

Fosterline
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your fostering advice service



ANNUAL REPORT

1ST MAY 2020 – 30TH APRIL 2021

**FOSTER
TALK**
#SUPPORTINGTHOSEWHOCARE



Department
for Education

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FOREWORD

On behalf of the Department for Education, I am pleased to have the opportunity to congratulate FosterTalk on their successful delivery of Fosterline in England, during a particularly challenging year.

Since 2013, FosterTalk has delivered Fosterline - a free, confidential, impartial helpline and website, offering advice and information for current and prospective foster parents on a wide range of topics. Since June 2020, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government has also funded FosterTalk to deliver Fosterline Plus, a service offering tailored financial advice, as well as ongoing support where carers' concerns require this.

Between May 2020 and April 2021, Fosterline was contacted over 153,000 times via telephone, email, and web services. Over the year, Fosterline has dealt with a huge increase in enquiries about becoming a foster parent – it is really encouraging to see more and more people are expressing an interest in this rewarding role. Fosterline plays an invaluable role in providing information and support to inform this life-changing decision.

This Government remains committed to promoting the best possible outcomes for children and young people in the care system and supporting foster families to perform this vital role. Being a foster carer can be hugely rewarding, but it is not always easy and foster families have faced significant challenges due to Covid-19. The service provided by Fosterline throughout the pandemic has helped to enable foster carers to continue to provide essential support to those in their care. I would like to commend Fosterline and foster carers for their resilience and dedication in the interest of providing stable, loving homes to children and young people.

I am delighted that we can continue to support Fosterline to deliver such high-quality and much-valued advice to prospective and current foster parents.

Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

INTRODUCTION

BY SHARON THOMPSON - FOSTERLINE CO-ORDINATOR

Welcome to the Fosterline England Annual Report 2020/21. Fosterline is delivered in England by FosterTalk on behalf of the Department for Education. FosterTalk has now completed its eighth year and 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 and articles by the end of year 8 was over 190,000. Fosterline, like so many other services, was impacted by staffing during the pandemic and focused on the provision of the helpline and keeping the website updated with advice related to the pandemic. The Lowdown newsletter, which is usually distributed quarterly to fostering services and those that contact Fosterline who wish to provide contact details, was suspended as we focused staffing time on service provision to meet the challenges of the pandemic. Instead, we regularly updated a Frequently Asked Questions section of the website to share information and posted regularly on social media to reassure the service was open as usual and inform carers of changes in guidance etc as the situation changed. We also wrote articles for carer publications.

Fosterline also launched an additional service during the pandemic with separate funding agreed initially from June until March 2021 which was then extended to the end of March 2022 at the time of writing. Fosterline Plus was launched in June 2020 to offer tailored financial advice to any foster carer or prospective foster carer in England on tax and benefit issues, registering as self-employed etc.



We were also able to refer callers for confidential 1 to 1 advice where a concern required ongoing support from an advisor for example in standards of care issues, care planning disputes, relationship breakdowns with a fostering service and for prospective carers too in relation to complaints, decisions to terminate an assessment unrelated to stage 1 concerns. This new service reached 297 households from June 2020 – April 2021.

Fosterline continued to offer its full range of helpline 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. The subject of enquiries was often linked to the pandemic with many queries around contact, safety issues and the guidance in place and financial concerns. There was also a surge in interest from prospective carers some of whom had lost their jobs or faced financial uncertainty due to the pandemic, some who enjoyed spending more time at home and wanted a career that enabled them to do this beyond the pandemic and some who had been thinking of fostering for a while and were responding to the media coverage in respect of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children. The service saw an increased use of emails and call back requests perhaps a reflection of many carers limited ability to make calls to follow up their issues with children likely to be off school and in their care.

Many prospective foster carers are thus unable to secure or afford suitable accommodation in order to become foster carers. This may disproportionately affect prospective carers who are single carers or are on lower incomes and BAME, who may be more likely to be living in overcrowded accommodation and those with children living at home.

The service continues to be contacted by many family and friends who are caring for, or considering caring for, a child or children known to them. Some of these calls have been directly related to the pandemic with several calls in relation to teenagers who “have been thrown out”, advisors are told, due to the stress of lockdown and family breakdown and tragically some as a result of the death of birth parent(s). In situations where the child is not in the care of the local authority callers are often shocked to discover that there is no automatic right to financial support from the local authority. Some callers tell us that such arrangements have not arisen as a result of a private arrangement with the birth parent but as a result of the local authority asking them to care for a child and they feel misled when they are then told no financial support will be provided. Callers who are caring for looked after children are often struggling to obtain clear information on financial support available and worry if they complain about this they may be regarded as financially motivated. However, many have had to give up work or reduce their working hours in order to care for a child and have financial commitments which can be a source of anxiety and affect placement stability. It is of continuing concern that we receive a minority of calls whereby family and friends foster carers are not receiving payments in line with the minimum fostering allowances as set by The Department for Education.

However perhaps the most difficult calls that Fosterline received during this period were in relation to contact issues and introductions. It became clear that there were wide differences in interpretation of the government guidance issued during the pandemic on contact across England with some LAs moving to virtual and other methods to reduce risks and others continuing to offer face to face meetings. Many carers contacted Fosterline extremely distressed and fearful in relation to proposed face to face contact/introductions for a child in their care which they felt put the child, carer and their household at risk of infection. Many carers were shielding or had someone in this medically vulnerable category in their household. Other carers could not understand how they were unable to see members of their extended families as they were following the guidance and were concerned about high infection rates but were being told they must supervise face to face contact for the LAC. Many carers told us that no risk assessment had been undertaken or in some circumstances it had been completed but gave no mention of any potential risks to the carer or their household. Some carers stated they felt their own safety was disregarded and that their concerns were not being acknowledged. Some carers stated they felt bullied by fostering services or in some cases supported by their IFAs but who told them they were powerless to change the decisions of the LA. In some calls carers stated they had been threatened with the removal of children who were settled in their care and/or deregistration unless they agreed to the plans in place. Several carers were considering resigning as a result of such issues despite reporting that they had many years of fostering experience and did not wish to disrupt the care of the children.

Foster carers have shown themselves to be highly professional and resilient in meeting the needs of vulnerable children during the pandemic. Many have expressed they have felt unsupported and fearful but determined to offer stability to the children in their care. Many carers have experienced financial insecurity as a result of the pandemic and again the overwhelming message within such calls was carers wanting to find a way through to be able to continue to foster. Fosterline will continue to develop its service to be responsive to the needs of carers to enable them to meet the challenges and rewards that the fostering role entails as we begin (at the time of writing) to emerge from the pandemic.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fosterline provides free confidential, impartial advice, information and signposting on issues of concern to foster carers and prospective foster carers in England.

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 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

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. The website provides comprehensive information and resources about fostering that may be invaluable to anyone thinking about fostering or is a current foster carer but requires additional information with an issue or concern.

Fosterline advisors can also answer queries and messages that are posted on Fosterline social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn via posting a general response if appropriate or directly contacting the individual.

Fosterline Plus can be accessed via speaking to a Fosterline advisor who can make a referral on a callers behalf or alternatively via self-referral from the website. All referrals for 1 to 1 support are allocated within 1 working day and calls can take place at evenings or weekends to meet the needs of the carer. Call backs for financial advice are completed between 9-5pm within 1 working day Monday-Friday or can be requested on a particular day/timeslot to meet the caller's needs.

KEY FINDINGS

The Fosterline annual report covers the period from 1st May 2020 to 30th April 2021 and reflects the impact that Fosterline has had upon users of the service.

The Fosterline service continued throughout the pandemic with advisors working from home. The advisors dealt with a high volume of Covid-19 related enquiries from foster carers during this time and experienced a surge in interest in fostering that will be reflected in the report.

The report is based on 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.
- Feedback from users of Fosterline who completed the annual survey.
- Fosterline users feedback from those who completed a questionnaire following their engagement with Fosterline.

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 153,000 occasions in the reporting period, May 2020 to April 2021.

The Fosterline 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 whilst complying 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 and as the pandemic dominated events in all areas of life it impacted significantly on foster carers. Many sought help in relation to finances as income was affected due to shielding, the ceasing of respite placements in many areas and some carers households were reduced due to furlough arrangements for themselves or their partners when working in addition to fostering. Other carers had concerns about contact and care planning, and many expressed they felt isolated from their fostering services. There was a reduction in calls from carers facing allegations perhaps linked to the reduced contact that carers and looked after children had with professionals during this period. However, the emotional nature of many of the calls cannot be over-stated. Many foster carers were fearful about decisions being made in respect of contact, moving children on and in respect of care leavers that they felt placed young people, themselves and their households at risk of infection.

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 misinformed 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, 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 who 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 grown with 24% of helpline enquiries and 26% of web users seeking information on becoming a foster carer. Fosterline have provided over 153,000 interactions (including use of the website and 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, we will then contact them up to a further 2 occasions during their journey to gain feedback. This is to help understanding of why many prospective carers drop out during the assessment process. It is also an opportunity to learn more about the journey to become approved carers and to get prospective carer's feedback on the process whilst also offering any additional advice as may be required in order to support the recruitment process.

Fosterline provides impartial advice and sought to encourage positive communication between carers and their fostering service and other professionals with the aim of enabling a carer to provide the best possible support to vulnerable children. The Fosterline Plus service enabled us to extend this support in the event of an ongoing issue such as a care planning dispute, breakdown in trust with the fostering service or carers who may be subject to a complaint or standard of care concern. At such times carers may feel isolated and from discussions with carers facing such issues Fosterline is aware it can lead many to question whether they should continue with fostering. One to one telephone support from an allocated advisor can help them assess their options and move forward positively. It also enabled carers to receive tailored financial advice at a time when many were facing changes and uncertainty and has provided a source of reliable comprehensive information for kinship carers. For prospective carers it provides a "one stop shop" with an opportunity to fully explore the impact of fostering on their financial circumstances to enable them to make informed decisions.

Fosterline continues to receive positive service user feedback on an ongoing and consistent basis to evidence that the advice provided has helped carers move forward, resolve difficulties 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. We also undertook an annual survey of those who used Fosterline during the timeframe of this report and conducted mystery shopper feedback.

REVIEW OF FOSTERLINE PERFORMANCE AND 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 and some half days between Christmas and New Year). 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 when closed for 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 half days between Christmas and New Year) and predetermined advertised training days for the Fosterline advisors. The service may close for training purposes that are advertised for 4 half day sessions however, during this reporting period the service closed for 1 training session with other virtual training taking place in a staggered way that did not affect the running of the service. 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.

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 during this period. Advisors completed training on Vicarious Trauma aimed specifically at helpline workers during the summer and this continued to improve their ability to respond to callers who may be experiencing mental or emotional distress. However crucially this training also helped advisors recognise the impact of dealing with such calls upon themselves particularly whilst continuing to work remotely. The team have met regularly via virtual sessions to support each other and share any concerns and have also had access to regular supervision. Advisors also completed training in relation to "Staying Put" to improve advice given to foster carers who may be considering this option.

During the pandemic there was much anxiety and uncertainty for foster carers and the 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. Examples of issues raised included: support bubbles, "the rule of 6" as to who was included, contact, home schooling of LAC, local restrictions and impact on contact arrangements involving families from other areas, access to the covid vaccine for foster carers.

FOSTERLINE PERFORMANCE DATA

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FOSTERLINE CALL VOLUMES

Calls to the service were down slightly compared to the previous year but the service saw a significant increase in email enquiries perhaps a reflection of carer availability when caring for children off school during the pandemic. Fosterline saw `becoming a foster carer` the most discussed topic by Fosterline advisors during the reporting period with 24% of all enquiries answered by advisors providing information related to the assessment process or finding a fostering service. The “other” category was the next popular with 20%. Financial queries accounted for 10% of contacts with SGO and kinship care at 9%.

	Calls Received	Calls Received Out of Hours	Call Back Appointments	Voicemails Left in Hours	Voicemails Left Outside Operating Hours
Q1 May – Jul 2020	657	91	147	62	52
Q2 Aug – Oct 2020	676	108	34	64	43
Q3 Nov 2020 – Jan 2021	566	73	48	57	72
Q4 Feb – Apr 2021	664	92	37	53	68
Annual Total	2563	364	266	236	235

95% of all calls to Fosterline were answered within 1 minute (including time taken to listen to the automatic initial voice recording).

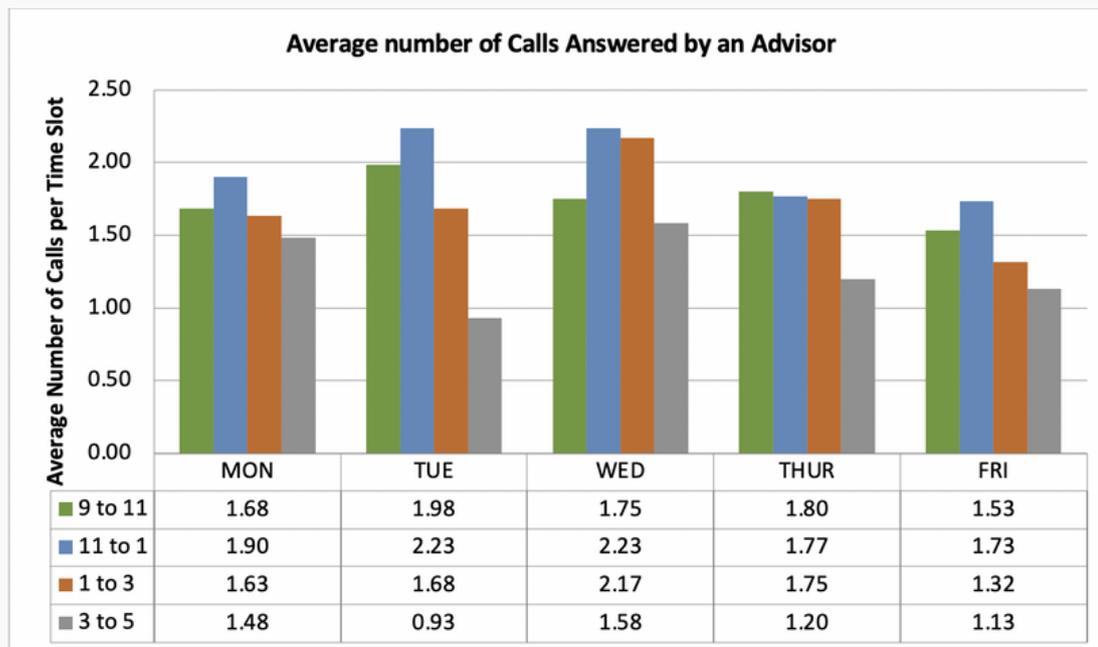
FOSTERLINE CALL ANALYSIS

Call patterns have remained consistent throughout the reporting period for each month but have changed in relation to previous years. Calls tended to peak weekly around Tuesday to Wednesday with the middle week of every month being the busiest period for incoming calls. In previous years Monday was the busiest day and the first week of the month had more calls. The change may be related to the pandemic and more carers being at home during the week as a result of periods of lockdown.

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 significantly during the pandemic when many carers had children in their care and were home schooling and wanted a call at a specific time or carers contacted the service via email or livechat.

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. More complex calls can take in excess of an hour. Calls outside of opening hours average 1 a day with many choosing to leave a voicemail which is responded to within 1 working day. There is no evidence to support an extension on current opening hours.



FOSTERLINE WEBSITE DATA

Visitors to the Fosterline website continue to seek information about fostering with the pages containing information on how to foster being the most popular. Over 100,000 visitors used the site in 2020-21. The page views for “Find a Fostering Service” and “Thinking of fostering” webpages totalled over 22,700. The Noticeboard advertising recruitment events was temporarily closed in March 2020 on the website due to lockdown and government guidance in respect of gatherings. It reopened in the summer as many virtual recruitment events were being held by fostering services. The online Can You Foster Quiz? has proved popular during the pandemic with 1691 participants- a record number since the website was launched.

Fosterline advisors can 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 download useful factsheets such as special guardianship, insurance for foster carers etc.

FOSTERLINE WEBSITE VISITORS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The Fosterline website has been operational for 100% of the time over the past year. A total of 88,695 new users have visited the website over the past year with over 11,629 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 during the pandemic and raising awareness about fostering in the wider community with over 33,000 engagements. We continue to advertise our services and myth bust around fostering to reach as many prospective foster carers and those currently fostering in England as possible.

	New Users	Returning Users
Q1 May – Jul 2020	25,749	3,188
Q2 Aug – Oct 2020	19,077	2,929
Q3 Nov 2020 – Jan 2021	21,320	2,657
Q4 Feb – Apr 2021	22,549	2,855
Annual Total	88,695	11,629

FOSTERLINE WEB FORMS AND EMAILS

	Web-Forms	Emails	Live Chat
Q1 May – Jul 2020	25	298	76
Q2 Aug – Oct 2020	23	329	65
Q3 Nov 2020 – Jan 2021	25	312	28
Q4 Feb – Apr 2021	30	266	56
Annual Total	103	1205	225

LIVE CHAT

Live chat continues to be available 9-5pm Monday-Friday with the exception of bank holidays. Live chat was unavailable during December for technical reasons and there was an associated drop in use during this quarter. 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. This was a handy option for many carers during the lockdown period who had children in their care during the day and were less able to contact the service by phone. Advisors can provide advice and add links to other resources and/or signpost 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. Again, this has proved very popular during the pandemic with an increase of over 100% on the number of call backs booked in comparison to the previous year. Many carers also contacted Fostertalk enquiries seeking help who were non-members and as Fosterline advisors were working remotely the advisor was emailed to request a call back to the carer. These call backs are not included in the figures below (as were not via the online calendar system) and during the height of the pandemic were an additional 60 call backs a month on average.

Number of Call-back Appointments	
Q1 May – Jul 2020	147
Q2 Aug – Oct 2020	34
Q3 Nov 2020 – Jan 2021	48
Q4 Feb – Apr 2021	37
Annual Total	266

SAFEGUARDING ISSUES

No safeguarding issues were highlighted during this reporting period. Fosterline is subject to FosterTalk's robust safeguarding policy and procedures which are regularly reviewed and shared with staff and discussed within induction training and ongoing supervision.

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. 2021, however was a year unlike any other and the calls to Fosterline reflected the concerns of carers during the months of lockdown and issues that emerged from the easing of restrictions. The Fosterline website was regularly updated with information and guidance as restrictions tightened and then eased before further periods of lockdown were again introduced. Carers were concerned about financial pressures and support available as some were required to shield and cease fostering temporarily or experienced a drop in demand for respite placements. There were concerns about home schooling options for looked after children and about care planning issues particularly in respect of contact, introductions to new placements etc There were also many enquiries about the covid vaccine once a roll out programme was developed with confusion about whether foster carers were in a priority group. We also received calls from carers frightened and who felt isolated in their role as a foster carer from their fostering service. Many were anxious about contact issues and possible risks arising from face-to-face meetings.

However, there was a huge increase in calls from those interested in finding out more about fostering. Many were seeking information as a result of finding themselves in uncertain employment situations and were looking for a possible career change and some were particularly interested in working from home and seeking a role that would enable them to continue to do this post pandemic. Many were emotionally moved by the coverage of the impact of lockdown on vulnerable children in the media and wanted to help. Some had been thinking about fostering for a while and now found themselves with the time to follow this up to decide if it was something they wanted to pursue. There were several calls from landlords unable to rent out rooms due to the pandemic looking into fostering as an alternative. Most such callers realised they had underestimated the assessment process and timescales involved in becoming a foster carer and were signposted to consider other options.

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. These trends were less pronounced this year as the impact of the pandemic hit carers in different ways throughout the pandemic dependent on their individual circumstances. As a result, many sought help when they or their partners were furloughed, or when placements ended or were ceased for reasons related to covid. There was confusion about whether carers could access bounce back loans and other financial support and about eligibility for free school meals, access to laptops etc for looked after children.

In June 2020 Fosterline was provided with additional funding to offer additional services. Fosterline Plus was able to offer tailored individual tax and benefits advice to any prospective or approved carer in England via a call back service. The service also offers the option of allocating an advisor for ongoing 1 to 1 phone advice and support in complex matters where further independent advice is required.

Fosterline continue to actively promote the recruitment of prospective foster cars and it was the most popular reason 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. Fosterline Plus was launched in June 2020 and advisors can with consent refer callers for a call back from a specialist tax and benefit advisor. Alternatively self-referral is possible via the Fosterline website. This service has been particularly beneficial for prospective foster carers wanting to understand what financial support will be in place should they decide to foster if they need to give up work or reduce their working hours or to understand the impact on any current benefits they are in receipt of. It has also assisted carers whose financial circumstances have changed (often related to the pandemic) and helped inform them of any entitlement to benefits. The service has also been welcomed by kinship foster carers and prospective kinship foster carers who may traditionally receive little or conflicting information about financial support available to them. Housing costs involved in obtaining larger accommodation as discussed earlier in the report appear to be a significant barrier to fostering for many who make initial enquiries about fostering who are without a spare bedroom.

There were many calls connected to the fostering allowance and fee payments. Some callers raised the issue of higher living costs during lockdown as a result of eating all meals at home as a family and having the heating on etc and the need to shop locally was also felt to add expense. There have been several calls from carers concerned about the cost of transport that is being deducted at source by fostering services when a taxi or other transport is put in place for the young person to attend school or contact.

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.

ENQUIRY THEMES

TAX AND NATIONAL INSURANCE

- Carers were unsure where to access specific advice on tax and national insurance related to their particular circumstances. This was particularly evident in the early months of the pandemic with confusion about eligibility to furlough, bounce back loans and universal credit for carers who were unable to foster due to shielding or other issues. The introduction of Fosterline Plus has thus been well received with any prospective carer or current foster carer in England able to receive tailored advice.
- Kinship carers are often unclear that they will need to register a self-employed and struggle to understand how fostering may impact on their household finances.
- Many prospective carers are daunted at the prospect of becoming self -employed and what this will mean. Referrals to Fosterline Plus have helped remove this important barrier to fostering by providing jargon free friendly and professional tailored advice.
- Many find the process of completing an annual tax return confusing and seek help with this.

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. These queries were particularly prevalent in the early months of the pandemic as many carers found their household finances impacted by the pandemic for example partners who were furloughed, carers on hold due to shielding etc
- There were many queries around free school meals and vouchers with some schools appearing to provide meals for all children that were attending during the initial lockdown and others chose to provide vouchers to all vulnerable children who were being schooled at home whilst many did not as they were not obligated to do so.
- Many foster carers are often confused around Pupil Premium criteria for Looked After Children and some carers were querying if they could access this to help provide resources for home schooling of LAC.
- Foster carers will explore what benefits they may be entitled to when a child leaves placement if they are left without a placement or in some circumstances carers are subject to an allegation and are unable to offer care until this has been resolved.
- Some carers seek advice on the impact of a decision to move to a staying put arrangement.

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE (DLA)

- Some callers are concerned that the child's social worker is stipulating how the DLA should be spent with some carers instructed to save much of the allowance towards the child's adult future needs rather than spend to enhance their opportunities during childhood. Some callers are concerned that they are told the money is to be used to pay for counselling or other services that the LA should be providing as part of their statutory duties towards LAC.
- Some callers felt the level of scrutiny was excessive and was a factor in breaking down relationships between the carer and the LA or fostering service.
- Some carers stated they were being asked to purchase equipment using the DLA that may have been freely available via an occupational therapist assessment.

FOSTERING ALLOWANCE

- 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 and/or changes in respite provision and payments with no overall increase in financial support. Many told us they were unable to access respite due to the pandemic during the timeframe of this report and were unable to roll over the provision to the following year and were not offered any compensation for respite not taken.
- Some carers continue to express 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. 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.

- Some carers were concerned that deductions are made to allowances at source by fostering services to pay for transport arrangements for the LAC. Some callers dispute that this was agreed with them at the point the child was placed in their care or feel the amounts are excessive and are causing them financial worries in respect of meeting the child's full needs from the remaining allowance.
- Some carers raised that their costs were higher as a result of the pandemic with the need to shop locally and having children at home during the day increasing their utility and food costs.
- Some carers with clinically vulnerable looked after children in their care were required to close vacancies to shield the child and sought advice as their fee payments were reduced by their fostering service which some carers felt was unfair.

KINSHIP AND FAMILY AND FRIENDS FOSTER CARE

- Callers caring for children known to them as a result of a request by the local authority to do so are often seeking advice when told they are not eligible for a fostering allowance as the child is not looked after. Many feel misled by LAs and dispute that it was a private arrangement and are concerned about the financial pressures.
- Prospective kinship carers and newly approved kinship carers seek financial advice as they have been given little or no information about the financial support they will receive. Many are worried about asking for this information in case they are judged as being financially motivated but need to understand the support available to be able to plan their household finances. The assessment process for any foster carer encompasses the financial stability of the household and this information is therefore vital for any carer.
- 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. Many callers state they are not informed about any eligibility criteria for fee payments and therefore have missed out because they were not told they needed to attend specific training courses etc in order to qualify.
- Some temporary approved kinship carers who are undertaking the full assessment whilst the child is in their care seek advice as they are not receiving the equivalent of the fostering allowance but are paid a lower level of financial support. The callers state they are told they cannot receive the full fostering allowance until the full approval has been completed. Such callers raise concern that lack of financial support is threatening the stability of the placement and some express they feel set up to fail by the local authority.
- In one example a carer had begun the approval process as a kinship foster carer with the looked after child in their care but after the viability was successfully completed was informed it would progress automatically to an SGO application. The carer was given £25 a week from the local authority, and this had continued for 15 months. The carer was still without a court date for when the SGO application would be made and was seeking advice as she had financial difficulties but had now also been approached to care for a sibling.
- Some callers raise queries about access to training and support that they feel is different to that received by other foster carers.
- Some kinship carers subject to allegations appear to struggle to access independent support and when children are removed are not updated about the allegation process or any outcome.

STAYING PUT

- There appears to be wide variation in how LAs across England support staying put arrangements with financial support differing significantly.
- 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.
- Callers report that there is a lack of support from any personal advisors and inclusion in any pathway plan. Many express frustration that they are left to sort out the benefits with the young person.
- 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. This was magnified during the pandemic with universities closing or students returning early as lessons were online. Some carers sought advice as the LA was refusing to provide financial support to them despite the student being in their care.
- Some callers sought advice as they felt the LA was putting pressure on the young person to apply to study away from the carers home despite the young person stating they wished to remain with the carer full time on a staying put basis and continue with their studies.
- Some callers sought advice as staying put arrangements were ending but due to the pandemic the care leaver was continuing in their education or study for an additional year and wanted to know if staying put could be extended.

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
- 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. Some caller's queries were related to changes as a result of the pandemic with guardians in reduced financial circumstances as a result of job loss or being furloughed. Post SGO support appears to be patchy with some carers having received no support post order.
- Fosterline is contacted by some special guardians who have not been provided with a support plan and in some cases have never received any financial support from the local authority and were unaware of the possibility of this at the time the order was granted.
- Special guardians contact Fosterline for advice when birth parents are intending to return to court to contest contact arrangements as they are concerned about the costs of legal advice and representation.



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. During the pandemic Fosterline received less calls related to allegations. However, for carers subject to allegations feelings of isolation from their fostering service and a lack of support, information and direction from their Supervising Social Worker were often magnified as a result of lockdown experiences.

In the initial stages many of the enquiries require emotional support, as well as advice about the process. Fosterline can 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. In some situations, the caller informs us that the fostering service has refused to make independent support available and Fosterline Plus can offer ongoing impartial one to one advice to such carers but cannot attend meetings or enter into any mediation or communications with the fostering service and we explain that it is not a substitute for independent support.

ENQUIRY THEMES INFORMATION ON PROCEDURE

- Foster carers are often shocked and distressed and seeking information on the process. Many carers report they have been given little or no information from their fostering service and feel very alone.
- Some carers were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on any allegation increasing their sense of isolation, worry about how processes would take place in lockdown and concern that timescales would be lengthier as a result.
- Some foster carers stated 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 and relationships within the family particularly if one carer within a couple is the focus of an investigation.
- 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 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.
- Foster carers seek advice when review reports and other records are inaccurate. Many raise concerns they are given a very short time frame to respond to lengthy reports hindering their opportunity to defend themselves.

- 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.
- Some foster carers report that allegations are being made following their decision to give notice on a placement or transfer to another fostering service or in situations where they have raised a complaint about a social worker or supervising social worker.
- 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.
- Some callers feel previous resolved allegations are re-examined as a result of a change in social worker and are again left feeling their practice is under a microscope.
- Kinship foster carers are often unclear regarding the process of allegations and may be told children will not return to their care but not informed about the implications of resigning during an allegation. Some ex-kinship carers in this position have contacted Fosterline as this has had implications when they have gone on to have a child of their own resulting in contact from the LA to do assessments etc or had a DBS check for a work role to find information recorded in relation to the incident that they categorically dispute.
- 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.
- Fosterline has received calls from kinship carers for children not looked who are subject to an allegation and seeking advice.

INDEPENDENT SUPPORT

- Foster carers report that they are not aware that independent support is available to them following an allegation or that this has not been provided (NMS 22.12)
- Some foster carers that are registered with IFAs continue to state that the fostering agency will not challenge any views held by the local authority as their overriding concern is to protect their business relationship and future placements rather than support the 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. Others have raised issue with the independent support provided and feel there is collusion with the fostering service.
- Some callers tell us that their fostering service has informed them of Fosterline and can therefore access independent advice via this service and that they do not need to provide additional independent support as defined in NMS.
- Some carers tell us they are being criticised for seeking support from other carers and breaking confidentiality but may have done so in the absence of any independent support.

REMOVAL OF CHILDREN

- Foster carers share the upset of children being removed suddenly with no explanation given.
- Foster carers express confusion when a sudden decision appears to have been made to remove some but not all children in their care. The impact of this on other children placed can be difficult for carers to manage due to limited information and the stress of the allegation process upon them.
- 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.
- 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.
- Some carers feel in a difficult situation when forced to decide quickly if they will continue with a placement whilst the investigation is underway subject to the focus of the investigation (a partner or other family member) moving out of the accommodation. This situation can place enormous emotional and practical strains on carers.

INFORMATION GATHERING

- Many carers feel they are prejudged as guilty by professionals and that the allegation process is not vigorous as conclusions are drawn from the outset.
- A small number of carers have raised issues with reviewing offices and children's social workers sharing details of allegations in review reports and meetings pertaining to other children in their care that has thus made birth parents of other children aware of this information.
- 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.
- Foster carers tell advisors they are not 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.
- Carers are unclear if they can receive copies of any minutes from Strategy or Position of Trust meetings held and if they can challenge the outcome of the LADO process.

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. Some carers report that fostering is their sole income source and are struggling financially whilst they await the investigation to be concluded.

TIMESCALES

- Lengthy investigations increase the financial pressure on the household and can lead to resignations as carers need to meet their financial commitments. Some callers feel this was the intended outcome on the part of fostering services.
- The stress of an allegation appears to be underestimated within some fostering services and the carer's health can deteriorate resulting in them being unwell and unable to attend meetings further reducing their ability to have a voice within the process.
- Some foster carers seek advice around resignation as a foster carer, in view of the stress and timescales involved whilst awaiting an outcome or having lost faith in the process, come to their own conclusion that they no longer wish to foster. Fosterline advisors provide specific information around the implications for foster carers should they seek a resignation prior to the outcome of any ongoing investigation.
- Carers subject to an allegation during 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.
- Many carers report that they are given insufficient time to respond to lengthy reports (examples include just a few days).



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. 24% of all of the enquiries responded to by the advisors and 26% of visitors to the website seek information on becoming a foster carer. This gives a potential of approximately 23,000 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. There has been increased numbers of queries from prospective carers who have a health issue or have queries around British citizenship, and this may be seen as positive in the sense that callers have not ruled themselves out as the myths exposed within our Can You Foster? quiz show many continue to believe that a health condition, disability or not holding British citizenship would preclude someone from fostering. Many continue to seek advice believing they are too old to foster or that a previous conviction will prevent them from fostering.

ENQUIRY THEMES

WHO CAN FOSTER

- Callers are seeking information about whether they are too old to foster. Advisors have also seen increased queries from those under 21 seeking information about fostering.
- Callers wish to know if they can work and foster a child alongside their own children as a single carer
- Some callers express that they wish to foster but their partner does not wish to be involved and want to know if they can be assessed on their own.
- Many callers seek clarification around health concerns including mental health issues when considering fostering.
- Some callers request advice around previous criminal offences and whether this will prevent them from fostering.
- 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.
- Some prospective carers are seeking information about training and resources to help prepare them for a role in fostering prior to them contacting any fostering services.
- Some callers seek information about fostering children from their extended family who are currently living outside of the UK.
- Many foster carers seek information around payments made to foster carers and allowances received to support a child in their care.
- Many callers seek information about housing as they are without a spare bedroom. Many are puzzled at the lack of local authority support to acquire a larger property when the motivation to do so is to foster. Lots of callers tell us they are unable to move to a larger property without the assurance of approval and regular income from fostering but as many fostering services require a spare bedroom to be available before they will commence an assessment, they are unable to proceed.

- Some callers have approached fostering services and intended to create a spare bedroom with their birth children moving to a room share and seeking help understanding why this was not deemed appropriate by fostering services.
- 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 or pension planning.
- Some callers wish to find out about foster to adopt.
- Fosterline received some calls from landlords during the pandemic struggling to let rooms and seeking information on the fostering process as an alternative use for their rooms. However, the majority realised they had underestimated the timescale and robust assessment process that is involved.

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 were responding to media coverage of vulnerable children during the pandemic and wanted to know how they could help via becoming a foster carer with some asking what type of carers were most needed in their area.
- 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 about the self-employed status of a foster carer and how this would apply to their own situation.
- Some callers are seeking advice as they have been informed by fostering services that they need to be a British Citizen in order to foster which is not the case.
- Some callers seek advice about situations when their applications have been terminated due to issues in respect of previous partner references or refusal or negative reference of an adult birth child following family breakdowns.
- Some prospective carers seek advice on appeals/complaints options when their applications are terminated by a fostering service but with little or no information provided.

Callers report reasons they are unable 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/leave to remain in the UK
- Applicants withdraw due to changes in circumstances (health, job security, promotion, birth children/family events etc)
- A small number of applicants report that having researched and spoken to fostering services they have realised the role is not for them.
- A small number of prospective carers report finances as the reason they decided not to proceed.
- No current permanent right to reside in the UK.

HEALTH

- 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.
- A small number of queries around the medical process and reasons for this.
- Some prospective carers queried the impact of fostering on disability benefits.

CARE PLANNING FOR LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

- Many calls were made by carers very frightened during the pandemic who were being told to continue with face -to- face contact arrangements. In some examples carers themselves or a household member was shielding and they had concern that they and the child in their care were being put at risk. Some carers stated they had been threatened children would be removed from their care if they failed to comply with face -to- face contact. Carers stated they felt their own safety was disregarded by local authorities and fostering services. In several cases it was stated risk assessments had not been undertaken or had not been shared with foster carers, and when they had been completed the carers risks and that of the wider household were not included.
- Many calls were received from carers in respect of education provision during the pandemic. In some areas carers were criticised for sending looked after children to school whilst in other parts of their country there appeared to be a blanket approach that all looked after children should remain in school. Many carers were distressed at treating the looked after child differently to their own child by sending the foster child to school as many were required to do. Some carers raised concerns that the LAC views were not being taken into consideration with some young people wanting to study at home like the majority of their peers.
- Some carers sought advice on resources to assist them in home schooling to provide the child in their care with as positive an experience as possible.
- Many callers expressed concern regarding delays in decision making and changes in plans as a result of frequent changes in social worker and the impact on the child.
- Some carers raised concerns that changes in plans appeared to minimise risks and previous concerns and were worried new staff appeared unfamiliar with the child's file and therefore not in a position to be making well informed decision in a child's best interests.
- Some callers stated their professionalism is disputed if they question any care planning decisions and are concerned, 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 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.
- Some carers wish to make a complaint but are fearful of any wider implications for the child in their care and/or their fostering career.

ENQUIRY THEMES

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

- Some callers were fearful of visits by professionals as the pandemic continued and wanted to know if they had a right to refuse a home visit. Some carers raised fears that workers in their homes had not worn any PPE such as masks or adhered to social distancing guidance.
- Some carers were fearful of adoption introductions taking place in their home during the pandemic due to the lack of social distancing that was practicable and felt their household was put at risk.
- One caller sought advice as she was distressed at the request to leave a child “on the doorstep” of the proposed long-term carer without any introductions taking place at the height of the pandemic.
- Some carers were struggling to continue with placements where young people were not complying with the national guidance refusing to stay at home and continuing to mix with others. The carers were concerned about the risk to their household and to the young person and did not always feel this was being taken seriously by the fostering service/local authority.
- 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.
- Some carers felt that they had been left to manage contact issues with little support. In some cases, the child was struggling to engage with the sessions. In other examples involving carers supervising face to face contact carers were worried about trying to implement social distancing and use of PPE with birth parents. Some carers were aware via social media posts that birth parents were not complying with any risk assessment that had been put in place for the contact sessions at contact centres and elsewhere e.g parents posting pictures with the baby in contact without the PPE agreed. Carers were concerned such actions put the child and their households at risk but felt the LA were dismissive of their concerns.
- 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.
- Carers express frustration at the lack of consultation or consideration of the impact of decisions upon the household. Examples include contact or extensive introduction plans that are drawn up placing unrealistic expectations on carers. Carers reported on several virtual contacts during lock down for each child in their care and the impact on others in the household of trying to manage this often alongside home schooling. Some expressed frustration that virtual contact frequency continued at the same rate following reintroduction of face-to -face contact further increasing time pressure upon some carers.

- Some callers felt that the breakdown of a placement would have been avoided if full information about the needs of the child had been shared with them at the outset of the placement. Some carers felt vital information relating to issues of aggression had been withheld from them at the point of placement that placed other children or themselves at risk.
- 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. Carers raised they were left to cope and informed they would need to give a notice period to end a placement and in some calls, this had been extended by several months with the carer being told there was nowhere else for the child to go. One carer expressed frustration to the point she had considered taking the child with their belongings to the office as the notice period had expired by 3 months but was told she would be recommended for deregistration by her agency if she did this.
- Some carers stated they had agreed to have an additional child as an emergency placement during the pandemic but were then experiencing difficulties in establishing any plans with the fostering service to move a child on.
- 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 and the impact of the pandemic.
- Many calls from carers concerned that the looked after child(ren) was included in the guidance around the rule of 6 for gatherings as the lockdown measures began to ease and felt this was unfair and had impacted on contact with their wider families.
- Christmas contacts and arrangements over the festive period were also a source of many calls as carers were confused/fearful regarding the change in guidance and the impact of face-to-face contacts in light of infection rates rising again.
- 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.
- Some callers sought advice in respect of managing siblings when there was evidence of violence from one child to another. Some carers felt this was not taken seriously by social workers and that there were unrealistic expectations upon them to supervise them at every minute within the household to prevent further incidents which made family life challenging.

ROLE OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO)

- 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.
- Some carers feel the IRO has limited power to influence decision making and some calls suggested lockdown had left carers feeling they were less involved as carers in the decision- making process than ever. Some carers stated that meetings had been held with out them during the pandemic as carers were unable to attend virtual meetings due to home schooling obligations or due to lack of IT support to do this.

COMPLIANCE WITH REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

- Some carers expressed frustration that while they were held to account that the local authority or fostering service was regularly flouting regulations, its own policies and good practice with no consequences.
- Many carers contact the service to discuss concerns that children's views have not been considered in care planning. However, some carers appear to be viewed negatively by fostering services or local authorities when seeking advocacy (NMS1) and this can discourage carers from making referrals for children in their care.
- 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.
- Some carers told us they had received little or no contact from their supervising worker during the pandemic (NMS 21). This appeared to have a particularly significant impact for newly approved carers and for carers experiencing placement difficulties.
- Some carers of children with disabilities sought advice as they stated they were given no support in accessing appropriate equipment or in some cases adaptations to their home. In some calls carers spoke of carrying 8 year old children up and down the stairs with no risk assessments undertaken.

PATHWAY PLANNING

- Pathway plans were raised with carers concerned no action had been taken during the lockdown and children approaching 18.
- 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.
- During the early months of the pandemic some carers were asked to continue with placements beyond 18 that were not transferred to a staying put arrangement as delays to moves for young people to independent accommodation took place. Whilst callers were happy to provide this service in most cases that we spoke to, some were worried about how any payments should be treated in relation to tax and benefits.

STAYING PUT

- Many 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. There also appears to be some confusion in respect to care leavers with additional needs and whether staying put or shared lives is the most suitable option.

FINANCES AND BENEFITS

- 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.
- Some callers are confused about the financial support available for staying put from the local authority and about the fact they may no longer be a foster carer and impact on tax and benefits.
- Some students at university returned early to be with the carer as a result of universities closing or suspending all face-to-face sessions. Some carers had difficulty accessing financial support from the local authority for this period.
- 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 unclear on the young person's contribution towards their stay.
- There is an ambiguity in how each LA interprets the legislation and Living Together Agreements are not always completed with carers, care leavers and the LA which calls suggest lead to issues later in some cases .
- Some carers sought advice as they had been informed the arrangement would end but due to delays in the apprenticeship or course as a direct result of the pandemic the care leaver remains in full time education or training for a further year and was seeking to continue with staying put.
- Some carers reported that staying put arrangements had suddenly ceased with no discussion with the young person or their carer.
- Some callers had been approached to offer staying put to children with disabilities in their care and were worried about plans beyond this as the young person would be unable to move onto independence.

PRESSURE FELT BY THE FOSTER CARER

- Some foster carers are given little time to consider the option of staying put and pressured to make a swift decision due to delays in the care planning process
- Foster carers report that they have been told that a refusal to offer staying put could impact on their continued fostering career when in a position to offer both.
- 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.
- 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.
- Some carers are concerned that the care leaver is prevented from returning to their care when they move out even when this may have been done in the heat of the moment and they quickly express their wish to return.

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.

SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDERS (SGO)

Calls from foster carers about Special Guardianship continue to grow. Many struggle to access information elsewhere and state they are given little time in which to make an informed decision. Many carers feel pressurised to agree and are fearful children will be removed unless they agree to an SGO. Some carers favour 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

- Fosterline continue to receive calls from family and friends of looked after children who are concerned as they are being advised they will not be considered as kinship foster carers for those children but are being advised to directly seek SGO.
- Some approved kinship foster carers feel pressured into going forward with SGO as they are fearful children will be removed from their care if they do not comply. Many such carers feel the role of a kinship foster carer provides support and financial stability to enable them to focus on the needs of the child.
- Some carers feel pressure from birth parents to offer SGO. Whilst some regard this as a sign of confidence in their ability to care for the child some callers suspect the motive is to remove the role of the local authority and increase the parental role which may jeopardise placement stability.
- Some callers express concern that the local authority will not consider matching a child long term in their care and are pushing the carer to agree to an SGO. In some examples the possibility of a move for the child has been suggested which can increase pressure on carers.
- 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.
- Fosterline received a small number of calls from carers during the pandemic that were asked to write their own support plan by the local authority and were unclear what they needed to include.
- Some special guardians have contacted Fosterline for advice in respect to contact issues, changes in circumstances and how to access support.

FINANCES

- Some callers are concerned that what was stated verbally in relation to exploring SGO is not reflected in the financial arrangements and support plan produced by the local authority.
- The caller is not always aware that often payments may be time limited or subject to review.
- Foster carers are not always aware of the importance in seeking legal advice in order to document financial arrangements and support plans.
- Callers ask about any entitlement of special guardians 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. This was more prevalent during the pandemic as some SGO carers were faced with redundancy or furlough arrangements.
- Some SGO carers contact the service as they are concerned that parents are contesting contact arrangements or the SGO order and are unclear where to access support and if any help is available with legal costs.
- Arrangements for SGO reviews and support appear to differ significantly across England.
- Some SGO carers were unaware the support needs would transfer from the area responsible for the child to the area they live and are struggling to access any support from their own local authority.
- 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

Fosterline receives many calls from extended family members and friends who are caring for, or considering caring for, children who cannot be cared for by birth parents. Many of the children are known to the local authority as children in need or are subject to child protection plans. The carers have often assumed that due to this the local authority will provide financial and other support as often they argue their actions have prevented the child from entering the care system. Sometimes callers feel they have been misled particularly when they have been approached to offer care by the local authority but are then told the arrangement is considered as an informal kinship arrangement or private fostering arrangement dependent on the carers relationship to the child. This results in a reduced role for the local authority in providing support and any financial support is often at their discretion. Many callers share financial worries and are unclear where to access support for the child.

ENQUIRY THEMES

FINANCES

- Many callers are struggling financially to care for a child/ren and tell us they are unable to access financial support from birth parent(s). In many examples carers tell us they have had to stop working to offer care and that the impact of increased costs arising from meeting the needs of the child in addition to having a reduced income is significant.
- 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 significant number of calls received during this reporting period were linked to the pandemic with calls from extended family members stepping into care following the death of a birth parent. These calls explored the financial challenges but also the therapeutic and other support that may be needed for the child and the carer.
- In other calls the strain of lockdown on family relationships was evident with relatives, neighbours and friends stepping in to care for teenagers who were unable to remain at home as relationships had broken down. These calls focused on the financial impact but also on issues related to finding services to support young people as they approached 18.
- Many callers continue to 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

- Private foster carers were often 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. There are also opportunities to add comments. During this reporting 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:

146974-Excellent, words cannot describe how grateful I am ...for the support, the advice, the knowledge and the listening ear they gave me at a time when I was not heard from nobody.

134432-She was really insightful and gave detailed answers to the questions I had.After the phone call, I felt informed and reassured about the plan of action moving forward.

1137221- Very informative and easy to speak to

132878-This is a fantastic service. The advisors are so friendly and well informed. Absolutely brilliant!

144993- Nothing was too much trouble and not rushed.

142847-Thank you for all the advice it is very helpful

1 132878-Up to date practical advice given in a user friendly format

145730- Really useful. I came away ...with a really useful to do list and some really helpful advice and ideas.

146974-Excellent, words cannot describe how grateful I am ...for the support, the advice, the knowledge and the listening ear they gave me at a time when I was not heard from nobody..

During the reporting period Fosterline also achieved reaccreditation of The Helplines Standard awarded by Helplines Partnership following a rigorous assessment that is valid for 3 years. The report was extremely positive about the service:

“The helpline benefits and prides itself on well-established operational processes and procedures. Resources are used effectively, and the helpline operates within a robust suite of policies and protocols... From the comprehensive evidence submitted, and during the assessment, it was clear that the Fosterline helpline is strongly focused on meeting the needs of its callers. There was evidence of regular service review and development to respond to emerging needs. *the term ‘callers’ includes any type of multi-channel contact including text, web-chat and social media....”

***Helplines Quality Standards Assessor,
May 2021***

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 2020 to 30 April 2021. The survey was updated to include information about the pandemic as the reporting period included the early months of lockdown.

The survey received 80 responses. The questionnaire results indicated:

- 51% were foster carers
- 31% were prospective carers

The remaining group consisted of kinship carers, special guardians and ex foster carers.

- 86% rated the advisor as knowledgeable
- 87% felt the advice had helped them resolve their query.
- 25% of the prospective carers that responded to the survey were now approved as foster carers.

Where prospective carers were not approved currently:

- 24% were still in the process of being assessed.
- 59% had chosen not to enter the assessment
- 6% had decided to terminate the assessment and 6% were not approved at fostering panel.
- 6% were appealing following the ADM decision

Feedback comments on Fosterline included:

- *“I was able to make a better-informed decision”*
- *“All the advice I was given was really helpful, the advisors were friendly, easy to talk to, supportive and knowledgeable”*
- *“Helped in the successful conclusion of a dispute with a fostering service”*
- *“I was helped to understand my relationship with the LA better...”*
- *“I felt supported and better informed, however when I asked my agency for a referral for ongoing support, the new manager refused and was angry that I had gone to an outside agency...”*

2. In 2020-21 946 prospective foster carers contacted Fosterline via calls, , 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.

- 209 (22%) 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 that they had realised they would need to move house as were without a spare bedroom and those interested in fostering young babies had often been informed by the local fostering services whom they had contacted that they were not recruiting carers for this age range. Some discussed the costs and difficulties in accessing larger accommodation and felt unable to proceed at the current time
- Some callers had experienced opposition from their partner or wider family and felt they needed more time to be able to get them onboard with fostering.
- Some expressed a change in circumstance such as change in employment, health or family issue that had led them to put plans to foster on hold for the time being.
- However, many indicated that they intend to return to explore fostering again in the future.
- Some prospective carers were not contactable despite several attempts being made by advisors.
- 12 were continuing with fostering enquiries/application and agreed to a call back at 10 weeks.
- At this stage others dropped out due to similar reasons above with changes in their circumstances being referred to by many and again some callers were not contactable.
- 3 agreed to a 16 week call back one of whom was approved, another carer was due to attend Panel shortly and the 3rd was not contactable at this stage.
- The feedback from the callers tracked through the process was that the process of approval, experienced during lockdown had been thorough and professional. The callers stated they had underestimated the time they would need to invest in training and meetings with the assessing worker but felt prepared and positive about their journey to date. These callers had also made use of Fosterline plus to obtain tax and benefits advice so that they could make plans to reduce employment hours in order to foster and felt fully informed about the self-employment process.

3. 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 a record 1691 responses during this 12 month period. The completion rate of the survey has improved as it was updated to change the wording of the questions to gain their opinions and assumptions rather than ask directly about them if they themselves had experienced mental health issues or previous financial problems for example which it had been noted led to some partially completed surveys in previous years. It is interesting to note that 10% of those completing the survey were under 25 and a further 15% identified themselves within the 26-30 age bracket. All responses were confidential, and the identity of the respondents remain anonymous. However, when consent was given, and details provided Fosterline contacted them via email with information about the service how to access further advice and also details of the Fosterline Plus service in relation to tax and benefits advice for prospective carers.

The following results were obtained:

- 91% believed they were the right age to foster
- 17% did not have a spare room
- 45% did not own their own property
- 2% believed they needed to be married
- 7% believed that being LGBT precluded them from assessment
- 62% had children of their own
- 61% thought that a disability, medical condition or mental illness would prevent someone from fostering.
- 43% believed they had to be a British Citizen
- 90% believed that a previous conviction of a criminal offence would preclude them from fostering.
- 68% thought that previous financial problems would prevent someone fostering.

Following the survey the participants identified next steps as follows:

- 37% next step was to contact a fostering service provider
- 23% next step was to book a call from a Fosterline advisor
- 13% next step was to start the assessment within 3 months
- 26% 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’m currently looking for a new house to live in, so want to have the space and a loving home for a child before I continue into the next steps*
- *Would like to gain more knowledge on it before making that commitment*
- *I need to discuss and consider our finances with the rest of the family before we begin the process*
- *Waiting to hear about possible redundancy*
- *Just something I am looking into at the moment, not looking to start anything official just yet.*
- *Not sure yet how to work fostering around working*
- *Preparation and getting past Covid-19 situation.*
- *Financial situation.*
- *I would like to wait until my youngest child goes off to university.*

FOSTERLINE DELIVERY PLAN 2020-21

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 2020 – 2021:

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

We achieved:.

- The promotion of and information around cultural events during the period, including Eid, Ramadan, Christmas, Easter, Black history month, Black Lives Matter, Diwali and Hanukah and how these events can help to recruit foster carers.
- Regular posts with links to reports on topics of interest to foster carers such as how to ease anxiety for children returning to school, SGO film, articles on mental health.

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

We achieved:

- Annual Fosterline user satisfaction survey.
- 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 with 100% availability.
- Updated our website information and advice to callers in light of the changing guidance and regulations as the pandemic developed.
- Provided emotional support, information and advice 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.
- Launched Fosterline Plus in June to provide options for tailored financial advice to foster carers and prospective carers as many told us they were experiencing significant financial uncertainty. Fosterline Plus also helped support carers who felt isolated with issues such as standards of care concerns, complaints, care planning disputes etc
- Changed the way in which we kept in touch with prospective carers who wanted us to do so by replacing the automated emails with calls at 10 and 16 weeks to offer ongoing support to prospective carers.
- Provided follow up information about Fosterline to those who participated in the online Can you Foster? quiz who wished to have contact from the service.

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

We achieved:

- Shared via social media the Children & Families Minister's letter of thanks to all foster carers
- Regular posts to confirm Fosterline was open and with the options available to contact us
- Attended FosterTalk member virtual presentations to promote Fosterline services to foster carers and fostering services.
- Regular social media posts on a wide range of fostering issues
- Distributed government guidance via social media on issues pertinent to fostering and the pandemic including the vaccination programme, school attendance, rule of 6 etc and regular updates on the website including frequently asked questions.
- Shared information about Fosterline Plus service including articles in carer membership publications and carer social media apps, contacting fostering services and meeting with another fostering membership organisation.
- Sharing information on Black Lives Matter and the care of BAME children.

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

We achieved:

- Shared fostering related news regularly on social media and on the Fosterline website news pages.
- Updated frequently asked questions and information on the website in relation to the pandemic.
- Updated the website with information about Fosterline Plus and included the option for self-referral via the website

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.
- Targeted social media posts at hard to reach groups to encourage more carers to come forward. Examples include a post about the shortage of BAME carers and Ofsted statistics highlighting the shortage were shared. Posts aimed at LGBT+ community with information on the service and how to find out more about fostering.
- Posted links to the FAQs related to fostering and the pandemic to support carers.
- Improved our communication with prospective foster carers replacing automated emails after the 4 week call back with the option to have 10 and 16 week call backs to provide ongoing support and improve our feedback to the Department for Education on any barriers to fostering raised by prospective carers.
- Launched Fosterline Plus in June 2020 to offer tailored free tax and benefits advice to any prospective or current foster carer in England.
- Fosterline Plus can also offer ongoing telephone support with an allocated advisor to any prospective or current foster carer who needs impartial support with an ongoing fostering matter.

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

We achieved:

- Sharing and publicising policy briefings on the Fosterline website and social media.
- Sharing the government guidance during the pandemic that was relevant to carers for example in relation to school attendance for LAC, support bubbles, contact and the rollout of the vaccine on the Fosterline website and within advice provided by the advisors and in our newsletters.
- We fed back to the Department for Education carers views regarding key workers, financial support, school attendance, concerns regarding face-to-face contact etc in regular contract meetings and correspondence.
- Developed a new service Fosterline Plus with additional funding from the Department for Education to respond to the high number of queries Fosterline received regarding becoming a foster carer and finances and to address carers expressed needs for additional support (297 households supported).

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 some virtual Fostertalk membership sessions with carers to provide information about the Fosterline service.
- Information regarding Fosterline Plus was circulated to all fostering services.
- Fosterline information has been shared on some local authority and independent services websites including fact sheets and links to the Frequently Asked Questions
- 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:

- 95% of all calls to the service were answered within 1 minute. Feedback has remained positive throughout the review period
- Over 99% 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.
- A seamless service transition to remote working with advisors operating from home as the pandemic progressed 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.
- Developed Fosterline Plus service with additional funding from the Department for Education in June to offer tailored financial advice to any foster carer or prospective foster carer and offer additional 1 to 1 advice with any ongoing matter such as complaints, care planning disputes, standards of care issues etc. 297 households received support from Fosterline Plus.
- Achieved reaccreditation of The Helplines Standard awarded by the Helplines Partnership.

CONCLUSION

The Fosterline service provided 2008 hours of advice line availability in 20/21 and achieved 100% in relation to its advertised hours. In the period reviewed, Fosterline has been able to provide information to over 190,000 service users through the Freephone helpline, website and email services, social media, call backs, livechat and articles in carer publications. The figure is reduced compared to the previous year as a result of the suspension of The Lowdown newsletter during this period which will be reintroduced on a quarterly basis in 2021/2022. However, Fosterline Plus was launched in June 2020 as a result of additional funding from The Department for Education to help improve support to carers and prospective carers needing to access tailored financial advice and/or additional support from an allocated advisor. The new service was able to assist 297 households between June 2020 and April 2021 and we aim to widen awareness of the service to help even more prospective and current carers during 2021-22.

There has been increased interest in fostering on the helpline service and via the website and some of the interest appeared to be directly related to the pandemic e.g: financial uncertainty and exploring alternative career options. Fosterline has improved its system to track prospective carers, with their consent, to gain more insight into how many go on to be approved and the reasons why many choose not to proceed. Whilst the reasons for this are varied housing was a significant barrier for several callers with the lack of availability of a spare room and the high cost of renting or accessing larger property preventing them from moving forward. Many prospective carers are disappointed that they cannot receive help obtaining a larger property within social housing when their motivation is to foster. They are often informed this is not possible until after they have been approved but that an assessment will not commence until they are in suitable accommodation. Fosterline will look at how it can further improve the follow up process to strengthen qualitative and statistical data from prospective carers. Fosterline will continue to reach out to all sections of the community to make them aware of the service and for the need for prospective carers to come forward that reflect the diverse needs of vulnerable children.

Fosterline is also focused on the need to respond to our foster carers and will continue to engage actively with the fostering community to widen knowledge of our service so that more carers can access Fosterline. We will also continue to listen to carers in order to provide a service that remains responsive to their needs as we begin to emerge (at the time of writing the report) from the pandemic.

Fosterline has robust policies and procedures and quality assurance measures in place but will continue to review these regularly. Fosterline encourages feedback from users of the service, conducts an annual survey and mystery shopper exercises and in 2021-22 will continue this in conjunction with increased call sampling to evidence high standards of service provision. Advisors will receive relevant training and support in their roles to ensure they are able to respond effectively to the needs of callers and the induction process for new staff members will be reviewed.

2020-2021 was certainly a year unlike any other for most and for many callers it was a very challenging and at times frightening experience with many carers extremely isolated due to the periods of lock down and concerns about the spread of infection. During complex and often distressing calls advisors were able to offer a listening ear and up to date information to help them identify options. Service feedback scores (96%) and positive comments received help reflect the value of the impartial advice service to foster carers and prospective foster carers. The positive feedback received within the report that confirmed reaccreditation of Fosterline achieving the Helplines Standard was also a welcome boost for staff and further reassurance to all stakeholders within the fostering community of the quality of the service provided.

As the Co-Ordinator of Fosterline I have spent many hours, along with the advisors, engaging with callers. I have been particularly struck by the continued resilience of foster carers to meet the needs of looked after children during such a challenging year. It cannot be underestimated how difficult it can be for a carer to pick up the phone, send an email or voice chat and share that they are struggling. Indeed, often such contacts begin with a carer's concerns about the child in their care, their household members or their extended families as they are so used to putting the needs of others before themselves. Prospective carers have also shown adaptability with many welcoming virtual training and meetings that were swiftly put in place by many fostering services as a response to the pandemic. Whilst the forecast for 2021/2022 indicates there may be bumps in the road as we emerge from the pandemic Fosterline's aim is to continue to support and inform carers every step of the way.



APPENDIX

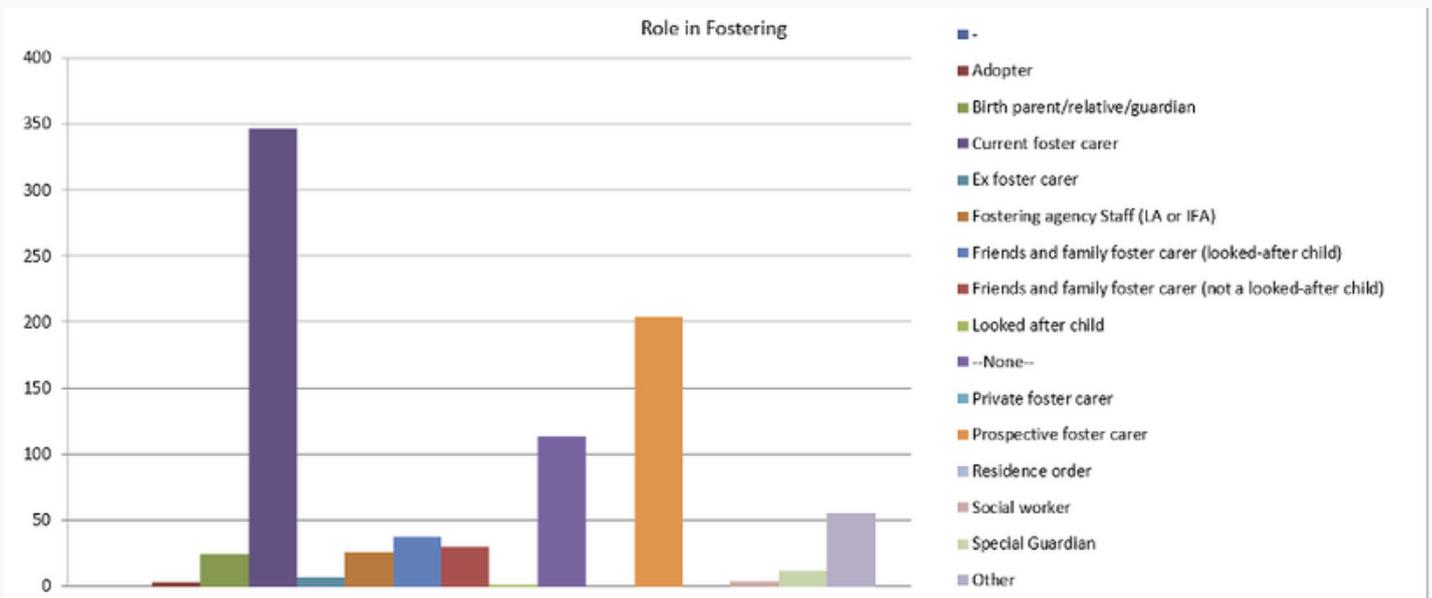
FOSTERLINE DEMOGRAPHICS

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

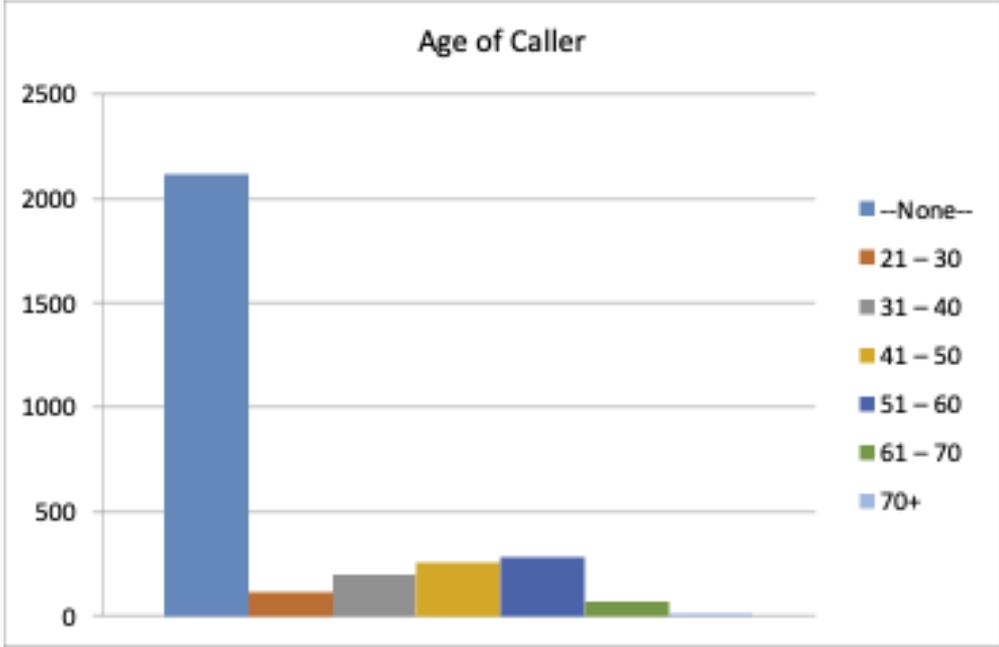
Advisors are also able to use their discretion as to whether or not to collect the data due to the nature of the call. Advisors will not increase or cause stress and anxiety to any caller whose situation is of a sensitive nature and they believe it would make the caller feel uncomfortable. Enquiries 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

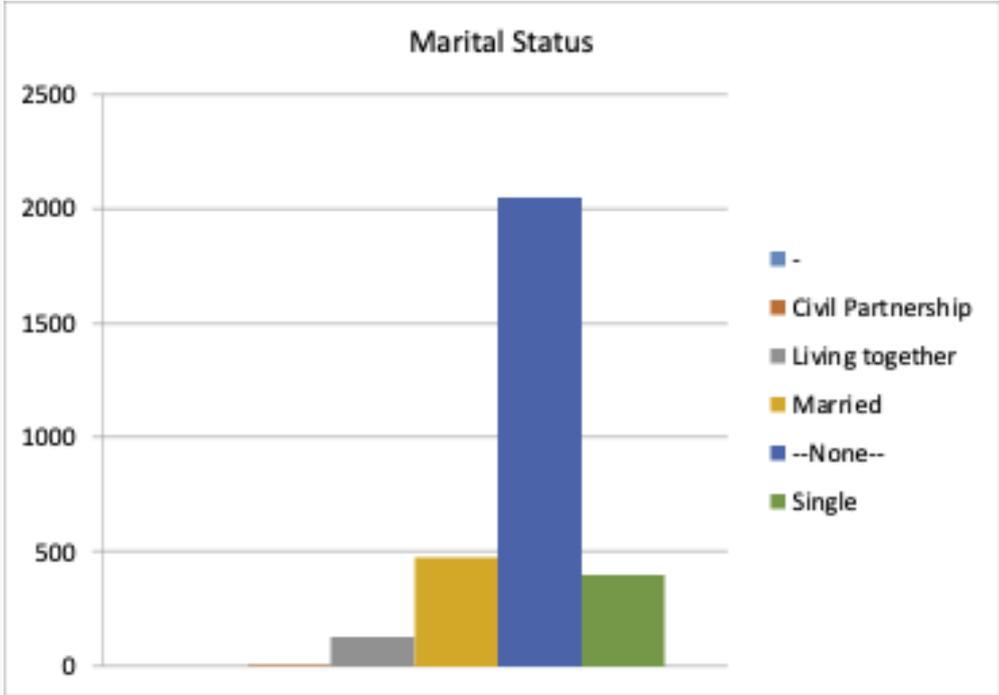
The majority of callers to the service are existing foster carers yet the main reason for calling the service is to become a foster carer. This is because the topics of concern to foster carers are so vast these calls and communications are spread far and wide. The information gleaned from the role of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



AGE OF ENQUIRER

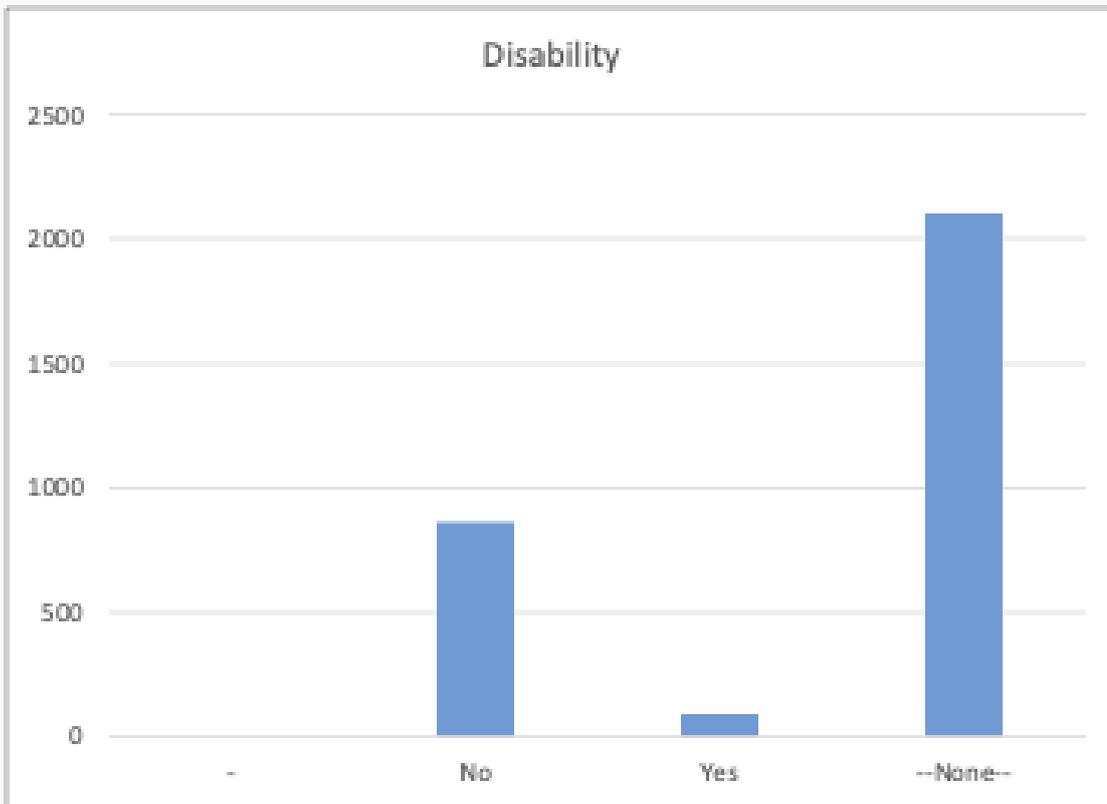


MARITAL STATUS



DISABILITY

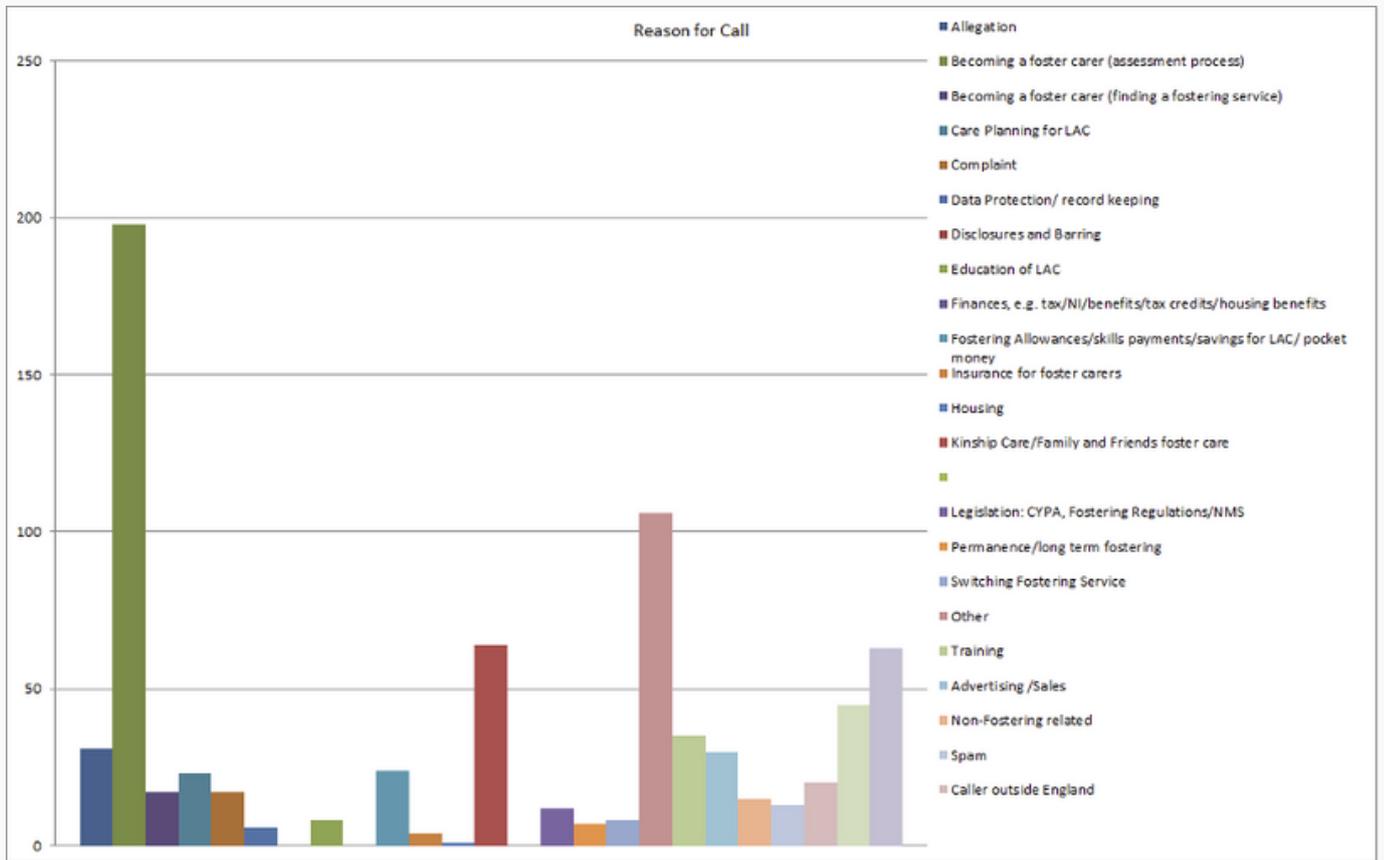
Disability is not defined when taking demographics. The enquirer defines their own status and the question is optional.



REASONS FOR CONTACTING FOSTERLINE

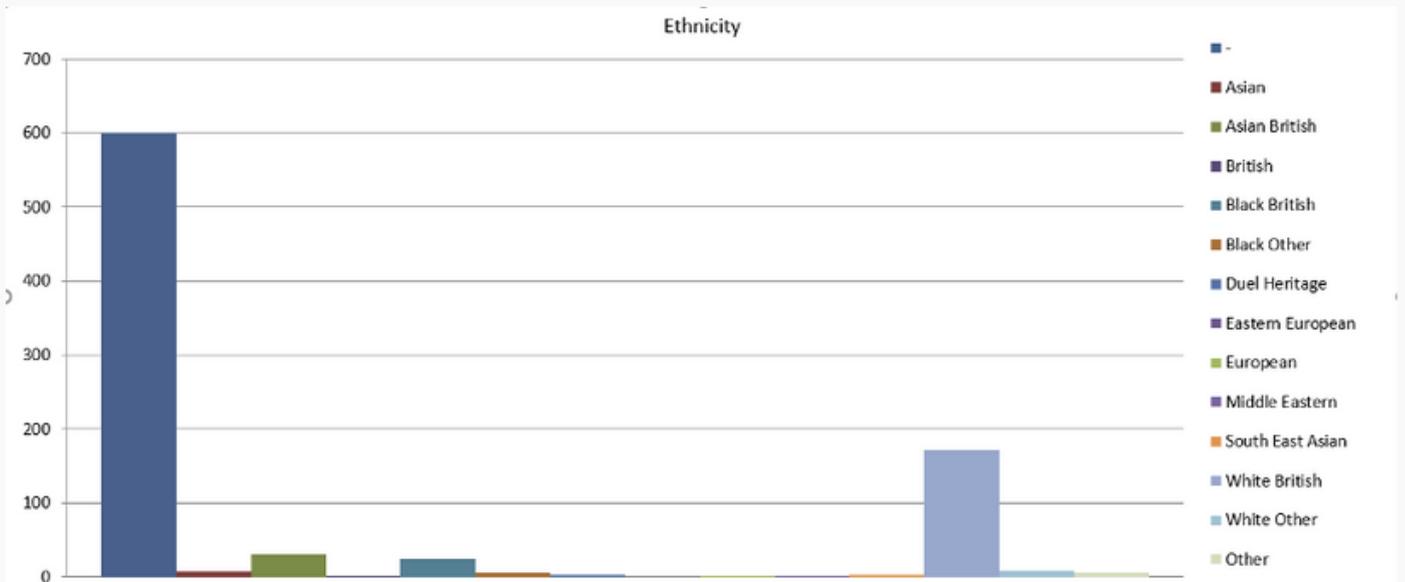
Fosterline has continued to respond to a very broad range of enquiries of concern to foster carers and often they do not fit into discrete categories. The following represents a general description of the topics and many cross over into the realms of another topic.

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)