special Guardianship applications/ Orders and Kinship Care. Many foster carers continue to express concern over the pressure faced to consider Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) for the children in their foster care and often struggle to gain impartial information elsewhere about the implications for carers in relation to support and the legal status of the child. Kinship carers are often given misinformation about their status and role as carers for looked after children and the financial support available to care for the child and any entitlements to other financial support.

From surveys and interaction on the website, it is clear that despite the continued provision of information and positive case studies the same myths about fostering still prevail each year but our quiz results appear to suggest these are lessening. These myths include that you must be married, own your own home, have had your own children and are reflected in the fostering assessment criteria survey available on the Fosterline website and reported on page 39. There has been an increase in the number of people taking the survey with a criminal record and people that have suffered mental illness. It is a very positive development that perhaps until recently, many may have automatically assumed they would be unable to foster are now actively seeking information. However, despite this optimism it is clear there is still much work on myth busting to be done to encourage a diverse inclusive foster carer workforce.

Fosterline's role in promoting the recruitment of foster carers has seen **21% of helpline enquiries and 22% of web traffic** obtain information either from the Fosterline website or the Fosterline Advisors have provided over **50,000** interactions (including use of social media) resulting in a significantly large captive audience of potential new foster carers. Fosterline is committed to aid fostering services to convert more of these interactions into approved foster carers and has introduced additional systems to capture the experiences of prospective foster carers from the point of enquiry to the approval. A call back with consent of the prospective carer takes place around 4 weeks after the initial contact to offer any further support and advice and discover if the prospective carer is pursuing an application to foster.

The advisors will gather qualitative data on decisions not to proceed that are fed into quarterly reports to highlight any barriers to fostering. In relation to those that are applying to foster with consent from the prospective carer a series of automated emails are sent during the assessment process to gain feedback on their experience and whether any decisions not to proceed with an assessment identify any common barriers. Unfortunately the response rate to emails has been very low and there were discussions on how to improve this which have led to further call backs during the assessment process introduced in the new contract period to extend the personal approach from an advisor in 20/21.

Fosterline continues to play a fundamental role in encouraging the positive communication between foster carers, fostering services and other relevant professionals in the ultimate goal to provide the best possible environment for the child or young person in care. Fosterline provide a responsive service with attuned advice from highly trained

well informed helpline advisors who have relevant experience and understand the role of foster carers, their views and perspectives, needs and requirements as well as the legislation and good practice required to achieve good foster care. This was brought into sharp focus during the pandemic when many carers were contacting the service expressing fear and anxiety and were increasingly socially isolated due to the lockdown measures introduced in March.

Fosterline continues to receive positive service user feedback on an ongoing and consistent basis to evidence that the advice provided has helped to re-motivate and focus foster carers back into the role and support the best outcomes for the children and young people in placement.

Service user feedback is rated between 0 – 5 in several key areas with 5 being rated as the highest score. Scores received are consistently rated between 4 and 5 in respect of quality of information and the satisfaction of service received.

Review of Fosterline performance & statistics

Fosterline Helpline

Callers are able to access support and advice from qualified and experienced fostering advisors via the Freephone number 0800 040 7675, on Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm (except Bank Holidays). Voicemail messages can be left for a response in 1 working day and call backs can be requested at a particular date and time via the website. The service can also be accessed via live chat with an advisor 9-5pm weekdays (except Bank holidays) and via email.

Of the **2008** hours that the service was advertised as open, Fosterline achieved **100%** availability. Fosterline closed only on public holidays as recognised in England and on predetermined and advertised training days for the Fosterline advisors. Outside the advertised hours an answerphone message invites callers to leave a voicemail or encourages callers to use the website, web-form and appointment call back facilities. During the period of this report the service experienced severe local flood conditions in the autumn of 2019 and the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. In each situation advisors have been able to swiftly and safely relocate to work remotely at home with no loss of service provision.

Advice is provided by fully trained, experienced Fosterline advisors and all advice provided is impartial and confidential. The quality of advice is monitored and assured through regular consultation, supervision and training with its origins firmly embedded in legislation, regulations and good practice guides for fostering in England.

All Fosterline Advisors are required to attend regular training and are provided with up-to-date information reinforced by legislation and information obtained from the Department for Education and FosterTalk's Professional Advisor.

Quarterly training days address specific issues and topics encountered from enquiries and bespoke external training has also been provided by the Helplines Partnership, Epact, The Training Hub, and Legal experts. Advisors have completed training on Special Guardianship and some have become Mental Health First Aiders as a result of training put in place in the autumn of 2019 and are therefore well placed to respond to carers who may be experiencing mental or emotional distress. During the initial early months of the pandemic there was much anxiety and uncertainty for foster carers and the service ensured all advisors were kept up to date on the government guidance and any restrictions in place. The team clarified where necessary its application to the role of foster care and the needs of looked after children and ensured that all advice was as accurate and up to date as possible.

Fosterline performance data

In addition to providing monthly management information to the Department for Education, FosterTalk meets quarterly with the Department to review performance against KPI's.

During our quarterly reviews with the Department, Fosterline's management team share and discuss key issues of concern raised by Fosterline users in order to inform policy and practice. Fosterline often receives enquiries from fostering service staff, social workers and non-related fostering personnel. These enquiries are signposted to other relevant sources of information and support in line with the Department's contractual requirements.

Fosterline call volumes

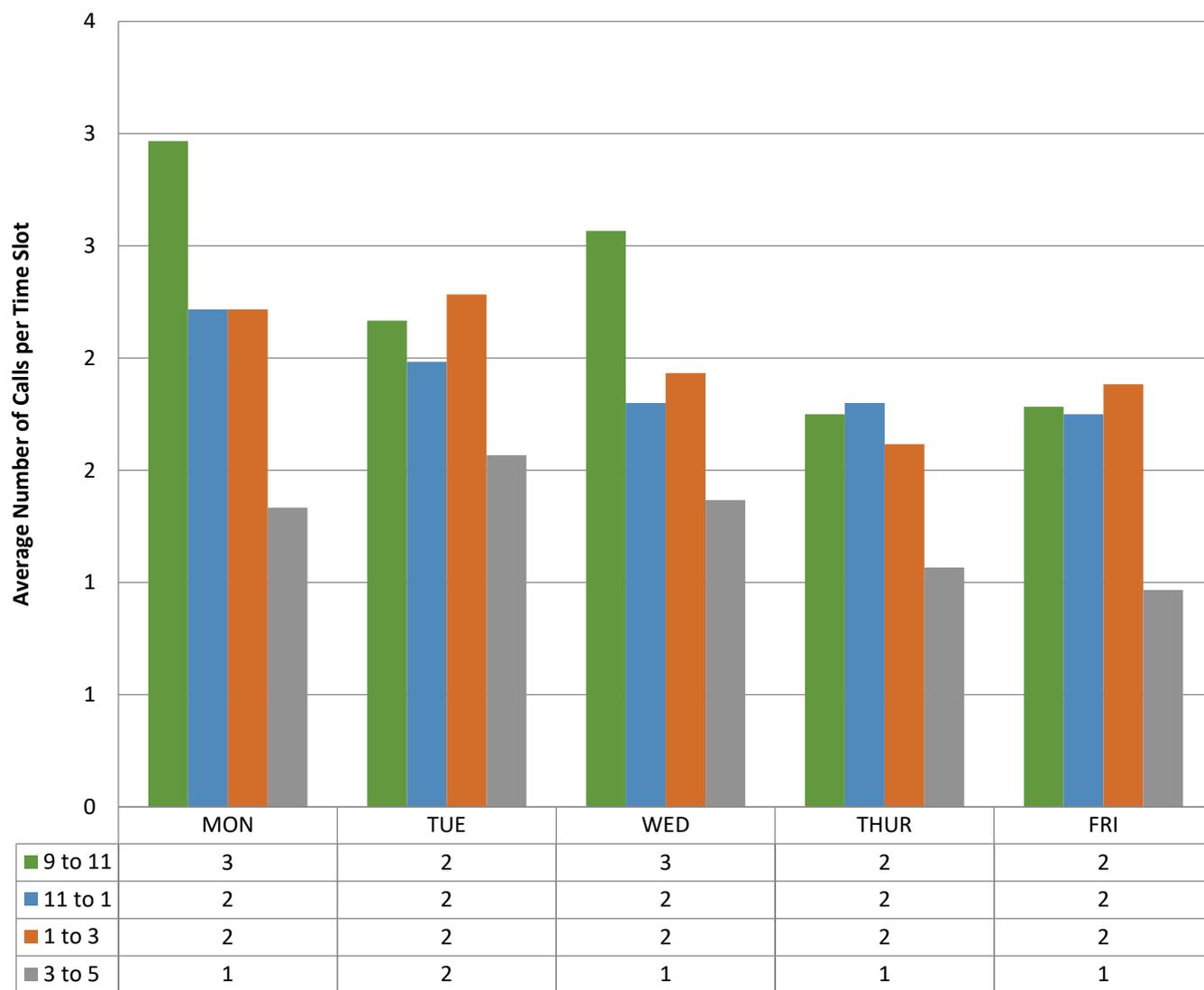
Fosterline saw 'becoming a foster carer' the most discussed topic by Fosterline advisors during the reporting period with **21% of all calls answered by advisors providing information related to the assessment process or finding a fostering service**. Special Guardianship and Kinship Care was the next most discussed topic by Fosterline advisors at 14%. 12% of all calls answered by the advisors had financial implications.

	Calls Received	Calls received out of hours	Call back appointments	Voicemails left in hours	Voicemails left outside operating hours
Quarter 1 May 2019 – July 2019	875	188	50	73	71
Quarter 2 Aug 2019 – Oct 2019	891	178	27	63	74
Quarter 3 Nov 2019 – Jan 2020	638	34	5	40	34
Quarter 4 Feb 2020 – April 2020	495	35	22	30	24
Annual Total	2899	435	104	206	203

94.5% of all calls to Fosterline were answered **within 1 minute** (including time taken to listen to the automatic initial voice recording (IVR))

Fosterline peak call times

**Average number of Calls Answered by an Advisor
(May 2019 - April 2020)**



Whilst there is a small identified drop in calls received this must be evaluated against the increased requests for call backs via FosterTalk enquiries during the pandemic as carers adapted to seeking advice at a time that suited them whilst having care of looked after children (and often birth children) when they were being home schooled. Call patterns have remained reasonably consistent throughout the reported period. Call backs could also be booked on the Fosterline website. The highest volume of calls to the service is remains between 09:00 and 13:00 each day. On average the service is contacted outside the advertised opening hours 30 times a month. This equates to 1 call each day outside the opening hours. Analysis has identified that many of these calls are within the first half an hour before the service opens and half an hour after the service closes. Those that call just prior to the service being available tend to try again once the service is open.

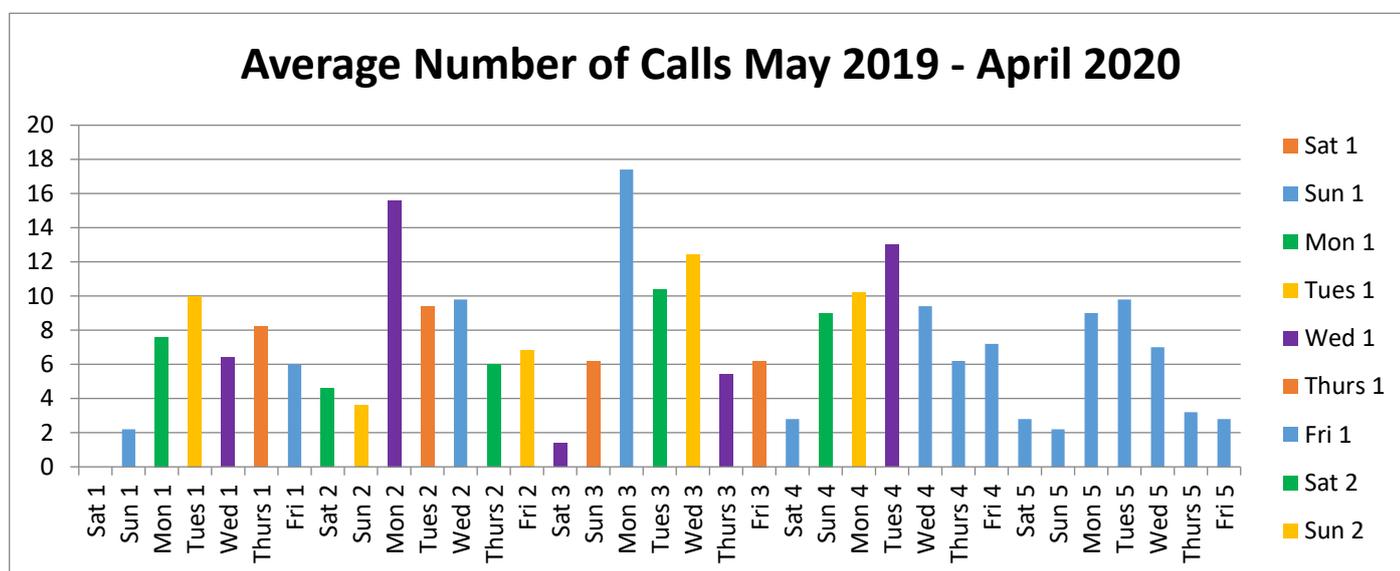
There is no evidence to support the service hours being extended at this time.

Fosterline call analysis

Call patterns have remained consistent throughout the reporting period for each month. Calls tend to peak weekly around Monday to Wednesday and the fourth weeks of every month being the busiest period for incoming calls. School holidays affect the volume of calls to the service as calls are more confidential and less likely to be interrupted when the children and young people were in school or not within the home. Requests for call backs thus increased during the early weeks of the pandemic when many carers had children in their care off school and wanted a call at a specific time.

When callers telephone Fosterline they are greeted with an initial voice recording (IVR) advising them that their call will be recorded for quality monitoring purposes. At this point 6% of callers end the call.

The average call to Fosterline lasts 12 minutes giving enough time for complex issues to be discussed fully with an advisor.



Fosterline website Data

Visitors to the Fosterline website dropped significantly after the launch of the new website and it was discovered that the reduced landing platforms within the new site was negatively impacting upon Fosterline listings in website searches and visitors to the site. This issue was rectified resulting in a restoration of our listing position when fostering queries are undertaken on search engines and increased use of the website. The decline in use can be seen within Q3 and Q4 figures and has significantly affected the overall figures for the website use for the year showing a decrease from 162,646 for 2018/19 to 130,777 in 2019/20. Figures recovered following the changes.

Website content was reviewed and refreshed as part of the relaunched website and continues to be 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. The designers of the new website won a Special Kudos Award and Design Award for Fosterline awarded by the CSS Design Award Judges and CSS Design Awards Community. The Noticeboard advertising recruitment events was closed in March on the website due to lockdown and government guidance in respect of gatherings.

Fosterline advisors are able to direct callers to the website as a reference tool confirming information given during phone line engagements and to assist prospective carers to find fostering services near to where they live. Callers to the helpline are also encouraged to use the website for reference, for example; to access fostering legislation and regulations information and to download useful fact-sheets.

Fosterline website visitors and social media

The Fosterline website has been operational for 100% of the time over the past year. A total of 114,058 new users have visited the website over the past year with over 16,719 repeat users. Email and social media campaigns continue to drive people to specific information on the website. Social media has been a valuable means of promoting relevant messages to foster carers and raising awareness about fostering in the wider community with over 55,000 engagements. We shall continue to encourage identified groups within society including the retired community, LGBTQ+ and other groups who may have interest and transferable skills to foster and grow our organic reach accordingly.

	New Users	Returning Users
Quarter 1 May 2019 – July 2019	38,678	6,152
Quarter 2 Aug 2019 – Oct 2019	39,365	5,871
Quarter 3 Nov 2019 – Jan 2020	18,677	2,558
Quarter 4 Feb 2020 – April 2020	17,338	2,138
Annual Total	114,058	16,719

Fosterline web-forms and emails

	Web-forms	Emails	Live Chat
Quarter 1 May 2019 – July 2019	126	171	91
Quarter 2 Aug 2019– Oct 2019	131	344	62
Quarter 3 Nov 2019– Jan 2020	7	115	26
Quarter 4 Feb 2020– April 2020	0	166	39
Annual Total	264	796	218

Live Chat

Live chat continues to be available 9-5pm Monday-Friday with the exception of bank holidays. Live Chat users have the advantage of contacting the service in a more discrete form of communication without alerting other people that may enter their vicinity. Advisors are able to provide advice and add links to other resources and/or sign post effectively.

For some complex issues the Fosterline advisors will request a telephone number from the service user and call them back at their convenience to discuss the matter further if required.

Call back appointments

The Call Back facility allows website service users to access a calendar and to then book an appointment from a Fosterline advisor between 10am and 4pm Mon-Fri. The Call Back facility allows the service user to schedule a call back to them from an advisor in a half an hour slot from available times on the booking form. This can reduce the anxiety from service users that have questions and issues raised outside operating times by reassuring them that a Fosterline advisor will contact them at a specific time.

	Number of Call-back appointments
Quarter 1 May 2019 – July 2019	50
Quarter 2 Aug 2019– Oct 2019	27
Quarter 3 Nov 2019 – Jan 2020	5
Quarter 4 Feb 2020 – April 2020	22
Annual Total	104

Safeguarding issues

A total of 5 potential safeguarding issues were highlighted during this reporting period. Fosterline is subject to FosterTalk's robust safeguarding policy and procedures and these were acted upon on each occasion resulting in 2 of the issues being recorded and reported to the relevant local authority and 3 situations where further information on how to make a referral was provided in situations where livechat engagements and callers declined to provide enough information for the service to contact the relevant local authority as location was not known.

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

Key issues arising from enquiries

Overview:

Enquiries to Fosterline reflect similar topics each month although items represented in the news also have an impact on enquiries to the service. Calls from March onwards reflected the concerns about Covid-19 related to issues about new placements, contact and introductions and the possible risks of infection and practical queries around the financial impact of lockdown and supporting the education needs of looked after children. Fosterline ensured its advice reflected the latest government guidance to ensure all callers had access to the most up to date information and support during what many carers have experienced as a very challenging and uncertain situation.

Enquiries to the service also have seasonal trends. For example more enquiries typically focus on tax returns and issues during October and January with benefits enquiries more frequent during April. January also sees an increase in calls regarding pupil premium as this has become a traditional time to re-evaluate personal circumstances. In March in light of lockdown Fosterline was contacted by many carers in respect of financial queries related to furlough and any available support to the self-employed.

Fosterline continue to actively promote the recruitment of prospective foster cars and it continues to remain within in the top three most popular reasons for calling Fosterline. Callers also often call regarding financial queries and concerns.

Finances

Finance and tax issues have consistently been discussed during the reporting period and more often than not the majority of issues discussed with the Fosterline Advisors will have an element of finances about them. Fosterline Advisors will not give detailed advice on benefits and finances but will provide an overview and general implications.

Fosterline advisors will then signpost to the HMRC and DWP accordingly for specialist advice or information. Finance will have implications in the discussions around Kinship Care, Special Guardianship Orders, Disability Living Allowance, state benefits to include 30 hours child care criteria, private fostering and Staying Put arrangements. There is no doubt that this continues to be a confusing area for many prospective and approved carers and many express they have been given conflicting or inaccurate information from their fostering service. Foster carers also continue to express concerns that fostering services and/or local authorities make decisions based on budgetary constraints rather than in the best interests of the child in care.

The fostering allowance is recognised as an enabler for a person to provide foster care but Fosterline Advisors continue to receive reports from foster carers who express concern that the allowance does not cover the realistic cost of both caring for the child and meeting the arrangements stipulated by the Local Authorities to enable contact requirements, health, educational and other related commitments such as pocket money and savings.

Kinship foster carers continue to raise that financial support is not in line with standard foster care despite the National Minimum Standards clarifying the need for equity of provision it would appear some local authorities continue to have arrangements in place that do not reflect this. Their status as temporary carers with the care of a child whilst a full assessment is undertaken can leave some kinship carers with precarious financial support as the regulations appear to be interpreted differently across England with some carers receiving section 17 payments rather than fostering allowances during this time and no access to fee payments. There continue to be issues with misinformation given to kinship carers for example many are told to claim child benefit despite the child being a looked after child.

Prospective single foster carers and low income households often express concern about the impact of uncertain

income on their families or household, when there is no guarantee of a placement, particularly when there is an expectation that one carer will be available to foster on a full time basis. Prospective carers may feel unable to give up the security of full time employment in order to foster due to this uncertainty.

At the onset of the pandemic many queries were related to carers who were shielding and therefore experienced financial difficulties arising from a sudden drop in income while others who also worked in roles other than fostering were being furloughed or had lost their job. Respite carers were another group hit hard financially as many had their roles frozen in a bid to prevent the spread of the infection and again experienced a sudden loss of income. Other carers experienced higher outgoings with the lockdown as a result of everyone at home resulting in higher utility costs and the need to shop locally increasing food costs for many.

Enquiry themes

Tax and National Insurance

- Prospective and new foster carers frequently express concern that they are unable to get specific advice relevant for foster carers around tax and benefits.
- Many foster carers are unaware of the specialist tax scheme set up for foster carers and share concerns that their fostering services are unable to advise them.
- Some foster carers remain unaware that they are obliged to register as self-employed and seek advice about national insurance payments. Kinship carers regularly report they have received no information on this or have been incorrectly advised that as kinship carers they do not need to register. Some foster carers are confused about how to register and what they should and should not provide in respect of information about earnings.

Some foster carers continue to ask Fosterline advisors to complete their tax returns for them and are signposted to the webinars on the Fosterline website and/or signposted to HMRC or their membership services.

Benefits

- Benefits for foster carers has been raised every quarter since June 2013. Foster carers seek information on the benefits that they are entitled to claim including working tax credits, universal credit, housing benefit and council tax reductions.
- Several callers request specific information regarding their entitlement to 30 hours child care. Some callers raise concerns that the internal policy of fostering services prevents them from working and express they therefore feel it is unfair that they cannot access the 30 hours child care in respect to the child or children placed.
- Foster carers frequently enquire if they are entitled to additional benefits such as free school meals for Looked After children.
- Many foster carers are often confused around Pupil Premium criteria for Looked After Children.
- Foster carers will explore what benefits they may be entitled to when a child in their care leaves placement
- Many carers are unclear about any impact on their benefits if they proceed to a Staying Put arrangement and struggle to get advice.
- At the onset of the pandemic there was confusion about the financial support that may be available to carers for example as self-employed or whether they could be furloughed by the fostering service. Many carers were shielding due to medical conditions in relation to themselves or others in their household or due to other circumstances related to Covid-19 were unable to take placements.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

- Some foster carers have been led to believe that they can obtain further discount on their council tax if the child they are caring for receives DLA payments
- Some foster carers report that they have not been advised or have received contradictory advice on how to spend DLA payments appropriately on their foster child. In some cases following the end of the child's placement the carers have been held accountable for monies that the LA feel has not been clearly justified

as relevant to the child's needs.

- Some foster carers report that they have saved the DLA on behalf of the child in their care and have not been advised that this is not appropriate or permissible.
- Some foster carers seek to claim carers allowance to supplement their income in addition to DLA.

Fostering allowance

- Many foster carers are still confused between the proportion of the fostering allowance which is provided to cover the cost of a fostering placement (and how this should be broken down) and what proportion of payments received is the reward element for the foster carer. NMS 28.5 expects fostering services to have a clear and transparent written policy on payments to foster carers distinguishing between the allowance paid and any fee paid.
- Some callers are confused regarding a Private Fostering Arrangement and the implications for the carer to manage costs and expenses for the child in partnership with birth family, without the support of the Local Authority.
- Some carers have raised concerns about changes to fostering services policies that require them to set aside a greater proportion of the allowance for pocket money and savings than previously with no overall increase in financial support.
- Current foster carers continue to feel that the allowance received is not covering the full cost of the expense incurred by the child. NMS 28.1 states the carer receives at least the national minimum allowance for the child plus any necessary agreed expenses for the care, education etc, which covers the full cost of caring for the child placed with them.
- Some foster carers enquire about fee payment levels reporting that that the level of skill demanded to care for the child in their care warrants a higher skills payment than reflected in their fee. Callers request support in negotiating their fee.
- Some carers have expressed concern that changes to the allowance and fee payment structure have been made without consultation with carers and in some cases with little or no notice period. Some have stated they have lost entitlement to respite with no change to the financial support offered. Other carers state that applications to enable them to move to higher fee payments have been frozen with no clear timescale in place.
- Carers have raised concern that discretionary additional or goodwill payments offered at a point of placement or within a transfer process are not always honoured by the fostering service.
- Carers have raised concerns about delays in receiving fostering payments and late payments.

Kinship and Family and Friends Foster Care

- Callers continue to seek guidance on payment on caring for friends and relatives in their care. Some feeling that they have been unfairly misled when not being able to seek a 'fostering allowance' particularly in situations where the local authority have approached them to request they care of the child (not a looked after child but often a child in need or subject to a child protection plan).
- Some carers express they are given little or no information on financial support and are fearful about requesting this as worry they will be judged to be financially motivated. Many carers require this in order to know if they can give up work or reduce their working hours as they have been asked to do by the LA and still meet financial commitments. Many are given very short timescales to obtain this information and decide whether to proceed but struggle to access personalised tax and benefits information.
- Callers continue to express concern that delays in making payments to support the children in their care is causing financial hard-ship, stress and anxiety particularly in situations where sibling groups are placed.
- Callers continue to seek advice about the equality of payment for kinship foster carers and standard foster carers noting considerable differences in rates of pay for allowances and access to fees.
- Some callers raise queries about access to training and support that they feel is different to that received by other foster carers.

Staying put

- Some foster carers are keen to ensure that they can continue to foster and are unaware of the legalities of caring for a young person aged 18+
- There is ambiguity in how each LA interprets Staying Put guidance and this is amplified by different social workers interpreting their LA's own policy differently.

- Many callers are not aware that LA's and IFAs must have policies around Staying Put plans
- Foster carers express concern around the lack of planning for young people seeking Staying Put placements and poor planning via the LA to ensure a smooth transition. Some callers have indicated that any planning is completed weeks before the young person turns 18.
- Foster carers are unclear that young people who enter Staying Put arrangements at aged 18 years are no longer considered 'Looked after Children'.
- The 16-19 bursary and higher education grants have been discussed for young people leaving school by Fosterline Advisors. Callers report that there is a lack of support from any personal advisors and inclusion in any pathway plan
- Callers are not clear that financial arrangements will differ under Staying Put and struggle to obtain information on the support that will be offered.
- Some carers report they are put under pressure to make a quick decision just before the young person turns 18 without access to full advice around the financial support and any impact on their financial circumstances raising concerns about care planning.
- Some carers are confused why their own financial circumstances are part of the assessment. They remain unclear whether the care leaver will be required to contribute towards the placement and what action would take place in the event of them refusing to do so.
- Some carers report children move on to semi-independent living and a few weeks later wish to return to their care but the LA will not support this despite a carer being willing to agree a staying put arrangement.
- Some carers report issues with lack of financial support when a care leaver is away from the placement but returns to their home for example a care leaver at university or in residential training provision in the armed forces. There appears to be wide variations in the support provided by LAs in such circumstances.
- Some care leavers returned to their staying put carer early due to the closure of universities during the pandemic but callers stated they were struggling to obtain any financial support

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

- Foster carers are often not aware of the legal implications of an SGO and do not understand the financial implications and that payments will be reviewed and may cease.
- Callers are interested to know what discretion and power the LA holds when deciding financial support packages on SGOs
- Many foster carers do not understand that young people subject to SGOs are no longer subject to fostering regulations and are no longer Looked After Children
- Foster carers enter into SGO financial arrangements without negotiating their need for ongoing support in order to support the young person and the carer's familial needs.
- Access to legal advice for foster carers seeking an SGO appears to be patchy and carers are unclear at what stage it is best to access legal advice.
- Foster carers have been threatened with the removal of the children if they did not move to the LA from their Independent Fostering agency and then seek an SGO.
- Some callers are unaware that the SGO assessment will be shared with birth family and that sensitive personal information in relation to themselves can be redacted to protect the carer and/or their family.
- Some foster carers are not clear on the differences between an SGO and adoption and the implications for longer term care.
- Some callers remain concerned about maintaining control over future contact with birth families and seek support from the local authority to facilitate this but do not always feel this is responded to appropriately.
- Foster carers entering special guardianships have requested information on how this will impact on their benefits and tax returns.
- Special guardians have also sought advice when their circumstances or that of the children in their care have changed to find sources of advice support and information. Post SGO support appears to be patchy with some carers having received no support post order.

Allegations

The majority of calls received from foster carers on the subject of allegations, are primarily from foster carers that have just been informed that an allegation has been made against them. They are often experiencing feelings of isolation from their fostering service and a lack of support, information and direction from their Supervising Social Worker.

In the initial stages many of the enquiries require emotional support, as well as advice about the process. Fosterline is able to provide advice about the investigative process and the expectation of the foster carers to receive independent support in accordance with NMS 22.12. Fosterline also promotes relevant communication between the foster carer and the service provider during and after the process.

A small number of calls are from carers who have been informed about allegations retrospectively at a time of an annual review or following allocation of a new supervising worker and express concern about the fostering service sharing information with them at the time of an allegation and their ability to defend themselves once investigations have been concluded.

Enquiry themes

Information on procedure

- Foster carers frequently call feeling 'in the dark' without contact from their fostering service provider, not having recourse to any support or information about the nature of the allegation/concern
- Some foster carers share that the attitude of social workers who share information that an allegation has been received with the foster carer is sometimes presented in a way that assumes guilt and is unprofessional.
- Foster carers continue to report that they have been advised to resign from their role as foster carer, being unaware of the implications this may have should they wish to foster in the future
- Foster carers feel that they are not given enough opportunity to defend an allegation during the investigation stage.
- Callers share frustration at the lack of defined timescale considered appropriate for the investigations.
- Foster carers are frequently unaware of the process that takes place following an allegation (NMS 22)
- Foster carers share that the stress caused by an allegation impacts on their health which can result in them not feeling able to attend scheduled meetings.
- Foster carers express concern following a referral to DBS, sometimes being unaware that a referral has been made and often unsure of the process or implications of this.
- Foster carers feel that previous positive records of fostering history demonstrated at former annual reviews and LAC reviews, are totally disregarded at the post allegation review.
- Foster carers seek advice on their legal rights of redress when they have been the subject of malicious allegation.
- Foster carers approved with IFAs have expressed concerns that following an allegation the Fostering Service Providers are more interested in protecting their own needs and interests with the Local Authority as business provider, than supporting the needs of the foster carer.
- Some carers feel an investigation into an allegation can become an opportunity for fostering services to consider their entire fostering practice and include any potential issues or standards of care that may previously not have been regarded as a concern. Carers report feeling their fostering practice is under a microscope.
- Some foster carers report that allegations are being made following their decision to give notice on a placement or transfer to another fostering service.
Foster carers are unsure if they can access the minutes from Position of Trust/Strategy Meetings and/or appeal the findings of the Local Authority Designated Officer.

Independent support

- Foster carers report that they are not aware that independent support is available to them following an allegation (NMS 22.12)
- Foster carers that are registered with IFAs continue to stress that they feel unsupported by their agency and that the agency are more attuned to protect their interests with the local authority rather than provide the necessary support for the foster carer
- Foster carers who are offered independent support by a social worker appointed within their service do not feel that this is considered independent and therefore do not feel that their needs are fully represented but may be fearful of antagonising their service at a time that they feel vulnerable.
- Some foster carers report that the support they are being offered is insufficient, noting that support may come from other foster carers who have faced allegations themselves but are not fully equipped or knowledgeable to guide and advise them appropriately. They may also worry about confidentiality issues and working with that carer or attending carer support meetings etc with them in the future.

Removal of children

- Foster carers share that children are moved as a “knee jerk” reaction without explanation following an allegation, increasing anxieties for children when a considered approach may have been more appropriate.
- Foster carers report that they have been placed ‘on hold’ for many months pending investigation following allegation, children have not been allowed contact with foster carers despite their wish to do so and the children have endured significant distress.
- Some kinship carers express concern at the haste with which children are moved from their care as a result of an allegation causing unnecessary distress to the children and no contact arrangements considered whilst it is investigated.
- Foster carers report that they do not appear to receive appropriate referrals for prospective placements following an allegation, whilst other foster carers have and therefore feel the outcome that has enabled them to continue to foster has nevertheless damaged their reputation and livelihood.
- Some carers seek support as they have been subject to allegations by children in their care and may feel it is unsafe or inappropriate to continue with the placement but have been informed if they wish to cease the placement the notice period (usually 28 days) will continue to apply.

Information gathering

- A large majority of callers facing allegations continue to express to Fosterline that they feel they are not given the opportunity to give their account of the incident and feel they have been pre-judged.
- As above many foster carers have expressed that they feel the way in which information and notification of the allegation was alerted to them was unprofessional and disrespectful. They believe the attitude of the social workers was negative and that they were presumed guilty of the allegation before any investigation had taken place.
- A small number of callers who have faced allegations have been criticised for breaking confidentiality when they seek to approach any witnesses who may be able to help defend them against an allegation and are frustrated as they feel there has been insufficient investigation of any concerns.
- A high number of foster carers appear to not be receiving summaries and conclusions following the outcome of the allegation as would be expected from the designated officer as per National Minimum Standards 22.7
- Many foster carers are not aware that under NMS 22.5 a senior manager responsible for managing allegations has a responsibility for liaising with the subject of the allegation to inform him/her of the progress during and after the investigation.

Payment during investigation

- Many callers continue to seek clarification around payments whilst ‘on hold’ during investigations. There continues a disparity where some Fostering Service Providers will make payments during these periods whilst other do not.

Timescales

- Lengthy investigations increase the financial pressure on the household and can lead to resignations as carers need to meet their financial commitments.
- The stress of an allegation is often reflected in the health of the callers to Fosterline, resulting in foster carers not being able to attend scheduled meetings and hence their voice/opinions may not be heard.
- Some foster carers seek advice around resignation as a foster carer, in view of the stress and timescales involved whilst waiting for a resolution. Fosterline advisors provide specific information around the implications for foster carers should they seek a resignation prior to the outcome of any ongoing investigation.
- Many foster carers feel that issues could be resolved earlier if they were able to give their account of any situation at the first possible opportunity.
- Carers subject to an allegation at the outset of the pandemic were concerned about the potential of increasingly lengthy timescales and their isolation and lack of support during the process as a result of lockdown.

Becoming a foster carer

Fosterline receives a high number of enquiries from prospective foster carers each year. Fosterline actively promotes the recruitment of foster carers. 21% of all of the enquiries responded to by the advisors and 22% of visitors to the website seek information on becoming a foster carer. This gives a potential of approximately 19,000 prospective foster carers looking for information. It is interesting that the same myths about who can foster continue, despite the plethora of information available to the contrary. However more positively there has been more interest in fostering compared to previous years from those with a conviction and those who have experienced a mental health issue that may previously automatically assumed they would be unable to foster which isn't necessarily the case.

Enquiry themes

Who can foster

- Callers are interested to know if they can foster with a rented property.
- Callers wish to know if they can work and foster a child alongside their own children as a single carer
- Some callers express concern that they have been 'refused' for assessment as their partner is not willing to participate in the assessment process and seek rationale around this.
- Many callers seek clarification around health concerns including mental health issues when considering fostering.
- Some callers request advice around criminal records and what might constitute prevention from fostering children.
- Many callers wish to gain a more considered view about the challenges of fostering and the benefits to birth families in order to plan for the fostering role.
- Some callers wish to know how to challenge information recorded on their DBS
- Many foster carers wish to know how they can educate themselves more fully around child care issues, concerns that neglected and abused children may face etc, prior to undertaking the role of foster carer.
- Some callers seek information about fostering children from another country, who are family members.
- Many foster carers seek information around payments made to foster carers and allowances received to support a child in their care
- A small number of callers think that they can qualify for larger or different accommodation if they are approved as a foster carer and believe it would entitle them to be provided with suitable accommodation to foster by the local authority. Many express they will be unable to move to larger accommodation before approval as they cannot afford the higher rents without a fostering income.
- Some callers seek information about fostering providers local to their geographic area and advice around choosing a fostering service.
- Some prospective carers want advice on how fostering will impact on their current benefits.
- Some callers wish to find out about foster to adopt.

Application process and appeals

- Many callers wish to know how to commence an assessment and are confused by the number of fostering services in their area and how to select the right one for them.
- Some callers are keen to explore any impact on their birth children before applying to foster.
- Many callers seek information about the process of assessment, to include time length of assessment prior to becoming an approved foster carer.
- Callers seek information or are unaware that they will be considered self employed as a foster carer
- Many callers in assessment remain unaware of stage 1 and stage 2 of the assessment process and seek information around the appeals process when assessments are terminated. Some callers become frustrated that they have not been shared information around this and are referred to government guidance.
- Some callers seek advice about situations when their applications have been terminated due to issues in respect of previous partner references or refusal of a birth child to provide a reference (or submits a negative one) following family breakdowns.

A small percentage of callers do not have the appropriate accommodation to continue an application to foster including:

- No spare room

- Seeking new accommodation from which to foster/move to another area
- In the process of asking the local authority for larger rented accommodation
- Living with parents or other individuals that do not wish to foster
- Do not have permanent residence in the UK
- Some fostering services failed to notify the prospective foster carers in writing of their decision not to proceed with the assessment process

Health

- Callers have shared information on learning and mental health concerns and query whether such concerns would preclude their potential to foster.
- Callers query whether a particular health condition would prevent them from fostering.
- Callers with mobility or other physical disabilities seek advice about whether this may impact on their ability to foster.
- Some prospective carers are concerned their age and any preconceptions about their health that may impact on their ability to foster.

Care planning for looked after children

- Many callers express frustration that they do not feel involved in care planning for children in their care and that their voices remain unheard.
- Some callers feel their professionalism is disputed if they question any care planning decision making and worry they are then regarded as obstructive or difficult.
- Carers who try to act as an advocate for a child, in the absence of independent advocacy, to ensure a child's views are considered can feel criticised for doing so and some are hesitant about contacting advocacy services in case they themselves are regarded as unprofessional for having done this.
- Some callers express frustration at the turnover of social workers and the impact of this in terms of delays to decision making and in terms of decisions being changed as a result of a new worker.
- Some carers with independent fostering services express that they are unable to be considered as long term carers for children in their care unless they transfer to the local authority and state frustration that financial decisions appear to override what may be in the child's best interests.

Enquiry themes

Communication and relationships.

- Foster carers continue to report that following a complaint about a particular social worker or manager, a counter complaint will be received in respect of their standards of care or ability to work in partnership with professionals
- Foster carers continue to express frustration at the high turnover of social workers within the local authority and fostering services and the impact upon the children and themselves in respect of relationship building, trust etc.
- Foster carers frequently report they feel they have unrealistic expectations placed on them without consultation or consideration as to how for example, lengthy school transport journeys or frequent contacts, will impact on them, other looked after children in their care and their birth children. Carers report feeling undervalued and compromised trying to meet the competing demands of looked after children in their care and the needs of their own family.
- Some callers continue to identify a lack of support in dealing with significantly challenging behaviour and felt their safety or that of other children and adults in the household was significantly compromised as a result.
- Some foster carers fail to understand that discussing the details of their placement with other foster carers from their own fostering service or another fostering service is a breach of confidentiality
- Callers are not clear why a LA will consider a placement under an SGO for a child in their care as a permanent care plan as opposed to Long term foster care.
- Many foster carers are unaware of the rights for children to have an advocate and do not have a Children's Guide
- Pathway Plans are consistently being highlighted as inadequate and failing expected timeframes with a number not being implemented or overseen.
- Some foster carers have reported that care planning and court hearings have been delayed due to assessments

not being completed within the timescale

- Callers have shared that despite declaring that they are due to take a holiday abroad prior to placement of a child and the need for respite, social workers have demanded that foster carers must rearrange holidays upon placement .
- Many foster carers feel that they do not receive all the relevant information regarding the placement in the placement plan and hence the safer care plan for the child is compromised or the foster carer (or other household member) is placed at risk of allegation. Many foster carers have said they would not have taken the placement if all the details had been shared with them as it was an unsuitable match and this can lead to trust issues with their fostering service.
- Carers can feel criticised and scrutinised during Disruption Meetings or other processes following a placement breakdown when they feel the support needed was not forthcoming or the match was unsuited to their circumstances.
- Many foster carers are unclear of policies and safer care guidelines for specific and vulnerable young people in their care around the use of mobile phones
- Foster carers have expressed that they are very rarely consulted when contact is agreed with the social worker, court and the birth family which can impact on the placement and the mandatory actions and tasks of the placement. Carers also express concern they are given no feedback from professionals following a contact session but are left to pick up the pieces in respect of the child's behaviour with no clue as to whether any specific incident or information has been shared that may help the carer to respond to the behaviour more appropriately
- Concern is frequently raised around supervising contact with birth family members by foster carers both in the home and at contact centres. Foster carers are uncomfortable with the situation and on occasion may feel unsafe and report they have not been trained into what reports or information they need to record.
- During the commencement of lockdown many callers sought advice on contact issues as they were concerned arrangements put the child in their care, them and their families at risk of infection.
- At the beginning of the pandemic some carers were seeking advice regarding children moving on as they were concerned about the risks posed by introductions and also confused as to whether this was classed as an essential journey in light of lockdown.
- Some carers were concerned about virtual contact and the possible intrusion in to their families' lives whilst on lockdown and some queried the frequency or duration that they felt was not in the child's best interests.
- Multiple changes of the child's social worker leads to an inconsistent approach to the care planning for the child or young person, often resulting in tasks being neglected, not started on time or even dismissed altogether.

Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

- Some foster carers are unaware that they/ and the child in their care can contact the IRO between reviews and feel that their role is not as effective as it should be.
- Some foster carers feel that the independence of an IRO is not truly independent of the views of the LA and do not fully represent the child's views/ needs at LAC reviews but tend to align themselves with Local Authorities.
- Some carers appear to be discouraged from contacting the IRO by their fostering service and worry that if they do so they will be seen as obstructive.

Compliance with regulations and standards

- Some foster carers report that they continue to be asked to carry out activities that would be expected of the CSW and not the foster carer such as finding alternative education and challenging exclusions
- Many foster carers call the service seeking advocacy for the children and young people within their care as they feel that the child or young person is underrepresented in the care plan and often their wishes and feelings are not taken into consideration as expected in NMS 1. However some carers appear to be viewed negatively by fostering services or local authorities when seeking advocacy and this can discourage carers from making referrals for children in their care.
- A number of callers tell us they have not had a SSW for long periods of time due to staff sickness or shortages. Some carers tell us they are unallocated as soon as they inform the service of an intention to transfer despite continuing to have children in their care and remaining registered with them whilst they await a reassessment with the new service.

Pathway planning

- Pathway plans are consistently being highlighted as inconsistent and failing expected timeframes with a number not even being put into place.

- Some callers report the young people have not been allocated a personal advisor and the carer has been left to try to sort out benefit entitlements/college provision/training etc.

Staying put



A high proportion of foster carers still believe that they are foster carers for the young person entering the staying put arrangement and believe they are still regulated by fostering legislation. The staying put arrangements still appear to be ambiguous with many social workers not aware of the local authorities own policy and obligation to provide support beyond 18 years for the young person.

Finances and benefits

- Many callers are confused about financial arrangements and where to access advice.
- Callers state concern that they cannot financially afford to support the Young person in their care financially despite wishing to do so.
- A number of foster carers are not given clarity on any contribution the young person is to make to the arrangement from benefits, their allowances and earnings to support their own accommodation
- Many callers express concern around payments when a Young person attends university and being able to afford to 'keep open' their bedroom space to enable the young person to return for holidays and weekends-practice appears to differ significantly between LAs in respect of any retainer payments made whilst the young person is away.
- A number of staying put carers have arrangements put in place where the young person is in receipt of housing benefit and has to pay the whole of this amount to the local authority and the local authority then pays a small proportion of this back to the carer as part of their fee
- A small number of callers have said the LA have misled them on the payment they were to receive as a staying put carer with some LA agreeing beforehand that they would receive the same fees as they did as a foster carer but then find themselves with reduced financial support.
- Many foster carers are not aware of benefits that young people are entitled to as part of Staying Put and tax implications for the carer.
- There is an ambiguity in how each LA interprets the legislation and this is further complicated by different social workers interpreting the LA's own policy differently.

Pressure felt by the foster carer

- Some foster carers are experiencing a lack of clarity from the LA if the placement that continues after the 18th birthday of the young person is either staying put arrangement or supported lodgings or shared lives care
- Foster carers report that the Pathway Plan has not been prepared or updated in a timely manner which has impacted on Staying Put arrangements.
- Some foster carers continue to express the lack of parity between the young person entering the staying put arrangement and their peers. The policy was to support young people during the transition from care to independence but birth children will often leave the family home but return if the exploration into independence hits problems. This is not currently an option for young people in staying put arrangements.
- Some carers feel pressured to accommodate a staying put arrangement from the LA but have opposing pressure from their fostering service in order to continue to foster. One caller was being advised by her IFA to put a caravan on her driveway for a staying put young person to enable her to continue to foster.
- Kinship carers sometimes express that they are not given information on staying put and the financial support available and some state that due to their relationship the ongoing placement is taken for granted but may not always be in the best interests of the young person or their own family.

Fostering regulations

- Many carers are not aware that young people on staying put arrangements require a DBS if they continue to foster and may need support thinking through the practicalities e.g: overnight stays for friends of the young adult on a staying put arrangement, carers taking holidays away from the home etc.
- Some foster carers believe they are being offered the wrong arrangement to support the young person beyond 18 in that supported lodgings or shared lives would be better options
- Some foster carers have complained that the transition into leaving care is allowed to drift if the young person has not had any pathway planning prior to 6 months of their eighteenth birthday. Foster carers feel that nobody wants to take responsibility for the support of the young person and hope that the adult team would then be responsible for any ongoing support.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

Calls from foster carers about Special Guardianship continue to grow. Many are struggling to access information elsewhere and state they are given little time in which to make an informed decision. Many feel pressurised to agree and are fearful children will be removed unless they agree to an SGO. Many express wanting the ongoing support of the local authority to meet the needs of the children via long term fostering arrangements but have been told this is not an option. However some carers are welcoming of SGOs and seeking information to give the opportunity to offer children permanency and to be able to make more of the decisions about the child for themselves without the ongoing intervention of the local authority.

Enquiry themes

Pressure felt by the carer

- Family and connected persons have contacted the service with the concern that they have been told they will not be considered as foster carers but they will be considered as special guardians. Other family and friends carers feel their placements are under threat if they do not agree to an SGO. Many value the role of the LA and wish the children to remain looked after as they feel ongoing support is likely to be needed particularly in circumstances related to children having additional needs as a result of their early life experiences or as a result of disabilities.
- Some carers remain unclear about the legal status of an SGO and who has parental responsibility.
- Some callers report pressure to supervise ongoing contact with birth parents from the LA as part of an SGO support plan when previously it has been the LA role and are concerned as they do not feel it is safe or appropriate to do so. In some situations the LA have agreed to short term support with this but carers are fearful about the longer term arrangements.
- Foster carers with children placed long term have reported feeling under threat from the LA to agree to seek SGOs or risk removal of the children settled in their care.
- Several callers have reported that they are being encouraged/pressurised to move from the independent fostering agency to the local authority or risk the placement being removed from their care
- Some callers are unaware that the SGO assessment will be shared with birth family and that sensitive personal information can be redacted.
- Some foster carers are not clear on the differences between SGO and adoption and the implications for longer term care.

Finances

- Foster carers are not always aware of difference in payments and support when a child is subject to a SGO and no longer a looked after child
- The allowance paid to special guardians and the means testing of these payments are often discussed on the helpline as foster carers are not aware of the implications of an SGO and review of payments made to guardians
- Foster carers are not aware of the importance in seeking legal advice in order to document financial arrangements and support plans
- Callers ask about the entitlement special guardians have to benefits and allowances and the impact of means testing.
- Special guardians contact the service for advice when payments cease or when their circumstances change. In some cases advisors are told no payments were provided when the SGO was made and the carer was unaware of

this potential support at the time an order was made.

Ongoing support

- As above some callers express concern that they require support to facilitate contact with birth families and that support was not forthcoming from the LAs. In some cases carers have faced requests for advocacy or legally challenged by birth parents wanting to increase contact and are unclear where to seek support.
- Some callers indicate their own or the child's circumstances have changed post SGO and are unclear where to access support.
- Arrangements for SGO reviews and support appear to differ significantly across England.
- Some callers indicate they feel they have been misled by LAs when financial support changes or ceases despite no change in their own financial circumstances and appear unaware that this can happen.
- Some callers are surprised to learn that staying put and other support for care leavers does not automatically apply to children subject to SGO and struggle to access support post 18.

Private fostering arrangements

Private fostering arrangements and kinship care arrangements for non-looked after children are frequently reported to the Fosterline advisors. Family members and connected persons often look to provide support for children known to them that can no longer remain in the birth parents care. There is an expectation from these carers that if they provide the support the local authority will provide financial assistance because they may have been known to the local authority but the child has not entered care.

Family members will often provide the accommodation when they believe a child is at risk before the local authority has made a decision to take the child into the care system. Many of these carers feel the stigma of the child being in care or the risk to the child is too high and they feel they can't wait for Children's Services involvement so act in what they believe to be the best interest for the child.

In many of the cases the local authority are involved but have no obligation to provide financial support as the child has been accommodated in a safe environment under the relatives own volition. The local authority will then follow procedures relevant to Informal Kinship Carers and will have a much more reduced role.

Enquiry themes

Finances

- The vast majority of callers that have entered into an Informal Kinship Care arrangement are seeking financial support to help maintain the child or young person with them and report they are struggling with finances.
- Some callers have been approached by the LA to care for the child (for example as part of a Child Protection Plan or as a Child in Need) and have assumed the arrangement will be subject to financial support only to later find that no support is forthcoming.
- A large number of callers in relation to informal kinship and private fostering arrangements report they have had to reduce working hours or give up employment entirely to care for the child.
- Many callers express frustration at the lack of support available to them given the perceived financial savings that LA make by such arrangements as the child is not in care and thus reducing the strain on funding.
- Fosterline also receives a small number of calls from family members looking to provide accommodation for nephews, nieces and other connected young people from abroad to come and live in England under a fostering arrangement. Callers wish to explore if the Local Authority will fund this arrangement.

Local Authorities responsibility

- Many private foster carers were unaware of the need to inform the local authority that they had entered into a private fostering arrangement.
- Many private foster carers are unaware that the local authority role will end at 16 (unless the care is in relation to a disabled child) and struggle to access support and advice beyond this point.

- Callers enquiring about funding for private fostering arrangements are reminded of the responsibility of the birth parents and the application for child benefits. In certain circumstances the advisors will highlight the possibility of a section 17 assessment of a child in need.
- If the local authority appears to have had a role in the placing of a child in an informal kinship or private fostering arrangement advisors may suggest seeking legal advice to clarify responsibilities.

Feedback

Fosterline received feedback from service users via web-forms and email feedback response forms. Customers are asked to rate the helpfulness of the advisor, the knowledge of the advisor and the usefulness of the information provided with a maximum overall score of 15. They also have the opportunity to add comments. During this period we received 137 responses with an average satisfaction score of 96%. Often callers to the service will verbally praise and thank the Fosterline advisor at the end of the call but may choose not to complete a feedback survey.

Examples of feedback comments received are as follows:

116763-He was able to refer to fostering standards and gave me easy to understand advice

113899-Patiently walked through all points raised. Definitely happy that I called.

99963-This lady was so knowledgeable and advised me as to what I should do. I am in such a state she helped calm me down and suggested things that would help.

119659-Great service it helped me so much

121206-I felt as though I was given all the information I needed to proceed with confidence.

1228343-She knew exactly what I was asking and helped me by explaining exactly what I needed. Very helpful.

123270-very helpful and understanding

128518-Took time to listen and explain answers clearly as well as guided on where else to gather information.

Fosterline User Surveys

Fosterline conducted three specific surveys during the reporting period.

1. Fosterline sent a feedback survey to all service users that were willing to provide an email address to enable them to be contacted by the service during the reporting period 1 May 2019 to 30 April 2020. The survey was updated to include information about the pandemic as the reporting period included the early months of lockdown.

The survey was completed by 55 people. The questionnaire results indicated:

- 65% were foster carers
- 19% were prospective carers
- The remaining group consisted of kinship carers, special guardians and ex foster carers.
- Score rating for Fosterline Advisors as knowledgeable was 88%
- 54% felt the advice had helped them resolve their query. The majority of the lower scores indicated a matter remained ongoing.
- 22% of respondents had contacted Fosterline during the pandemic.
- 80% of the above group indicated they felt it was easy to contact Fosterline during the pandemic.

2. In 2019-20 **931 prospective foster carers** contacted Fosterline via calls, email, live chat or web form. Fosterline has been gathering information from prospective foster carers with their consent to understand their experiences, motivation and journey from enquiry to approval.

- **210 (23%)** of prospective carers that contacted Fosterline agreed to have a call back from an advisor a month later.
- The one month call backs informed Fosterline that many prospective carers had chosen not to proceed beyond initial enquiries.
- Many expressed the “time was not right” for them or their families due to issues such as potential house moves, children’s exams or issues at work.
- Some expressed they did not have full agreement from their partners and for many accommodation and lack of a spare bedroom was an issue.
- The results reinforce other research that many initial enquirers do not go on to make fostering applications and the reasons for this are varied and complex. However many indicated that they intend to return to explore fostering again in the future.
- 46 were continuing with fostering enquiries/application (22% of the call back group) and agreed to Fosterline sending further automated emails to gain feedback on their fostering journey.
- Some had proceeded to make enquiries and were to commence assessment and others were still actively deciding who to apply to having made enquiries to more than one fostering service.
- However the subsequent email response rate from this group was extremely low with just one contacting the service to indicate the assessment had ceased. The reasons for this may be linked to the sending and receiving of emails, lack of time for prospective carers who are in the process of assessment and who may also be in employment or indicate a disengagement from the fostering process.

An online survey was made available on the “Thinking of Fostering” section of the website in conjunction with additional webpage intent to dispel some of the myths still upheld regarding who can or can’t be assessed to foster. There were **389 responses during this 12 month period**. All responses were confidential and the identity of the respondents remain anonymous.

The following results were obtained:

- 87% believed they were the right age to foster
- 20% did not have a spare room
- 51% did not own their own property
- 2% believed they needed to be married
- 4% believed that being LGBT precluded them from assessment
- 67% had children of their own
- 34% had a disability, medical condition or had suffered a mental illness
- 38% believed they had to be a British Citizen
- 8% had been convicted of a criminal offence
- 31% had had previous financial problems.

Following the survey the participants identified next steps as follows:

- 41% next step was to contact a fostering service provider
- 19% next step was to book a call from a Fosterline advisor
- 16% next step was to start the assessment within 3 months
- 23% stated they were not yet ready to commit to an assessment
- 1% felt that fostering was not an option for them

Some of the reasons given to postpone the assessment were:

- *I am in the process of securing bigger accommodation*
- *I have a grown up son planning on leaving home, so that will free up a bedroom, although this is planned for later in the year. Also an 11 year old who is completely behind my decision to foster when her brother leaves.*
- *Fostering is something I've considered for a long time and I'm currently looking for information only, thank you*
- *Not sure if I would be good enough for the needs of a troubled child*
- *My own personal circumstance, but I think it may be an option for my future.*
- *Am still working part time, and unsure if I am ready to fully commit*
- *My children are 6 and 4 so feel I should wait until they are a bit older*

Fosterline Delivery Plan 2019 – 2020

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

The website and social media platforms are continually monitored and updated to include information relevant to foster carers and to ensure ease of use. Helpline staffing is also kept under review in line with call patterns to ensure a consistent and efficient service.

FosterTalk outlined the following Delivery Plan for Fosterline for 2019 – 2020:

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

We achieved:

- A large social media following and presence during Foster Care Fortnight (13-26th May 2019) which included the production and promotion of a series of videos of foster carers sharing their experiences of fostering and calling for more people to consider fostering.
- The promotion of and information around cultural events during the period, including Eid, Ramadan, Christmas, Easter, Black history month, Diwali and Hanukah and how these events can help to recruit foster carers.
- Promotion of the “find an event” service on the Fosterline website to direct prospective foster carers to fostering recruitment events in their local areas.
- Production and promotion of a range of videos and short films for use on social media and the website, including the points of view from care experienced young people and foster carers. This included posts of films about education and LAC and from a single male black foster carer about his role and calling for more BAME carers to come forward.
- A continuation of “Ask the Advisor” and “Take Over Tuesday” which saw direct content being shared over social media by the Fosterline advisors on current topics affecting foster carers and those thinking of fostering.

We proposed to: Develop the service in response to the requirements of the service users

We achieved:

- Continued and publicised the option for service users to direct message Fosterline via the Fosterline social media platforms as a means of contacting Fosterline to arrange a call back, to cater for the changing needs of our user base.
- Continuation and refinement of a data information collection system to gather more information on the process from enquiry to approval for prospective foster carers including the use of surveys.
- Extended our live chat availability from 10-3pm to 9-5pm to increase options available for contacting advisors throughout the day.
- Annual Fosterline user satisfaction survey.
- Developing and creating downloadable information fact sheets for use on the Fosterline website.
- Conducted a ‘Mystery Shop’ to assess and review the performance of all Fosterline Advisors.
- Continued the service with advisors working remotely from home in the light of the pandemic.
- Updated our website information and advice to callers in light of the changing guidance and regulations as the pandemic developed and the first national lockdown was announced.
- Provided emotional support, advice and reassurance to foster carers who were fearful about the rise in infection rates and the impact for them and their household in their role as a foster carer.

We proposed to: Increase Fosterline’s presence in the media and community

We achieved:

- Fosterline hosted a visit from the Children’s Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, MP on 11 July 2019 to promote the work of Fosterline and meet local foster carers and social workers.
- Contribution to the Parliamentary Review in April 2019 including examples of the impact of Covid-19 on foster carers
- Attended regular FosterTalk member presentations to promote Fosterline services to foster carers and fostering services
- Attended a conference on Mutual Benefits: The Potential of Disabled People as Foster Carers
- Hosted a regular “Ask the Expert Feature” in the FosterTalk quarterly magazine.
- Met with Coram BAAF to explore current work and possible future possibilities for joint working
- Attended Fostering Movement Meetings with other stakeholders to look at barriers to fostering.
- Produced and sent out a quarterly Lowdown Newsletter to all fostering services in England promoting Fosterline services, fostering related news and information to support foster carers.

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

We achieved:

- Launched a new award winning website in the autumn of 2019
- Updated all content and fact sheets to download from the Fosterline website.
- Improved links to the majority of pages to support with signposting for further information.
- Shared fostering related news regularly on social media and on the Fosterline website news pages.
- Updated frequently asked questions on the website in relation to the pandemic.

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

We achieved:

- Launched a dedicated recruitment campaign through Foster Care fortnight with the publication of videos and stories shared by foster carers sharing their experiences and urging more people to foster.
- Posted a series of films discussing the role of foster care with a single black male and encouraging other BAME carers to come forward.
- Continued with the partnership with NHS Blood and Transplant service urging more carers to come forward and for carers to consider giving blood. This ended with a 2 page spread in Fostertalk magazine in June 2019 focused on the need for more BAME carers and blood donors.
- Posted on events such as British Food Fortnight 21st September-6 October 2019 encouraging getting children involved in growing vegetables and healthy eating. We also had reflection on the ingredients of a good foster carer and invited prospective carers to find out more by contacting Fosterline.
- Promotion of the “Find an Event” page on the Fosterline website to direct prospective foster carers to fostering recruitment events in their local areas.
- Assessed and reported on the progress of the assessment process from prospective foster carers that engaged with Fosterline through monthly reporting via an online survey promoted through social media and the Lowdown quarterly newsletter.

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

We achieved:

- Shared key themes and issues raised by callers with the Department for Education in regular contract meetings and reports.
- Sharing and publicising policy briefings on the Fosterline website and social media.

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

We achieved:

- A Fosterline representative attended regular FosterTalk membership presentations to support with the promotion of the Fosterline service.
- All fostering services in England receive regular email correspondence with relevant updates and a quarterly Lowdown Newsletter.
- Fosterline information has been shared on some local authority and independent services websites and communications to their own foster carers in their internal communications following case by case communication.
- An annual customer satisfaction survey was sent to all fostering services and Fosterline service users.

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

- 94.5% of all calls to the service were answered within 1 minute. Feedback has remained positive throughout the review period
- Over 98% of all emails and voicemails are answered on the same day of receipt with 100% having been answered by the following working day
- Fosterline feedback shows an overall satisfaction rating of 96% from 137 users of Fosterline who chose to complete the survey. The participants rated the service on the helpfulness of the advisor, knowledge of the advisor and usefulness of the information provided.
- 99.3% would recommend the service to a friend or colleague.
- Mystery shopper feedback undertaken via calls and live chat was very positive about the service in respect of the information and impartiality of the advice offered and also in respect of the friendliness and professionalism of the advisors.
- A seamless service transition to remote working with advisors operating from home as the pandemic began with 100% service availability.
- We responded to the needs of carers for information about the impact of the pandemic updating frequently asked questions on Fosterline website as more guidance became available and ensured all advisors were providing up to date consistent advice based on the latest information available.

Conclusion

In the period reviewed, Fosterline has been able to provide information to over 463,298 service users through the Freephone helpline, website and email services, social media and distribution of the Lowdown quarterly newsletter.

OFSTED reported that within England from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 there had been an increase in the number of both approved fostering households and children in foster care. Although the number of approved fostering places had increased very slightly compared to the previous year during the period, the number of children entering foster care has increased at a faster pace (2%). This means that again there were fewer foster family options available for children than the previous year.

The period also reflected higher interest in fostering with an increase in enquiries to both local authorities and independent fostering services in England of 7% compared to the previous year. However the number of applications to foster decreased by 10% when compared to 2018-19. Of those applications made 38% were approved whilst 62% were withdrawn and 1% rejected. The need to recruit and support prospective carers in their journey to become part of a quality diverse foster care workforce and to retain skilled foster carers remains vital.

Fosterline continues to provide confidential impartial information to both prospective and current foster carers to help increase and maintain the current options for family based care available to some of the most vulnerable children and young people within England.

The increase of special guardianship orders and the provision of permanence offered by family members has seen Fosterline become vitally important in not only providing advice and options but signposting service users to the correct support and information provided outside of foster care. Advisors completed training in respect of Special Guardianship

during this period to improve our support to those kinship and mainstream carers considering Special Guardianship.

Advisors also completed Mental Health First Aid training in the autumn of 2019 which proved invaluable when the service was contacted by many anxious carers in March and April concerned about the pandemic and the impact on their emotional well-being or that of other household members including looked after children.

Fosterline has the unique position of impartiality for gathering experiences from service users. Most are more readily prepared to provide details of their experiences without the fear of any bias or conflicting views clouding the outcomes expressed, enabling Fosterline to continue to inform the Department for Education of the issues raised by prospective and current foster carers during quarterly reviews with the contract managers and in annual reports.

Fosterline plays a vital role in providing impartial information to prospective and existing foster carers. Many prospective carers are unclear how to start their fostering journey or have key questions they need to have answered before they wish to consider contacting any fostering service. Advisers are approachable and professional and able to answer queries and avoid pressurising tactics that some callers express they have experienced when initially contacting a fostering service. Fosterline continues to try to engage to support and understand the journey to become a foster carer or any decision not to proceed or to withdraw from an assessment. This information is fed back to the Department of Education in order to help identify any potential barriers to fostering and help inform wider recruitment strategies.

Alongside effective recruitment, the retention of current foster carers is essential for effective quality placements to meet the diverse needs of looked after children. The support offered by Fosterline can help isolated and disillusioned foster carers who often express feeling they are “backed into a corner” to re-engage positively with their fostering service or where relationships have deteriorated beyond repair, seek alternative solutions, including assessment with other fostering services rather than resignation.

Fosterline remains committed to providing a high quality responsive service and to this end there are clear priorities for the year ahead as the pandemic continues to impact on foster carers. We will continue to work collaboratively with our stakeholders to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers within this very challenging uncertain time. We will continue to offer call backs, engage on social media and update our website and be available to take calls and live chat as the situation changes. We recognise many carers and prospective foster carers are currently busy supporting the education of looked after children and their birth children and therefore these communication channels are more important than ever. We also understand carers feel more isolated in lockdown and may be less able to receive support from their fostering services due to the pressures upon them.

We wish to explore whether there is a demand for other options for communication; to arrange video calls such as via WhatsApp, Teams or Zoom and what safeguards would be needed in order to implement this appropriately. Our noticeboard advertising events was closed in March but will reopen when recruitment events are taking place again.

Fosterline also wants to improve its understanding of a prospective carers journey and will therefore seek to replace the automated emails that currently follow a 4 week call back after an initial enquiry with further calls at 10 weeks and 16 weeks with the consent of the prospective carer. We hope to gain further insight into why callers decide not to proceed to application or withdraw during the assessment process and share this with Department of Education in our regular contract meetings. It is also hoped the ongoing engagement with an impartial Fosterline advisor may positively support a carer during the vulnerable assessment stage.

Fosterline’s confidential impartial service is unique and compliments the work of fostering services and the government to encourage the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

FosterTalk is committed to the continued development and quality assurance of Fosterline in consultation with its service users and other stakeholders. We will continue to encourage and act on feedback, undertake surveys, mystery shopper activity and sample the calls that are recorded, analyse data on use of the service and strive to meet all the key performance indicators set to evidence the quality and responsiveness of service provision.

Appendix

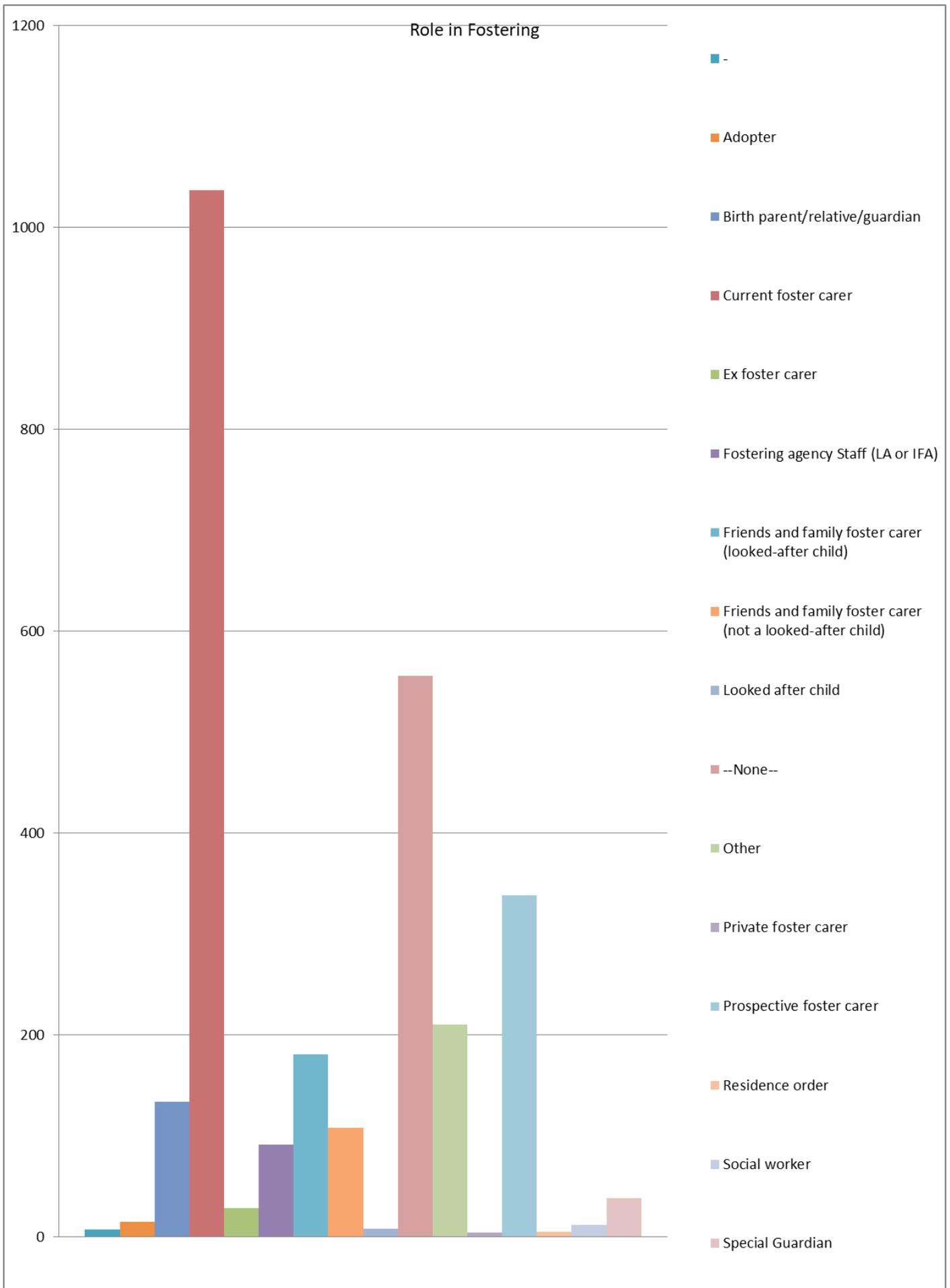
Fosterline demographics

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 web form 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.

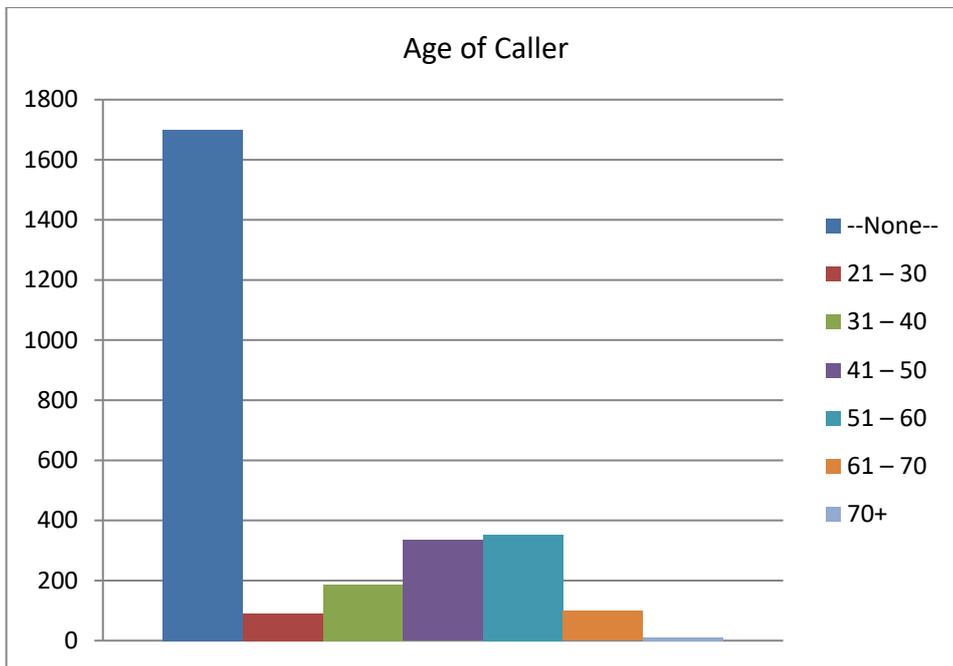
Role in fostering

The majority of callers to the service are existing foster carers yet the main reason for calling the service is to become a foster carer. This is because the topics of concern to foster carers are so vast these calls and communications are spread far and wide. The information gleaned from the role of the caller to Fosterline demonstrates the service is reaching the intended audience.

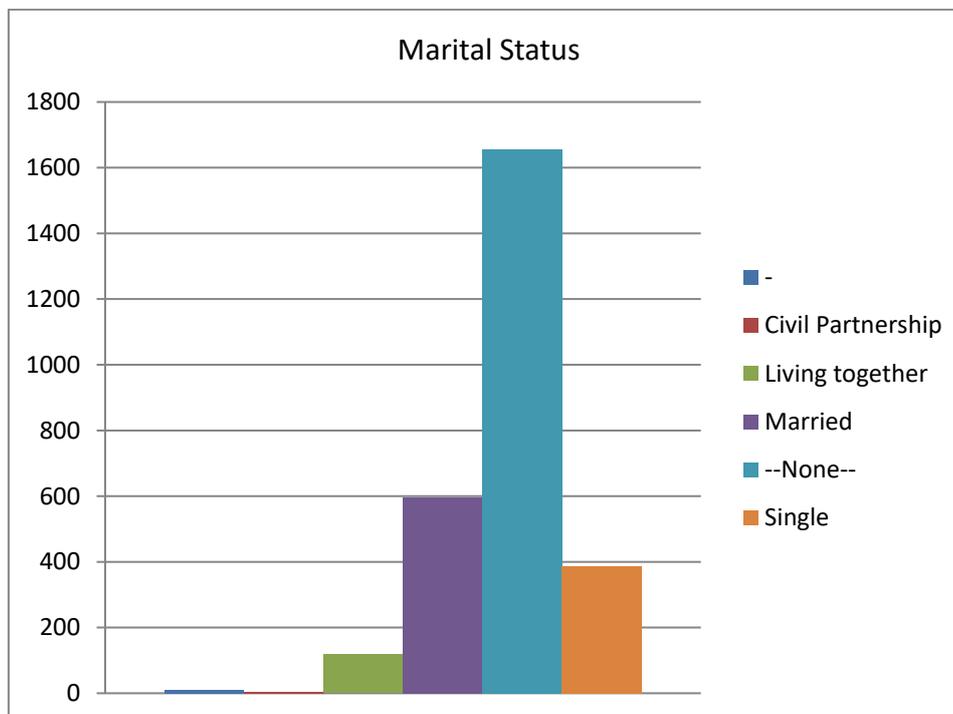


May 2019 to March 2020

Age of enquirer



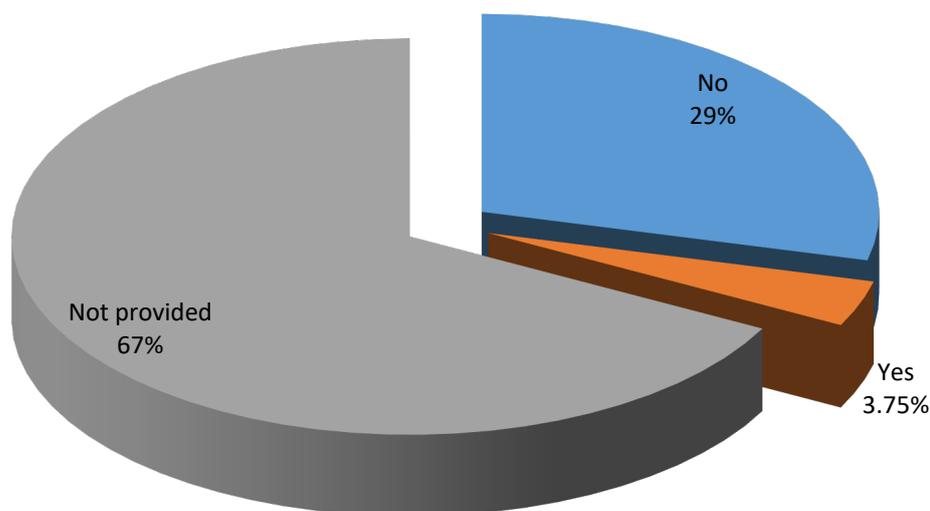
Marital status



Disability

Disability is not defined when taking demographics. The enquirer defines their own status and the question is optional.

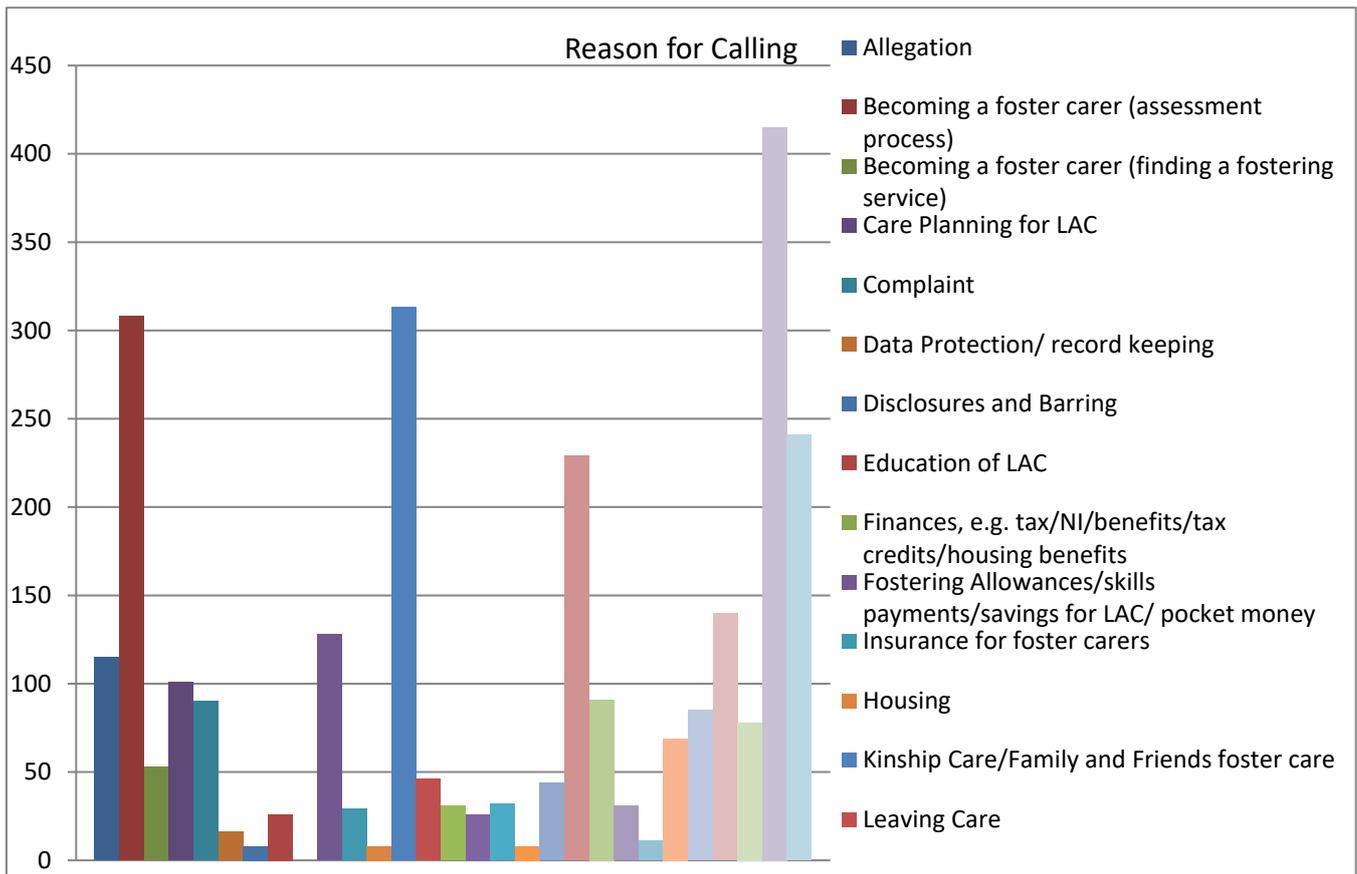
Disability Status of the Caller (May 2018 - April 2019)



Reasons for contacting Fosterline

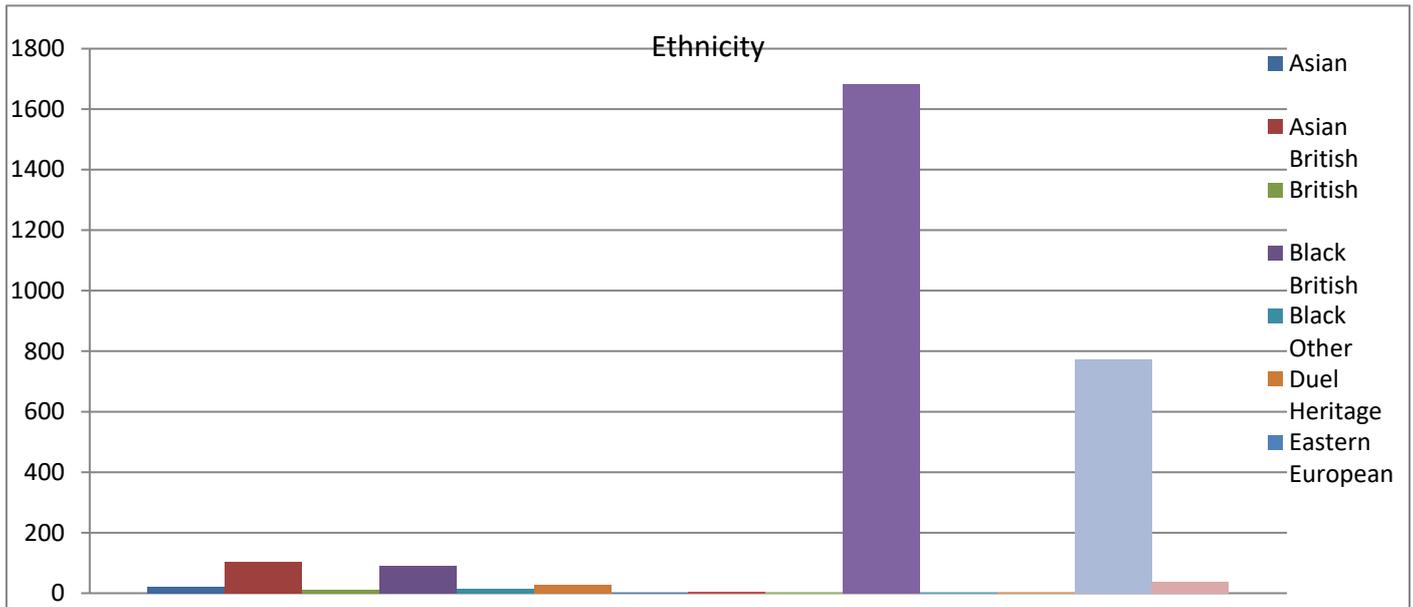
Fosterline has continued to respond to a very broad range of enquiries of concern to foster carers and often they do not fit into discrete categories. The following represents a general description of the topics and many cross over into the realms of another topic.

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 Fosterline service users

Figures shown below represent the caller's own description of their ethnicity. Callers are free to decline to answer this question.



Asian	includes Indian/Pakistani/Bangladesh
Asian British	includes anyone that describes themselves as British Muslim/Pakistani/Indian
Black Other	includes American/Australian/Caribbean/African
British	includes UK where white/Black has not been given
British Black	includes anyone that describes themselves as British African/Caribbean
Dual Heritage	Includes anyone that describes themselves as any definition of mixed race
Eastern European	includes Polish/Czech/Romanian
European	includes German/Greek/Cypriot/French/Spanish
Middle Eastern	includes Persian/Syrian/Iranian/Afghan
Not disclosed	Where information is not given or the enquirer refuses to provide information
South East Asian	includes Chinese
White British	includes English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish
White Other	includes American/Australian/Caribbean/African

(Spam and Advertising has been removed when calculating ethnicities)