

Fosterline
0800 040 7675
your fostering advice service



ANNUAL REPORT

1ST MAY 2021 - 30TH APRIL 2022

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FOREWORD

PLACEHOLDER

INTRODUCTION

BY SHARON THOMPSON – FOSTERLINE
COORDINATOR

Welcome to the Fosterline England Annual Report 2021/22. Fosterline is delivered in England by FosterTalk on behalf of the Department for Education. FosterTalk has now completed its ninth year and it continues to develop to meet the needs of the fostering community.

Fosterline aims to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers by providing free, confidential advice, support and information about fostering and the many issues that foster carers face. Fosterline's service user engagement via website and helpline, social media and live chat and articles by the end of year 9 was over 218,800.

Fosterline reintroduced the quarterly magazine The Lowdown during this reporting period that had been suspended during the pandemic and focused on updating information on the website including the extension of a range of fact sheets on a wide range of topics available for foster carers and prospective carers to download.

Fosterline launched on Instagram in November in a bid to reach a wider audience on social media. The service took part in Fostering Fortnight in 2021 focusing on a range of images with carers from diverse backgrounds. The themes linked to our love of the outdoors post lockdown and the role of foster care in the nurturing and development of children.

Fosterline also launched an animation that was widely distributed on social media and on our website about the role of Fosterline to encourage more enquiries.

Fosterline saw far fewer calls linked to the pandemic as we emerged from the lockdowns of the previous year. Some callers were anxious about the vaccination of children in their care as the guidance on age range changed and a



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few callers who were clinically vulnerable (or had someone in the household who was) raised concern that social workers visiting their homes were no longer willing to wear masks.

However, the trend to communicate via email continued to rise perhaps suggesting that carers and prospective carers have become used to communicating with services this way during the pandemic despite Fosterline remaining open for calls throughout the periods of earlier lockdowns. Mindful of the financial concerns of prospective and current foster carers we have also added further information to our website to confirm calls to the service via landline in the UK and from most mobile networks are free.

We also posted 4 blogs during the timeframe of this report focusing x2 on "meet the team" with a spotlight on a particular staff member and on shared adversity, sharing understanding and loving a resistant child.

Fosterline continues to respond to large numbers of service users looking for information on becoming a foster carer and seeking advice around the assessment process. At the end of March 2021 (according to National Statistics Fostering In England 2020-2021: main findings published 11.11.21) there were 45,370 fostering households (76,640 foster carers) in 425 agencies in England. Whilst the number of foster carers represents a 4% increase since 2014 to 2015 the number of children in foster care grew by around 11%. The number of family and friends' households continue to rise and is at an all-time high with them representing 27%

of all LA fostering households. Record levels of enquiries were received from prospective carers but the conversion rate to applications continues to fall at 6% compared to 12% in 2014 to 15.

The proportion of fostering households that were approved also fell with 32% in 20/21 compared to 44% in 2015/16. Foster care provided care for over 55,990 children in England (as of 31 March 2021). However, the overall picture is one of slow growth of foster carers that is failing to keep up with the demand for placements as the numbers of children in foster care continue to grow.

This is leading to shortages of placements and challenges in relation to suitable matching which increases the likelihood of instability and placement moves for fostered children. Our calls from foster carers raising concerns about matching and placement disruptions and a lack of support also suggest this may have an impact on foster carer retention with some concluding because of a negative experience that fostering is no longer for them. It is also of note that 30% of deregistered fostering households deregistered within 2 years of their approval and retention and support issues continue to be a huge challenge to the fostering sector.

In 2021/22 over 20% of all website searches on www.fosterline.info were to pages containing information on how to become a foster carer or actively searching for a fostering service near them or a recruitment advert. Additionally, the helpline received 27% of all calls from people enquiring about becoming a foster carer, a fall from 34% the previous year during the height of the pandemic. The 'Can You Foster?' survey that is interactive and aims to dispel myths about who can foster was completed by 703 participants on the website compared to 1083 the previous year.

Whilst both these figures show a decline on the previous year they remain higher than the figures collected in the years preceding the pandemic suggesting that there remains a strong interest in fostering with perhaps fewer calls linked to uncertain job security or other factors that were linked to the pandemic as a motivation to explore fostering.

Many of those exploring fostering express frustration that without a spare bedroom they are unable to proceed with a fostering enquiry. Callers state they are unable to afford to move to larger properties due to the high rise in rents, rising house prices and other economic pressures, and many are aware that fostering income can fluctuate depending on if and when children would be placed in their care. Several callers express a desire to foster babies without the need for a spare room and are dismayed to discover that local services in their area are not recruiting such carers.

Fosterline always encourages such prospective carers to contact several fostering services in their area and to include a mix of LAs and IFAs to get a good overview on whether any services may need such foster carers and explains generally about the demographics of the LAC population and the National Minimum Standards in respect of accommodation.

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 such callers are shocked to learn that when the child is not 'looked after' there is no statutory requirement for the local authority to offer financial support. Family and friends foster carers often have questions about the assessment process and/or about finances that they may feel uncomfortable approaching the LA about as they worry they will be seen as financially motivated.

However, for many they are required to give up employment or reduce their working hours to foster and are concerned about how they will meet their financial commitments.

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 or appear not to be able to receive a fee available to other carers within their service that appears contrary to NMS 28.7 and 30.10.

Fosterline continues to receive many calls from foster carers who are subject to allegations or standards of care concerns who are often distressed and anxious. Many have been given little or no information about the nature of the concerns or the process that will be followed. There continues to be wide disparity between fostering services in relation to providing independent support with some services putting this in place at the time of the allegation and others waiting until if a case is presented to the IRM and in some cases foster carers tell us it is not provided at all.

In relation to standards of care concerns that can be equally distressing and question the suitability of carer to continue to foster many fostering services do not provide any independent support and some foster carers who turn to family and friends for emotional support can find themselves criticised for breaking confidentiality. In many examples the carer is left with no financial support whilst any investigation is underway, and the timeframes can vary significantly placing additional financial strains on the fostering household. Some callers have told us they are innocent but have no choice but to seek alternative employment and leave fostering as they cannot afford to await the outcome of the investigation-we wait to see if this will become even more of an issue as the cost of living concerns grow in 2022-23.

Foster carers and prospective carers began to raise specific financial concerns during the last quarter of the reporting period as the cost-of-living concerns began to emerge with higher fuel and energy costs and food prices taking effect. Current carers were raising concerns about the failure of allowances and fees and other payment rates such as mileage, to keep up with rising costs and some felt this issue would impact on their ability to meet the needs of the child in their care. Some prospective carers expressed that the financial support available was insufficient to enable them to give up work to foster as the fees available would not replace their current wage.

Fosterline also experienced several calls from carers in relation to over payment issues due to

alleged errors in the fostering service some of which were small amounts that dated back over significant periods of time and had built up to several thousand pounds. Several such callers were anxious at the repayment schedules put in place to repay the money that were imposed without discussion with the carer over short periods of time. Carers were fearful of their ability to meet the needs of the children in their care and the financial commitments of their household expenditure at a time of rising costs from the reduced payments received because of the error made and short repayment timescale imposed.

Fosterline responds to all queries and concerns of prospective and current foster carers in England and of course is seldom contacted when all is going well. However, we continue to be inspired by the dedication of the foster care workforce to the children in their care that is very evident in so many of the calls received. We are often privileged to provide impartial advice to prospective carers in taking their first steps on their fostering journey and we remain committed to supporting the fostering community to meet the needs of vulnerable children.



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 caller's 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 usually 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 2021 to 30th April 2022 and reflects the impact that Fosterline has had upon users of the service.

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 170,000 occasions in the reporting period, May 2021 to April 2022.

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 from those wanting to find out more about fostering and from current foster carers. Many of those considering fostering want an

overview of the process and what to take into consideration when choosing a fostering service. Others have more particular questions about fostering often related to their circumstances such as the possible impact on their children, suitability of their current accommodation, or impact on finances. Current foster carers access advice on an array of issues including allegations, care planning issues, transferring to another service and queries around special guardianship or possible staying put arrangements under consideration.

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. The service strives to equip carers with the information to make decisions for themselves on any next steps.

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 (excluding other) has been from prospective foster carers seeking information about fostering. This is followed closely by enquiries and issues that foster carers face around finance. Special guardianship and kinship care queries were the third most popular reason that Fosterline was contacted. Kinship carers often appear to be 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. Some callers felt under pressure to accept an SGO but had been provided with little information about the implications of this and were fearful children may be removed if they did not proceed. Support issues with the child's social worker or their fostering service was also a common reason for contacting Fosterline during this reporting period with many, often newly approved carers during lockdown, expressing their concerns at feeling unsupported and at times overwhelmed by the fostering tasks required of them.

From surveys and interaction on the website, it is clear that many myths have reduced significantly about who can foster but that some misconceptions remain stubbornly high. The surveys show that disability (19%), citizenship (48%) and previous financial issues (16%) or a criminal conviction (64%) and LGBTQ (8%) continue to be regarded as automatic barriers to fostering by many participants. If they are representative of the views of the general public, it suggests that significant groups/ individuals may be discounting themselves from fostering before making any enquiries and that many in their networks would also be likely to reinforce the myths. It is also important that the fostering community is not complacent on any myths for example that foster carers need to have had children of their own or own their own property. Whilst the Fosterline survey aims to inform and dispel myths of those participating and addresses this within many areas of the website such as the FAQ sections and within fact sheets there is still much to do within the fostering community to challenge all myths around fostering to encourage as many as possible to come forward to find out more and to ensure the foster carer workforce is diverse to meet the needs of LAC.

Fosterline's role in promoting the recruitment of foster carers has grown overall (despite a drop in comparison to last year's figures) with 27% of helpline enquiries and over 20% of web users seeking information on becoming a foster carer. Fosterline have provided over 218,800 interactions (including use of the website, calls, live chat, emails and social media, and newsletters and articles) 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 to support the recruitment process.

The service also sends out an email giving information on Fosterline and Fosterline Plus and how the service can support prospective foster carers to anyone who has downloaded the Fostering Guide from the website where consent has been given to do so and also those who wish to leave their contact details when completing the 'Can You Foster?' quiz.

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. Often carers may feel isolated and 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 with the aim of improving support and retention. It also enables carers to receive tailored financial advice as many find the self-employment process difficult or want to know if they are entitled to any other financial support. It provides a source of reliable comprehensive information for kinship carers who have often received little information on self-employment and tax issues and may also require benefits advice. 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. In total 374 households have accessed this service in the reporting period.

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 all of which were very positive.



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 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 1992 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 2 training sessions 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. Improved call queuing information was introduced in March in a bid to reduce the number of calls abandoned as the caller is now aware of what number in the queue they are.

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 Head of Social Work and Development. Staff are also provided with 2 hours continuing professional development time approximately 6 weekly, subject to the needs of the service, to undertake reading to keep up to date on developments.

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 Domestic Violence Awareness, Handling Difficult Callers, IRM and a session on Inclusion. One staff member who joined us during the year also completed Vicarious Trauma that other advisors had undertaken in the previous reporting year. Advisors also attended a session on the impact and future aims of the Martin James Network of which FosterTalk is a member which celebrated the work of the network including Fosterline's achievements.



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During the continuing pandemic in the spring, summer and autumn of 2021 there was continued 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: whether foster carers were required to have the vaccine as part of their role, the guidance related to vaccinations on looked after children when introduced for teenagers. However, advisors also noted many calls from recently approved carers during the height of the pandemic who were now, at the time of calling the service, a few months into their role seeking advice with issues such as standards of care or allegations and many stated they had received little support as new carers and/or that placement matching had been poor.

Fosterline Performance Data

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

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

Fosterline Call Volumes

Calls to the service were down slightly in comparison to the previous year but the service continued to see a rise in email enquiries perhaps a reflection of carers who have become used to communicating in this way with their fostering services and others during the pandemic. Fosterline saw 'becoming a foster carer' the second most discussed topic by Fosterline advisors during the reporting period with 27% of all enquiries from prospective foster carers.

The "other" category was the most popular this reporting period with 32%. Financial queries accounted for 10% of contacts with SGO and kinship care at 8% and allegations accounting for 3% of all contacts with advisors.

The call back appointments below include those booked via the website and requested via Fostertalk enquiries.

	Calls Received	Calls Received Out of Hours	Call Back Appointments	Voicemails Left in Hours	Voicemails Left Outside Operating Hours
Q1 - May – Jul 2021	580	127	105	44	56
Q2 - Aug – Oct 2021	576	112	118	67	54
Q3 - Nov 2021 – Jan 2022	496	46	159	34	45
Q4 - Feb – Apr 2022	484	75	145	21	40
ANNUAL TOTAL	2,136	360	527	166	195

96% of all calls to Fosterline were answered within 1 minute (including time taken to listen to the automatic initial voice recording).

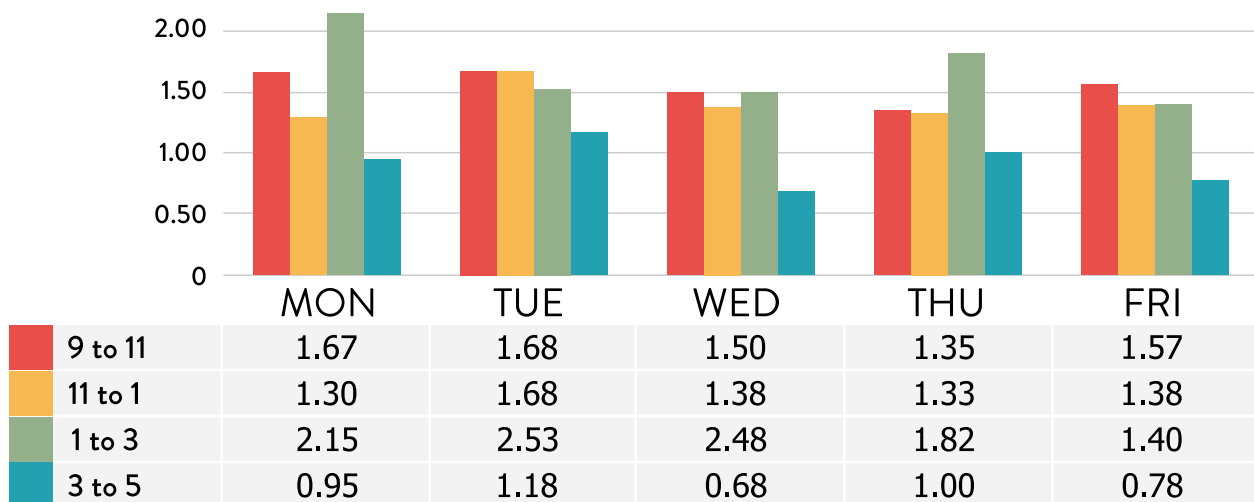
Fosterline Call Analysis

Call patterns have remained relatively consistent throughout the reporting period for each month with quieter periods often associated with the school holidays. Calls tended to peak on Monday and Thursday afternoons. Fewer calls were received in the first and last week of the month when previously the first week of the month has often been the busiest and there is no obvious explanation apparent for this change.

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 just under 7% of callers end the call.

The average call to Fosterline lasts 25 minutes (significantly higher than last year) giving enough time for complex issues to be discussed fully with an advisor. More complex calls can take more than an hour. Calls outside of opening hours continue to 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. In addition to answering the calls the advisors are responding to the email enquiries and dealing with any live chat requests and forwarding any events by fostering services that Fosterline is notified of to our marketing team that are then put on the event board.

Average number of calls Answered by an Advisor



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 88,000 visitors used the site in 2021-22. The page views for "Find a Fostering Service" and "Thinking of fostering" and "How Do I Become a Foster Carer?" totalled over 15,500. The Noticeboard advertising recruitment events at no cost to fostering services had 141 events placed on the site and received over 1,900 views. The online 'Can You Foster Quiz?' was completed by 703 participants, a drop on last year that was a record year with 1691 participants.

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 many of which have been updated during this reporting period, and the range of topics increased such as in relation to allegations, the role of the IRM, caring for a child with a disability etc.

The website also includes blogs and the Fosterline animations that seek to explain more about the help that Fosterline provides increasing the ways in which information is presented to appeal to different learning styles.

Advisors also interact more with website users following up with an email any prospective carer who downloads the fostering guide or takes part in the 'Can you Foster?' quiz when consent is given to do so.



Fosterline Website Visitors and Social Media

The Fosterline website has been operational for 100% of the time over the past year. A total of **78,059 new users** have visited the website over the past year with over 10 thousand repeat users. Email and social media campaigns continue to drive people to specific information on the website. Social media has been a valuable means of promoting relevant messages to foster carers and raising awareness about fostering in the wider community with over **20,600 engagements**. Instagram was added this year along with Facebook, Linked in and Twitter to potentially reach a wider audience.

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. We also use the platform to inform fostering services about Fosterline and the services it can offer to support their foster carers and to make them aware they can advertise recruitment events on our site without charge and list their service in our find a fostering service facility.

	New Users	Returning Users
Q1 - May – Jul 2021	23,351	2,897
Q2 - Aug – Oct 2021	18,886	2,428
Q3 - Nov 2021 – Jan 2022	18,215	2,523
Q4 - Feb – Apr 2022	17,607	2,322
ANNUAL TOTAL	78,059	10,170

Fosterline Web Forms and Emails

	Web forms	Emails	Live Chat
Q1 - May – Jul 2021	17	313	30
Q2 - Aug – Oct 2021	18	408	46
Q3 - Nov 2021 – Jan 2022	18	382	44
Q4 - Feb – Apr 2022	21	341	33
ANNUAL TOTAL	74	1,444	153

Live Chat

Live chat continues to be available 9-5pm Monday-Friday with the exception of bank holidays. Advisors can provide advice and add links to other resources and/or signpost effectively. The statistics show a drop in live chat use compared to the previous year that included periods of lockdown, when many children were being educated at home, which may have provided a convenient private way for foster carers to communicate in real time with advisors.

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. We also respond to requests for call backs that are made to Fostertalk enquiries which is a mix of Fostertalk members and non-members in England seeking advice. The statistics below combine both results.

	Number of Call-back Appointments
Q1 - May – Jul 2021	105
Q2 - Aug – Oct 2021	118
Q3 - Nov 2021 – Jan 2022	159
Q4 - Feb – Apr 2022	145
ANNUAL TOTAL	527

Safeguarding Issues

2 safeguarding issues were highlighted during this reporting period and passed on to the fostering service/LA. 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 with information on becoming a foster carer, finances, SGO and kinship enquiries and support issues most frequent although items represented in the news also have an impact on enquiries to the service. In February and March 2022 as the war in Ukraine commenced, the service received many enquiries from those wanting to foster an unaccompanied child or host a vulnerable family from the region. The Fosterline website was updated with links to additional information and the resources section has been updated with a fact sheet on caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking child which enquirers were directed to.

Enquiries to the service continue to 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.

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. In 2021/22 we saw increased referrals but also longer involvement of the 1 to 1 telephone advisors.

This appeared to be linked to many carers experiencing delays in their reviews and panels with meetings cancelled due to staff sickness (often related to covid) and also the increasingly complex nature of the referrals received. Many involved support with a complaint and again this process can take several months to complete. 374 households used the Fosterline Plus service over the reporting period.

FINANCES

Finance and tax issues have consistently been discussed during the reporting period and often 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 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 (some calls in the early part of the year continued to be related to the pandemic) and helped inform them of any entitlement to benefits or queries around completing the annual tax return.

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 (and its links to finance) continues 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 began to raise concern about rising living costs in the latter months of this reporting period and felt that payments were not keeping in step with this. We continue to hear 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

- Many calls from current carers unclear how to register as self-employed, including one caller who had been fostering for 20 years and had been unaware of the need to do this.
- Some carers receiving enhanced payments for the additional needs of the child in their care sought advice regarding any tax implications.
- 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 current foster carers find the process of completing an annual tax return confusing and seek help with this.
- Kinship carers seek advice about the tax and national implications of their role. It is of note that many do not appear to have been made aware of their self-employment status during the assessment process.
- Foster carers considering SGO or staying put arrangements seek advice on the tax and national insurance implications.
- Foster carers seek advice on any implications for their pension or pension planning.

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.
- Foster carers seek advice as to whether the child in their care is eligible for free school meals.
- 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.
- Several calls from prospective foster carers seeking advice on any financial support should they decide to reduce their hours of employment or stop working to become a foster carer.
- We continue to receive calls from carers considering staying put and wanting to know how this may impact on their current finances.

Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

- Some callers seek advice as are in dispute with the LA or fostering service about how the DLA should be spent. Some carers are stating they are told to save the money for the child's future and others express they have been told to purchase specialist equipment that may have been freely available via an occupational therapy assessment.
- Some callers continue to express that the level of scrutiny was excessive from social workers and was a factor in breaking down relationships between the carer and the LA or fostering service. There appears to be inconsistency in how this is overseen by fostering services/LAs.
- A small number of queries from carers who are unable to claim due to disputes in relation to DLA claims made when the child was placed elsewhere that they are told need to be resolved before any new claim can be processed.

Fostering Allowance

- Some carers raised concerns that the allowances and fee paid have not been increased to reflect the recent increases in living costs including heating, food and fuel.
- 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. Reductions in respite that are offered by some fostering services as part of a carers package have also been made that has caused carers concern.
- Some carers raised concerns about the tiered skills/fee payments and lack of transparency and some carers stated there were no timeframes for decision making in relation to considering progression or back dating payments.
- Some carers continue to raise concerns that deductions are made to allowances at source by fostering services to pay for transport arrangements for the child. 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. In some cases deductions appeared to continue during school holidays when no transport to school was in place.
- Many calls from carers regarding overpayments, some of which had happened for a long period of time, due to an alleged error by the fostering service. Carers felt repayment schedules, often with a short time frame imposed, took little account of a carers financial commitments, and need to meet the needs of a child in their care and were causing financial hardship.

Kinship and Family and Friends Foster Care

- Callers caring for children known to them because 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 continue to feel misled by LAs and dispute that it was a private arrangement and are concerned about the financial pressures.
- Several calls from prospective kinship foster carers for information about financial support and fees and allowances as they are worried about requesting this from the local authority in case they are seen as financially motivated. However, many are being asked to stop working to take on the role and are worried about the impact of this and the need to demonstrate financial stability as part of the assessment process.
- Some kinship carers continue to express that they are receiving lower payments than other foster carers and many struggle to access any fee payment.

- Reg 24 carers who have temporary approval and care of the child/ren whilst the assessment is underway are not always able to access fostering allowances with some carers paid via alternative budgets and at lower rates until their full approval has taken place. Some express this is creating financial pressures and undermining the placement.
- Some calls from kinship foster carers unhappy with the support of the local authority and wanting to move to another fostering service (LA or IFA) that they feel provides better practical and financial support but appear to be prevented from doing so.
- 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 and feel they have had no opportunity to defend themselves.
- Some callers express they are given little information by the fostering service/LA and rely on other wider family members to keep them updated.
- Some kinship carers feel vulnerable to allegations when supervising contact with a family member when there is ill feeling from the birth parent about the care arrangements agreed but express that their concerns are dismissed by the LA.

Staying Put

- There continues to appear 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 continue to express concern around the lack of planning for young people seeking Staying Put placements and we continue to receive calls from carers weeks before the young person turns 18 who have now been asked to consider staying put giving little time for them to explore the full implications.
- Callers report there are issues when the care leaver decides to leave the staying put due to a minor dispute but wants to return a few days later but the LA refuse to agree that staying put can resume.
- 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 have sought advice as they have been subsequently told as staying put carers that they are unable to leave the adult care leaver at their home alone while they are away overnight visiting family or on holiday etc.
- 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 issues with lack of financial support when a care leaver is away from the placement but returns to their home for example a care leaver at university or in residential training provision in the armed forces. There appears to be wide variations in the support provided by LAs in such circumstances.
- Some callers sought advice as staying put arrangements were ending at 21 despite the care leaver remaining in full time education or training.

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 seeking advice when there is a change in their circumstances as an SGO carer and whether it will be possible to access increased financial or other support. Many are unaware how to access support from the LA and in some examples had received no contact from them for several years.
- Some calls from foster carers who are considering applying for SGO without the support of the LA and seeking to understand any implications of this.
- 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 are trying to decide which is the best option for them and the child in their 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.
- Post 18 support to young people who were subject to SGO is another source of confusion for carers and there appears to be inconsistent responses from the LA in some examples.
- Special guardians contact Fosterline for advice when birth parents are intending to return to court to contest contact arrangements or the SGO order as they are concerned about the costs of legal advice and representation.
- Some prospective kinship carers seek advice as they have been informed their fostering assessment is negative but that they may wish to consider an SGO application but are unclear on the process and implications.



ALLEGATIONS

Most allegation calls received are from carers who have been told an allegation has been made and often children have been removed suddenly but the caller has no information about what has been alleged. The carer(s) are often in a state of shock and/or distressed and are unclear where they can access support. However, some calls are from carers several weeks into the process who have not received any updates or information and feel “frozen out” or ignored by their fostering service.

In the initial stages many of the enquirers 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 seek advice as they have been told they are subject to an allegation but received no other information. The carers are often distressed and confused regarding the situation and are unaware of any support. Some carers tell us they do not have access to the relevant policies or procedures and that requests for copies of these have not been responded to by fostering services.
- Several calls continue to be received from foster carers who are not clear how the concern raised is being dealt with by their fostering service in terms of an allegation, complaint of standards of care issue and this causes them confusion in respect of any policy that is being followed and any access to independent support.
- Some carers were concerned about the time scales of an allegation and the lack of financial support whilst an investigation is ongoing.
- Some foster carers stated that the information presented by social workers verbally and in reports is misrepresented and assumes guilt. Many callers expressed that the system was biased against them from the outset when an allegation is made.
- 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 and are spoken to at the end of the process when they feel the professionals have already made up their minds.
- 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 or the allegations involve their birth children.
- 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.
- Some foster carers approved with IFAs have expressed concerns that following an allegation the IFAs are more interested in protecting their own needs and interests with the Local Authority as a 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 or seek independent advice.
- Some carers have sought advice as requested a review of the ADM decision to deregister via their fostering service rather than the option of using the IRM as they are allowed to do, but had heard no update several months on.
- 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.
- A small number of calls received from ex-foster carers who have now received details of legal action being taken in respect of the adult care leavers who they formally cared for and are disappointed to learn they are outside of the fostering NMS and do not qualify for independent support and unless they have a membership service in place as an ex-foster carer, may be facing legal costs.
- Some callers who have been subject to allegations concerning children in their care who are there on informal arrangements or during the viability process and as they are not foster carers cannot access independent support.
- 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.
- Kinship foster carers are often unclear regarding the process of allegations and may be told at the outset that children will not return to their care but are not informed about the implications of resigning during an allegation. Some kinship carers seek advice as they state they have not been updated of the outcome of the allegation when children have been moved from their care. There appear to be inconsistencies in the deregistration process for kinship carers with some carers reporting they have had no opportunity to "clear their name".
- A small number of calls are from carers who have been informed about historical allegations at a time of an annual review or following allocation of a new supervising worker or when they experience a further allegation 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.

Information on Procedure

- Foster carers seek advice as they have been told they are subject to an allegation but received no other information. The carers are often distressed and confused regarding the situation and are unaware of any support. Some carers tell us they do not have access to the relevant policies or procedures and that requests for copies of these have not been responded to by fostering services.
- Several calls continue to be received from foster carers who are not clear how the concern raised is being dealt with by their fostering service in terms of an allegation, complaint of standards of care issue and this causes them confusion in respect of any policy that is being followed and any access to independent support.



Independent Support

- Foster carers report that they are not aware that independent support is available to them following an allegation or tell us that this has not been provided (NMS 22.12). There appears to be inconsistency with how 22.12 is being interpreted by fostering services. Some fostering services provide the Fosterline number and explain they are meeting the standard by doing this. Some fostering services appear to offer independent support from the stage that a carer decides to go to IRM. Other fostering services will offer independent support to any carer subject to an allegation and in some cases will also consider this for standards of care issues and complaints.
- Foster carers sometimes raise issues with the independence of some support put in place by fostering services. Some express that the social worker appointed has links with the service and/or is colluding with the fostering service and this undermines their trust and use of the support available.
- 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.
- Some kinship carers subject to an allegation are told children will not return prior to the conclusion of an investigation and are unclear if they can access 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 callers express concern about hasty decisions to remove all children from their care whilst an allegation is investigated. Callers tell us this has caused bewilderment and emotional harm to the children who have no idea why they are being moved as there has been no preparation time. Again, carers raise that no contact arrangements are considered, and some callers agonise that the children's belongings and favourite toys etc have been left behind in the haste to move them.
- Some kinship foster carers express concern at the haste with which children are moved from their care because of an allegation causing unnecessary distress to the children and no contact arrangements are put in place whilst it is investigated. Many are allegedly told the child/ren will not return prior to the conclusion of any investigation process. Kinship carers thus may express they feel they are assumed to be guilty prior to any investigation being carried out.
- 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 but policy led) will continue to apply.
- Some carers are asked to continue caring for a child whilst a partner or birth child/adult, who is the subject of the allegation, moves out of the family home. This situation can place enormous emotional and practical strains on carers.
- Some carers worry about the potential impact on their relationships and contact with their own children/grandchildren. Some callers share that their own children/grandchildren are to be spoken to as part of the process and/or seek advice about this and any proposals to stop their contact/care of them until the outcome is known.

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 officers 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. Other callers query what will be shared with their current employers or in any future references.
- A small number of calls from carers who are also criticised for sharing concerns with other carers or close friends and are deemed to have compromised confidentiality. However, many callers tell us they needed to access emotional support or in some cases were approaching potential witnesses as they were frustrated with the lengthy investigation process and were seeking to clear their name.
- 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.
- 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 that they are struggling financially whilst they await the investigation to be concluded.

Timescales

- Lengthy time frames can exacerbate financial concerns (particularly when fostering is the main source of income) with some carers feeling this is a deliberate ploy to encourage them to seek other employment and leave fostering even though they state they are innocent.
- 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 increasing the timescale whilst simultaneously reducing their ability to have a voice within the process.
- Some foster carers lose faith in the investigation process and 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. A small number of callers are dismayed that any decision made "in the heat of the moment" to resign cannot be retracted.
- Many carers report that they are given insufficient time to respond to lengthy reports (examples include just a few days to respond to a 40-page report). Some callers have shared that their post allegation review was held without the carer having seen any of the reports prior to the meeting and they felt overwhelmed and unprepared to respond. Some callers tell us they have been informed by their fostering service that the foster carers own reports for panel purposes are too long and need to be cut down before they will be submitted to panel members and again carers feel their ability to defend themselves is being curtailed by the process.

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. 27% of all of the enquiries responded to by the advisors and approximately 20% of page views on the website relate to information on becoming a foster carer. This gives a potential of over 17,500 prospective foster carers looking for information.

It is interesting that the same myths about who can foster continue, despite the wealth of information available to the contrary. There continue to be 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. The myths and results 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 received calls from prospective carers who have experienced depression and sought counselling and are concerned this will go against them.
- Callers wish to know if they can work and foster a child alongside their own children.
- Some callers want to foster but without involvement of their partner and seek clarity on why this is not possible.
- Some calls from under 21s asking what they need to have in place to be able to foster as they want to put plans in place for this to be viable in the future.
- Some callers request advice around previous criminal offences and whether this will prevent them from fostering.
- Many callers wish to gain an understanding about the challenges of fostering and working with birth families in order to help them decide if fostering is for them and/or plan for the fostering role.
- Many prospective callers wish to foster without a spare bedroom and are frustrated no support is available to help them move to a larger property to enable them to do this. They report they cannot afford to do this themselves due to high housing costs. Some such callers then make enquiries about fostering babies via a cot in their bedroom but the majority discover there is no local need for this type of carer and are thus unable to proceed.
- Some callers are concerned that their assessment has ceased and seek advice on the correct procedures and the possible reasons for this and if they have a right to challenge the decision.
- 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.
- 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 future pension planning.
- Some callers wish to find out about foster to adopt or are unclear whether to pursue the fostering or the adoption route.
- Several calls received in the early part of 2022 from prospective foster carers wanting to foster unaccompanied children from Ukraine.
- Fosterline receives many calls from prospective kinship carers seeking information about the assessment process and the financial support available. The service is also accessed by many carers whose arrangements have been deemed to be informal kinship or on a private fostering basis wanting to know if they can be assessed as a foster carer.

Application process and appeals

- Many callers are surprised to learn about the in-depth nature of the assessment process and approximate timescales and had assumed it would be a tick box approach to meeting specified criteria.
- Some callers were disappointed to learn there was no specific recruitment process for children coming from Ukraine and were directed to information on the Homes for Ukraine scheme but also to resources around the need for carers to come forward for other asylum-seeking children from other countries.
- Some callers reported they felt misled by adverts for carers offering high financial rewards when on closer examination had discovered much of the amounts stated was for the child's care and not reward payments to the carer.
- One prospective Deaf carer experienced an allegation during the assessment process and felt that there should be greater disability representation on fostering panels and at IRM.
- Some calls from prospective carers who have had assessments end but had been given panel dates etc. and were unclear if the assessment was being terminated at Stage 1 or if they should have proceeded to panel for a recommendation as to whether the assessment should be completed or terminated.
- A few calls from prospective carers with issues around the lack of transparency on decision making and sharing any concerns with the applicants often in relation to references/former partner references.
- Some callers who were interested in fostering and shared details of previous offences that would not appear to prevent an application reported that their initial phone enquiry had been treated with disdain from the fostering service. Embarrassment appeared to prevent the applicants from approaching further local services where they may well have received a more positive response.
- Callers seek information about the self-employed status of a foster carer
- Small number of calls from those who are seeking advice as they have been informed by fostering services that they need to be a British citizen to be approved as a foster carer which is not the case.
- Some callers seek advice about refusal to provide a reference or negative reference of an adult birth child following family breakdowns.



Fosterline
0800 040 7675
 your fostering advice service

Callers report reasons they are unable to continue an application to foster including:

- No spare room
- Seeking new home or plans to extend current accommodation from which to foster in the future.
- In the process of asking the local authority for larger rented accommodation
- Living with partner or other household members that do not wish to foster
- Do not have permanent residence/leave to remain in the UK for sufficient time.
- 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. Concerns expressed often include possible negative impact on their birth children and/or concerns about the ability to meet the needs of a vulnerable child.
- A small number of callers appeared to be put off by the issue of former partner references and despite receiving advice that in the event of previous domestic violence or other serious concerns the fostering service would look at how to obtain such information without putting the applicant at risk the feedback was that they did not wish to "risk it".
- An increased number of prospective carer calls have included elements of finance advice and many once they have received the tailored tax and benefits advice via Fosterline Plus have concluded that fostering is not financially viable for them. This seems to be particularly the case in situations where a prospective carer had planned to give up work to foster and they report that the fee payment would not replace lost income.

Health

- Callers continue to query whether a particular health condition would prevent them from fostering.
- There have also been queries over who pays for the health assessment with some prospective carers appearing to experience difficulties arranging assessments with some GPs not offering this service.
- Callers with previous mental health issues are concerned if this will prevent them from fostering and whether having had counselling or medication will be used as evidence of unsuitability.
- 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 from prospective carers wanting to know if the needs of their own child with a disability would impact on their ability to foster and matching concerns.
- Some prospective carers queried the impact of fostering on disability benefits.



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your fostering advice service

CARE PLANNING FOR LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

- Many calls were made by carers concerned that accurate information on the needs of the child had not been shared with them prior to placement. This has led to breakdown in relationships with the fostering service/LA and in some cases has resulted in other children and/or the carer being physically harmed. Callers state that the matching (based on information known to the fostering service/LA but not to the carer at the point of placement) was inappropriate.
- Several calls from carers who have given notice to move a child due to concerns and are distressed that fostering services are insisting on the notice period including situations where a child has harmed another young person in the household or the carer.
- Some calls from carers stating the notice period had expired by many weeks and there is still no plan in place for a planned move. Several callers sought legal advice on their position.
- Several calls from carers that were approved during lockdown experiencing challenging first placements with little apparent support from their fostering services and appearing to have limited understanding/training of relevant policies and procedures that needed to be followed.
- 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 this was having on the child.
- Some callers raised concerns about exclusions and access to an alternative suitable school to meet the needs of the child.
- Some carers raised concerns about decision making when a child is the responsibility of one LA but will be moving to the different LA where the carer is based. Queries on who is financially responsible appeared to be delaying school moves in some cases and access to additional support for a disabled child in another.
- Some callers continue to state their professionalism is disputed if they question any care planning decisions and are concerned, they are then regarded as obstructive or difficult.
- Carers report concerns that decisions to move a child are made outside a review process with no safeguarding issues being raised and often in such cases no advocacy has been sought in relation to the wishes and feelings of the child.
- Several calls from carers who have felt criticised when trying to advocate for a child in their care.
- 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 placement stability for the child.
- 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.
- Some calls from carers who had consent to take a child on holiday well in advance but there had been no action from the LA in regard to obtaining the necessary passport/consents required. Other carers had accepted placements with agreement for respite to be provided due to a pre-booked holiday only to find the day before their scheduled departure that no respite could be arranged.

Enquiry Themes

Communication and Relationships

- Some callers felt risks to carers around supervising contact were dismissed by fostering services. In some cases when several carers involved in contact arrangements there was ill feeling that one carer was able to dominate arrangements with the LA to the detriment of others involved.

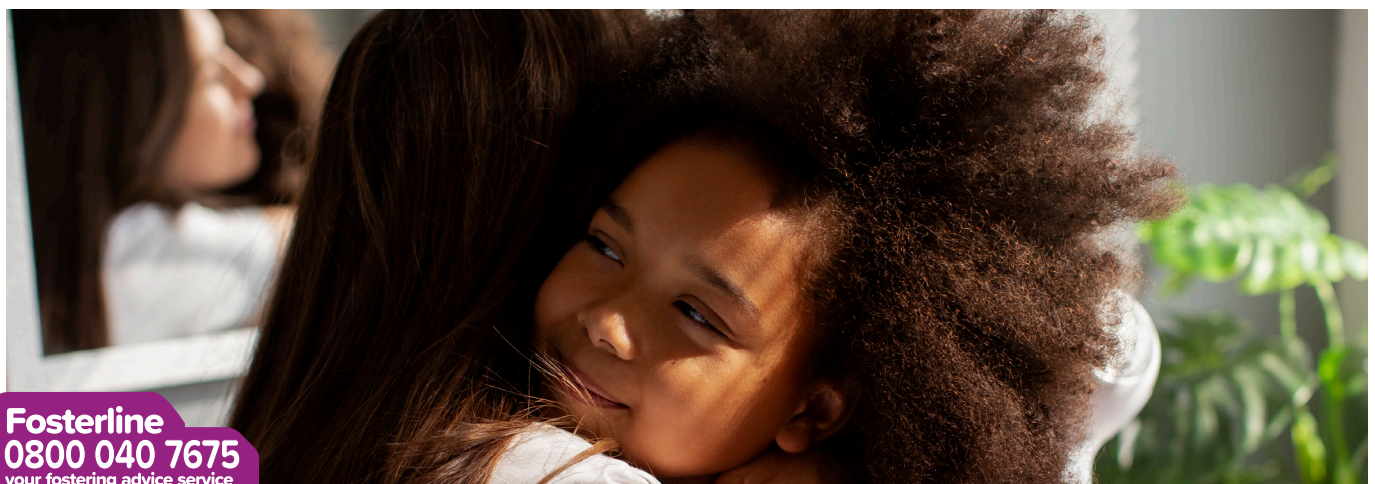
- Foster carers of siblings placed separately appeared to sometimes be at odds as to whether the contact was in the respective child's best interests with some callers raising issues of bullying and fear of one sibling's behaviour towards another that they felt the LA were ignoring.
- Some foster carers expressed an interest in adopting the child in their care but appeared to struggle to obtain information about the financial support that may be available to them.
- Some callers raised concerns about the frequency of visits to their home by professionals and felt they were trying to "catch them out" or undermine their SGO or long-term fostering applications.
- Some carers were struggling to continue with placements when notice given and stated no support was offered and some carers felt blamed when there were matching issues that prevented placements from continuing.
- Foster carers continue to report that following a complaint about a particular social worker or manager, a counter complaint will be received in respect of their standards of care or ability to work in partnership with professionals.
- Foster carers continue to express frustration at the high turnover of social workers within the local authority and fostering services and the impact upon the children and themselves in respect of relationship building, trust etc.
- Carers express frustration at the lack of consultation or consideration of the impact of decisions upon the household. Foster carers gave examples of unrealistic contact arrangements that required long journeys after school when the child was tired and other examples include children in their care placed at different schools and a carer logistically challenged to meet competing needs after school from different locations at the same time.
- 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. Several callers expressed concern that the safety and needs of their own children was disregarded by fostering services.
- Some carers express frustration at the lack of response by their supervising social worker or child's social worker to messages or emails that they have left after several days/weeks in some examples.
- 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, and may be criticised when advocating on behalf of a child or contacting advocacy services.
- Pathway Plans are consistently being highlighted as inadequate and failing expected timeframes with a number not being implemented or overseen.
- Many foster carers report concern that young people are placed with complex and risky behaviours in their care without any risk assessment process or training/support for the carer. Examples include history of self-harming behaviour, suicide risk, violence and aggression.
- 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 always supervise them when together within the home creating tensions in relationships and practical issues for example when a carer may need to visit the bathroom or prepare meals.
- The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was not always clear to foster carers and some questioned their independence due to close relationships with the LA and child's social worker.

Compliance with regulations and standards

- Some carers continue to express frustration that while they were held to account that the local authority or fostering service were regularly flouting regulations, its own policies and good practice with no consequences.
- Many carers raise issues with the lack of consistency in approach and plans are made and then remade differently as a result of a new social worker when the situation has remained the same.
- 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. There are also concerns with delays in the references from some current fostering services when carers are transferring with carers feeling there is a deliberate ploy to delay/derail the transfer from taking place.
- Some carers have expressed frustration at changes within the fostering services approach and that their bedrooms and those of birth children/adults are now part of the inspection carried out within the unannounced visit when previously this has not taken place.
- Some carers seek advice around insurance requirements for them as foster carers and those in their support network with one caller raising concern that she was told her daughter who supports her occasionally would need business use car insurance in place to transport the LAC.
- Fosterline continues to receive calls from carers in new relationships who are querying the level of checks required and at what stage in the relationship this should occur. It would appear that there are varied responses from services on this issue with some wanting all details and consent for a DBS at the commencement of any new relationship before any contact with the child in placement is being considered whilst others taking a view that these are not required until there is an intention for the partner to be a regular visitor to the home. Some carers question their right to privacy when there is no intention for the partner to regularly visit the home or have any contact with the child.

Pathway Planning

- Pathway plans were raised with carers concerned no plans in place as young person approached 18.
- Some callers report that they have been left to try to sort out benefits etc. of the care leaver.
- Some calls from carers telling Fosterline the placements have been extended beyond 18 on a fostering basis whilst other plans set in motion and are clear that they are not staying put carers but it is unclear on what basis the placement has been agreed.



STAYING PUT

Many foster carers still believe that they are foster carers for the young person entering the staying put arrangement and that they are still regulated by fostering legislation which is not the case.

There 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. Fosterline has received calls from staying put carers trying to seek information on adult services and options when staying put is due to cease but the care leaver is unable to live independently.

Some staying put carers have queried any regulations in respect of leaving the care leaver in their home overnight whilst they visit family/friends etc. as some LAs have subsequently raised this as a concern when the carer states it has been agreed with the care leaver and they are capable of caring for themselves during the periods they are away from the home.

Enquiry Themes

Finances and Benefits

- 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 any impact on tax and benefits.
- Some carers supporting young people at university or work placements away from the carers home appear to be treated differently with some paid a retainer and others receive no financial support until the care leaver returns to their home making it difficult for some carers to continue to offer support to the care leaver.
- 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 and can lead to issues later in some cases with different expectations and assumptions made by the respective parties.
- Some carers reported that staying put arrangements had suddenly ceased with no discussion with the young person or their carer. In one case the care leaver was told they needed to return to the area of the responsible LA (over 100 miles away) but had built up a support network and college etc. in the area the carer lived.

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.

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/partners of the care leaver 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 and that supported lodgings or shared lives would be better options.
- A small number of calls from carers in supported lodgings arrangements that have been dealt with by fostering services who are unclear why they cannot access the IRM process when they are facing a recommendation of deregistration.

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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. In some cases, the LA has agreed to assess them but only on the basis that they agree to become SGO carers within 12 months.
- 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 particularly in situations where the child has additional needs and financial stability to enable them to focus on the needs of the child.
- Some foster 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 they worry may jeopardise placement stability.
- Some callers continue to 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 parents views will be sought and that the SGO assessment may be shared with birth family and that carers can request 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.
- Some special guardians have contacted Fosterline for advice in respect to contact issues, changes in circumstances and how to access support. Many state they have received no information from the LA on how to access any 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. In some cases, it would appear that support plans are not completed until the case is in the court resulting in foster carers feeling rushed to sign and impacting on their ability to seek any advice.
- 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. In some examples this has been related to the death of an SGO carer and in one call the SGO carer's daughter had taken on the care of the child and was continuing to receive the allowance from the LA but had not been assessed or offered any support and the care arrangement was breaking down due to the violence that her birth daughters have experienced from the child.
- A small number of calls received from SGO carers who 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 with several SGO carers telling Fosterline they have had no contact with any dept of the LAs since the SGO was granted several years ago.
- 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 any support post 18.



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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) and in some cases the relationship with birth parent has completely broken down. 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 resulting in significant financial pressure.
- 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 but later find that no support is forthcoming.
- In other calls the private foster carer or informal carer was seeking advice about services to support the young person in their care post 18.
- 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 often want to explore if the Local Authority will fund this arrangement.
- A small number of calls from foster carers who are then approached by the LA to care for an extended family member as a kinship carer and are later told they will need to transfer as a foster carer to that LA as they cannot be approved with more than one fostering service. The carers are angry this was not discussed as part of the placement and express frustration as they are happy with their current fostering service and do not wish to move.

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 if it continues beyond 28 days.
- 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 of the LA and advise on the option to make a complaint.

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:

Clear and helpful when explaining the steps I need to take on my journey

| 152058

All conversations I have had with Fosterline have been helpful and informative

| 151820

Very useful. I have received guidance advice on the areas that matter the most

| 2672308

Gave me a summary of advice over the phone then followed up with guidance via email

| 2599330

The advisor was really knowldgable she answered all my questions and gave me a lot of information

| 2305315

I am so glad we have a helpline and someone to speak to for advice

| 1968438

Easy to talk to made me feel comfortable and was very informative

| 2013188

I believe it is a wonderful service and after our conversation I felt I was able to get on with my day. It is incredibly emotional having an alleged allegation but I felt reassured that I could and should get independent support which I will be doing

| 1710615

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 2021 to 30 April 2022.
2. The survey received 24 responses which was disappointing in comparison to the response numbers in previous years. The questionnaire results indicated:
 - **74%** were foster carers
 - **13%** were prospective carers
 - **13%** were kinship carers
 - **84%** rated the advisor as knowledgeable
 - **80%** felt the advice had helped them resolve their query.

Where prospective carers were not approved currently:

- **33%** had chosen not to enter the assessment process.
- **33%** had the assessment terminated by the fostering service.
- **33%** decided to terminate the assessment process themselves.

Feedback comments on Fosterline included:

"Helpful to know there is a dedicated service available"

"Information not readily available elsewhere"

"...helped me to move on from a very toxic environment. Explained that I had options and I could move to another fostering agency"

"I have help at the other end of the line which is great, I am a connected carer and also a mainstream carer so I am always looking for advise"

However some respondents wanted the service to include face to face support at meetings and others felt deterred by a lack of access to legal advice and representation with their issue.

3. In 2021-22 982 prospective foster carers contacted Fosterline directly 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.
 - **166 (17%)** 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 accommodation issues were preventing them from fostering as they were without a spare bedroom. Some callers had spoken directly with fostering services to discover they would not recruit on a basis of caring only for young babies and others had seen information on services websites since the initial discussion with Fosterline and drawn their conclusion that they would not be successful.
 - Some callers shared that their enquiries were about the longer term and that they were for

example recently divorced or other significant change in their life and would actively pursue fostering in the future when they had the required stability in place.

- Some callers shared that they had become aware work was needed on their home/garden in order to meet the standards required and would contact services again when this was complete.
- A small number who had discussed previous convictions with Fosterline (that did not appear to be an automatic barrier to fostering) had shared this with their initial discussion to a fostering service and received a negative response. Embarrassment/shame appeared to prevent the prospective carers from contacting alternative services despite advisors suggesting that they may get a more positive response elsewhere (and the caller did not wish to make a complaint) and the prospective carers chose to end their fostering journey at this point.
- Some prospective carers were not contactable despite several attempts being made by advisors.
- 26 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.
- 6 agreed to a 16 week call back one of whom was approved, another prospective carer was in contact with a preferred fostering service and was in the process of moving house to be able to foster. 1 had pulled out because of a family bereavement and the other 3 did not respond to the call back attempts so it is unclear if they proceeded to approval.
- The feedback from the callers suggests there may be a training issue for some fostering services staff/review of current policies and procedures in relation to DBS issues for prospective foster carers.



An online survey 'Can you Foster?' 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 **703 responses** during this 12-month period a drop on last year's record high response rate. 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 details of the Fosterline Plus service in relation to tax and benefits advice for prospective carers.

The following results were obtained:

- **4%** had believed they were too old to foster
- **4%** thought they were too young
- **20%** did not have a spare room
- **1%** believed they needed to be married
- **8%** believed that being LGBTQ+ prevented someone from fostering
- **62%** had children of their own
- **19%** thought that a disability, medical condition or mental illness would prevent someone from fostering.
- **44%** believed applicants had to be a British Citizen
- **64%** believed that a previous conviction of a criminal offence would preclude someone from fostering.
- **16%** 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
- **25%** next step was to book a call from a Fosterline advisor
- **12%** next step was to start the assessment within 3 months
- **25%** stated they were not yet ready to commit to an assessment
- **Less than 1%** felt that fostering was not an option for them

Some of the reasons given to postpone the assessment were:

- “ I want to gain experience volunteering with children first
- “ I am still considering if it's best for my family, I have also recently had a baby
- “ Awaiting our first house to go through before considering this big commitment
- “ I am single and live in a 1 bedroom flat. I do not earn enough to move to a 2 bed flat at this time and to continue to fund a bigger property by myself. I want to ensure I am in a situation where my main focus is caring for the young person in my care. I have applied for housing with my local council indicating that I am looking for a property to allow me to become a foster carer but looking at the information online this will be unlikely.
- “ I have 2 girls who need their own room ...I will need a 4 bedroom house (to foster). 4 bed houses are really expensive in my area and although I could afford to rent one if I was fostering ...I can't give up my council tenancy for a private 4 bed. Not least because I can't apply until I have the 4 bed and I may not be approved.
- “ I'm 24, married with my own home with 2 spare rooms. I'm a psychology graduate and have experience of being in the foster system. I've always wanted to be a foster carer but I feel I'll be declined due to my age and experience. I don't have experience with having my own children, but I've got nieces and nephews. I understand I am legally allowed to foster but I feel I'll be declined anyway.
- “ I am concerned about having to give up work to foster as the allowances are significantly lower than I earn.
- “ My husband has a criminal record...I feel we wouldn't be accepted.



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FOSTERLINE DELIVERY PLAN 2021 – 2022

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 2021 – 2022

We proposed to	Increase and develop Fosterline's online presence and social media networking
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. Fosterline was launched on Instagram to appeal to a wider audience An animation clip to explain the Fosterline service available has been widely shared across all social media platforms. Fosterline website content updated Posted blogs on the website on specific topics e.g. loving a resistant child and meet the team

We proposed to	Increase Fosterline's presence in the media and community
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Published an article in a publication aimed at teaching staff about Fosterline and information on fostering and family and friends fostering. Published several articles in Fostertalk publications including magazines and newsletters about Fosterline and Fosterline Plus with a distribution of in excess of 16,900 carer households in England alone. Regular online posts to provide information on Fosterline, open hours. Regular posts with links to frequently asked questions and links to facts sheets. Circulated an animation clip online and on the website about the role of Fosterline Attended a small number of FosterTalk member virtual presentations to promote Fosterline services to foster carers and fostering services. Shared learning with the IRM around allegations and liaised with them to produce a fact sheet on Fosterline that could be distributed to all carers contacting the IRM and to produce a fact sheet for the Fosterline website on the IRM process. Reintroduction of the quarterly newsletter The Lowdown that is circulated to all who choose to subscribe via the website.

We proposed to	Develop the service in response to the requirements of the service users
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual Fosterline user satisfaction survey. • Conducted a 'Mystery Shop' to assess and review the performance of all Fosterline Advisors. • The service was available 100% of advertised open hours and we continue to monitor open hours in light of current usage. • Updated the Fosterline website information as we emerged from the covid regulations. • Responded to the calls from those interested in caring for children from Ukraine by adding information on the website about the Homes for Ukraine scheme and also created a factsheet on Caring for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. • Extended the range of factsheets available for carers to download on a range of fostering subjects including allegations, the IRM process, attachment, caring for a disabled child etc • Continued to provide Fosterline Plus to provide options for tailored financial advice to foster carers and prospective carers. Fosterline Plus also helped support carers who felt isolated with ongoing issues such as standards of care concerns, complaints, care planning disputes etc that fit the remit of Fosterline's overall aims to support the recruitment, retention, and support of foster carers in England. • Increased awareness of our service by contacting via email all those who downloaded the Fostering Guide or took part in the 'Can You foster?' quiz when consent given to do so.

We proposed to	Increase the information available to visitors of the website
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared fostering related news regularly on social media and on the Fosterline website news pages. • Updated and significantly increased the range of factsheets available to download including Leaving Care, Autism and the Differences Between Fostering and Adoption • Updated the website with information about Fosterline Plus and included the option for self-referral via the website

We proposed to	Reflect the views of the service users to the Department for Education regarding policy and legislation
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing and publicising policy briefings on the Fosterline website and social media. • Fosterline continued to meet with the Department for Education for quarterly meetings and fed back on issues raised within the calls identifying common themes and concerns. • Fosterline continues to encourage service user feedback on the service offered and the results are shared anonymously with the Department for Education.

We proposed to	Support the recruitment and retention of foster carers in England
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched a dedicated recruitment campaign through Foster Care fortnight with the publication of stories and adverts urging people to find out more about becoming a foster carer. • Improved the information available to hard-to-reach groups via fact sheets for Men who Foster and LGBTQ+. Fosterline also ensured all its images and campaigns included diverse images of carers and young people to help challenge stereotyping and appeal to harder to reach groups. • The 'Can You Foster?' interactive quiz continues to gather information on preconceptions around who can foster and provides participants with the facts to encourage more prospective carers to come forward. • Launched our first Fosterline animation that was widely circulated on social media. • Fosterline Plus continues to offer ongoing telephone support with an allocated advisor to any prospective or current foster carer who needs impartial support with an ongoing fostering matter. • Fosterline Plus also offers tailored advice and expertise on tax and benefit issues to prospective and current foster carers to support them throughout their fostering career. • Increased links with the IRM to improve information to carers via a factsheet on Fosterline. The IRM also undertook training with advisors to ensure information provided to foster carers about this option during calls was as up to date as possible. • Fosterline service details were included in a recruitment toolkit that was circulated by the Department for Education to all England local authorities. • Fosterline has published several posts encouraging fostering services to check that their details remain up to date in the find a fostering service area of the website and provided information on how services can advertise recruitment events free on the Fosterline events board.

We proposed to	Communicate with all fostering service providers from both local authority and independent services to develop the support of Fosterline.
We achieved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Fosterline representative attended some virtual Fostertalk membership sessions with carers and fostering service staff to provide information about the Fosterline service. • Several social media posts have gone out encouraging fostering services to check their details are up to date in the find a fostering service list on the website and to remind them of the ability to advertise free any recruitment events planned. Information on how to send details of recruitment events has been improved on the website. • Fosterline information was included in the recruitment tool kit prepared by the Department for Education that was shared with all local authority fostering services. • 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

- 96% 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 93% from 147 users of Fosterline who chose to complete the survey around the time of their contact with Fosterline. The participants rated the service on the helpfulness of the advisor, knowledge of the advisor and usefulness of the information provided.
- 100% would recommend the service to a friend or colleague.
- The annual survey confirmed that over 70% of respondents found the service easy to contact and several commented that the service had made a difference to them and the children in their care with one noting the service had helped them "the child is still in our care and now we are going through the adoption process" and another noting "we continued to foster after the allegation was resolved" and others noting the advice had helped them decide to transfer to another fostering service of their choosing.
- Mystery shopper feedback undertaken via calls and live chat was very positive about the service in respect of the information and impartiality of the advice offered and friendliness of the advisors.
- Call waiting information was introduced in March 22 in a bid to reduce the number of abandoned calls informing the caller they are number 1 etc. whilst continuing to offer the option to leave a voicemail, book a call back etc.



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CONCLUSION

The Fosterline service has had another very busy year and although the number of prospective carers contacting the service dropped in comparison to the calls we experienced at the height of the pandemic they remain strong and generally higher than prior to the pandemic. The nature of the calls from prospective carers often share common themes with queries about the process, choosing a service etc but there have been far fewer calls from those exploring fostering as a result of employment insecurity or redundancy than in the previous two years as we emerge from the pandemic.

Fosterline has strived to “work smarter” in reaching out to those who may be interested in fostering by having a joined-up approach within its service; ensuring website users completing the ‘Can You Foster?’ quiz or downloading the Fostering Guide are made aware of the support on offer when we have consent to contact them. We were keen to be included in the recruitment toolkit the Department for Education shared with local authorities to alert services how we can assist them in the recruitment of foster carers encouraging them to use our free events board to advertise recruitment events.

Fosterline was also keen to focus on harder to reach groups so has updated fact sheets on LGBTQ+ and Men in Foster Care. The fostering fortnight campaign included a series of images involving carers from a variety of backgrounds to appeal to a wide range of potential prospective carers. We also produced an animation clip widely circulated on social media to show the role of Fosterline and encouraging more prospective carers and foster carers to get in touch as we know visual presentations may appeal to a wider audience.

The Instagram launch was also designed to help Fosterline reach new audiences. Our conversations with prospective carers suggest there may be a training issue for some fostering services particularly in relation to queries around citizenship or when there have been previous convictions with some being automatically

turned away at the initial enquiry stage. The prospective carers often expressed they are unlikely to approach another service, where they may have had a different response, due to feelings of embarrassment and the potential additional foster carer is lost. These discussions underline the significance of the first approach to a fostering service and the importance of enquirers being treated respectfully and in line with the regulations. It may also highlight the need to consider greater mutual co-operation in signposting prospective carers to alternative services if not quite meeting the requirements of one fostering service.

Fosterline has remained focused on supporting foster carers and sought to continue to do this via our advisors responding to all queries in a timely and professional manner. The Fosterline Plus services are beneficial in providing expert financial and tax advice or one to one phone support with an ongoing situation.

However, we also recognised from the calls received that foster carers were often struggling to obtain information about the needs of children in their care, so our range of fact sheets has been extended to include topics such as leaving care, caring for a child with a disability, attachment, the differences between fostering and adoption and allegations. We worked in conjunction with the Independent Review Mechanism to produce a fact sheet on the IRM process available on our website and to produce a flyer about Fosterline that the IRM will distribute to all foster carers that contact them. Advisors also had additional training on the IRM process to ensure any advice given is up to date and accurate.

We responded to the concerns and queries callers raised such as those contacting Fosterline with an interest in fostering children from Ukraine-information about the Homes for Ukraine scheme was added to the website along with a fact sheet on caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeker children.

The focus of calls from current foster carers continues to be varied but there was a strong theme around lack of support and information particularly for new foster carers and towards the end of the reporting period significant queries around finance as the cost of living became a concern for many. The latter looks set to be an issue of rising significance as we move into Fosterline's 10th year.

As the Co-Ordinator of Fosterline I have spent many hours engaging with callers and overseeing the work of the advisors and continue to be inspired by the dedication of foster carers wanting to improve opportunities for disadvantaged children in their care. The fostering role is hugely demanding as the needs of the children are often complex and Fosterline strives to provide helpful information, emotional support and identify options to support the carer to go forward positively. The statistics tell us despite a growth in foster carers this is not keeping pace with demand for placements and it is thus perhaps more important than ever that foster carers are supported in the challenges of meeting the needs of children in their care.

The sector needs to retain foster carers and build a skilled and experienced workforce. Whilst this of course will have resource implications foster carers often tell us there are some immediate things that would make a difference to supporting them.

Foster carers want to be listened to, shown respect for their role as carers and for their families and not feel they are being prejudged when there are issues along the way. Many carers ask for more transparency in information that is shared with them by professionals as some express that they are often left feeling they are the last to know. Fosterline ensures callers are given time to air their worries, provides emotional support and access to a range of information and can signpost for additional support when needed. Advisors are friendly, respectful, and professional at all times. As an impartial service Fosterline never criticises a fostering service or individual and we strive to support the carer in re-establishing positive relationships with their service.

Fosterline feedback continues to be welcomed and we are very proud of our high satisfaction rates and positive comments from users of our services. Improving call waiting information appears to be helping to reduce abandoned calls and our average waiting times for a response continue to be excellent with 96% answered in less than a minute.

As stated in the introduction, Fosterline is rarely contacted when things are going well and there is much to be celebrated about the role of foster carers and of the work carried out by fostering services. Fosterline will continue to be positive and proactive to dispel myths around fostering and try to reach all sections of the community to encourage more prospective foster carers to come forward.

We are keen to support fostering services in their recruitment by having the find a fostering service facility on our website and by continuing to advertise recruitment events at no cost to fostering services. The latter function has grown steadily since it was suspended at the height of the pandemic but remains underutilised and we will continue to alert fostering services to this service. We will continue to review and improve our services to meet the needs of foster carers and to offer Fosterline Plus additional support services when appropriate.

We are excited to be going into our 10th year and look forward to planning celebrations around the spring/summer of 2023 to highlight this and the role of Fosterline and how we can continue to support the recruitment, support, and retention of foster carers.

APPENDIX

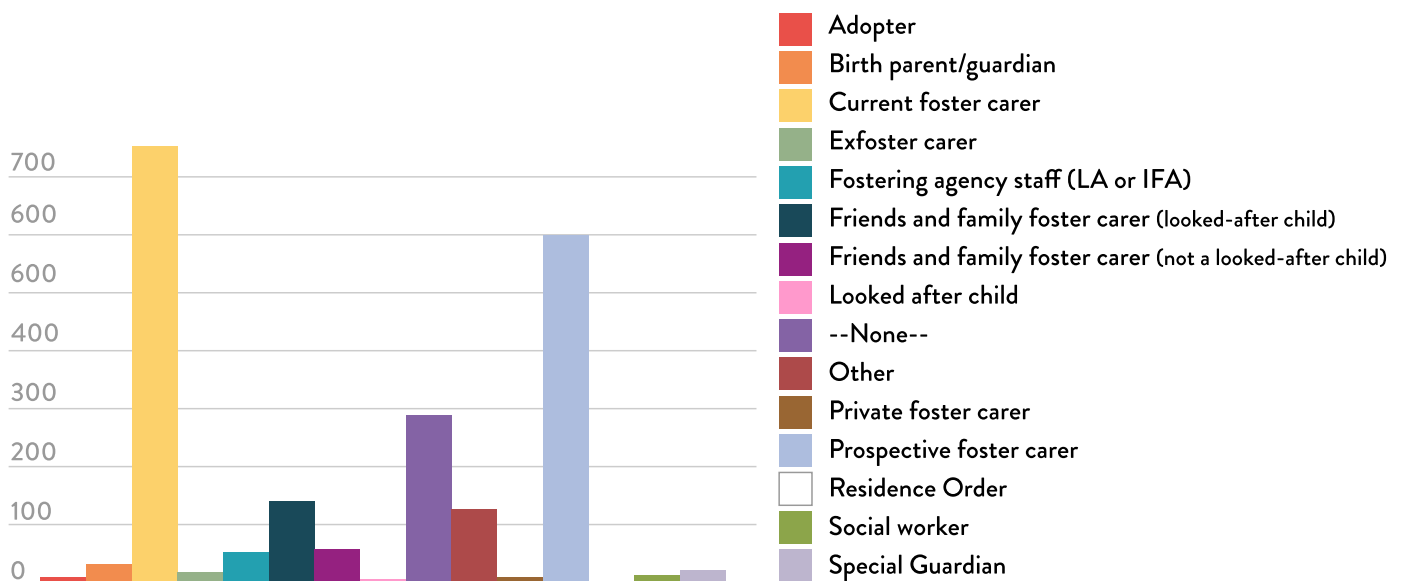
FOSTERLINE DEMOGRAPHICS

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.



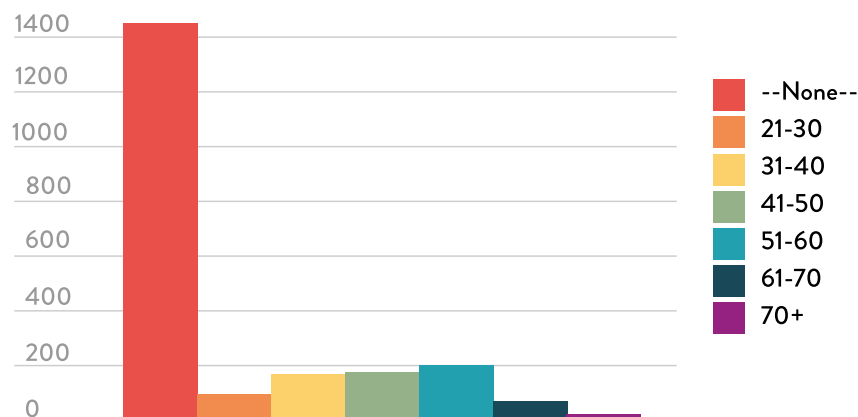
Disability

Disability is not defined within the demographics callers are asked to self-identify and just below **3%** disclosed a disability during the reporting period.

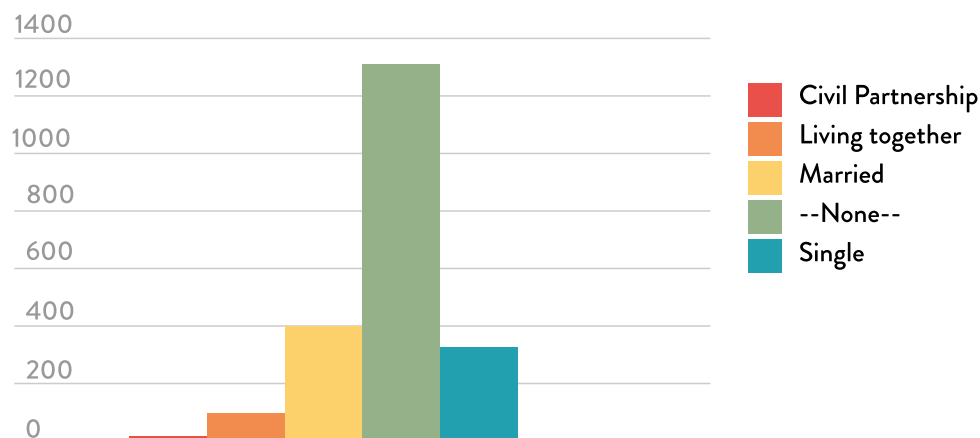
LGBTQ+

Just under **1%** disclosed that they identified as LGBTQ+.

Age of Enquirer



Marital Status



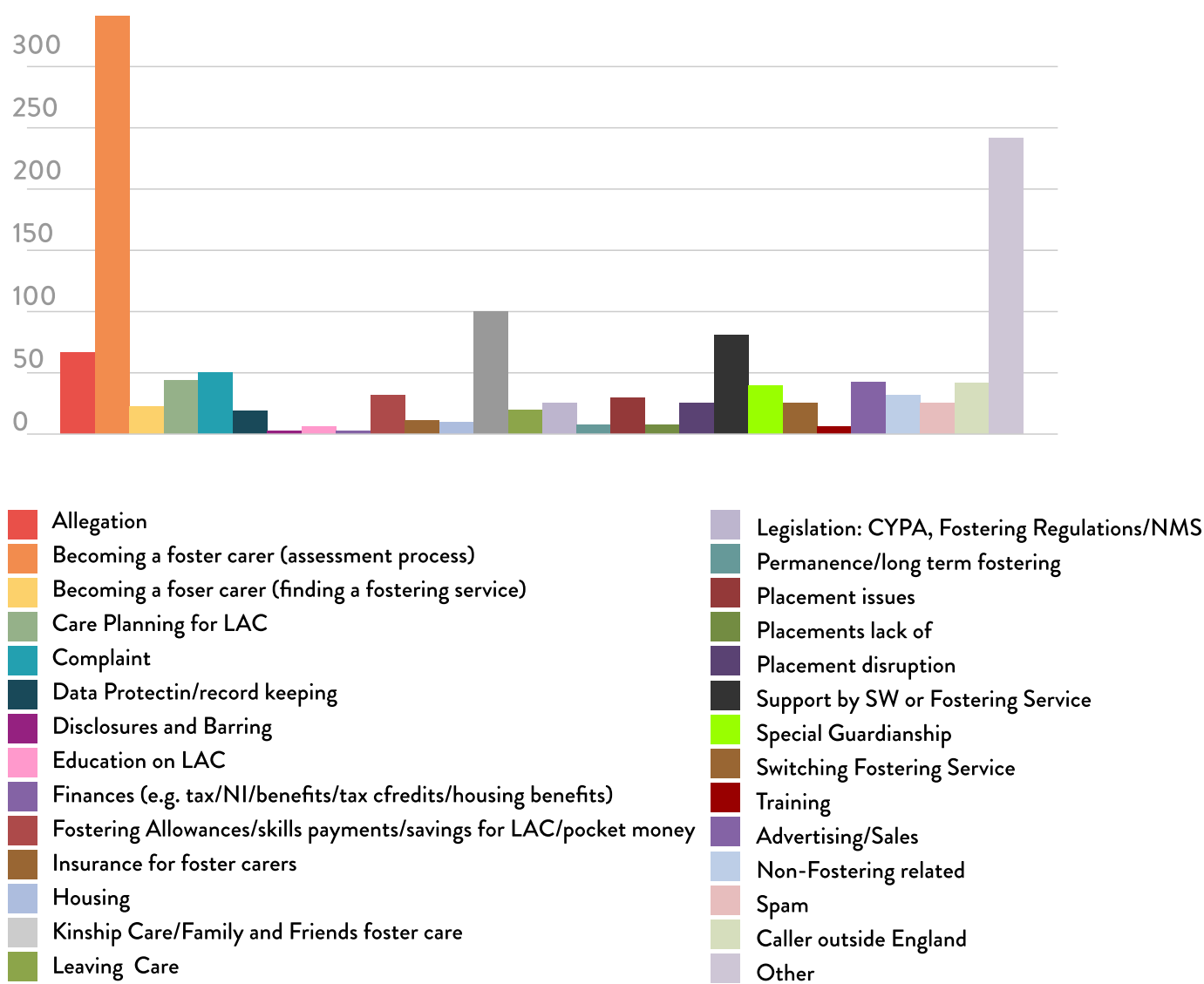
Fosterline
0800 040 7675
your fostering advice service



Reasons for Contacting Fosterline

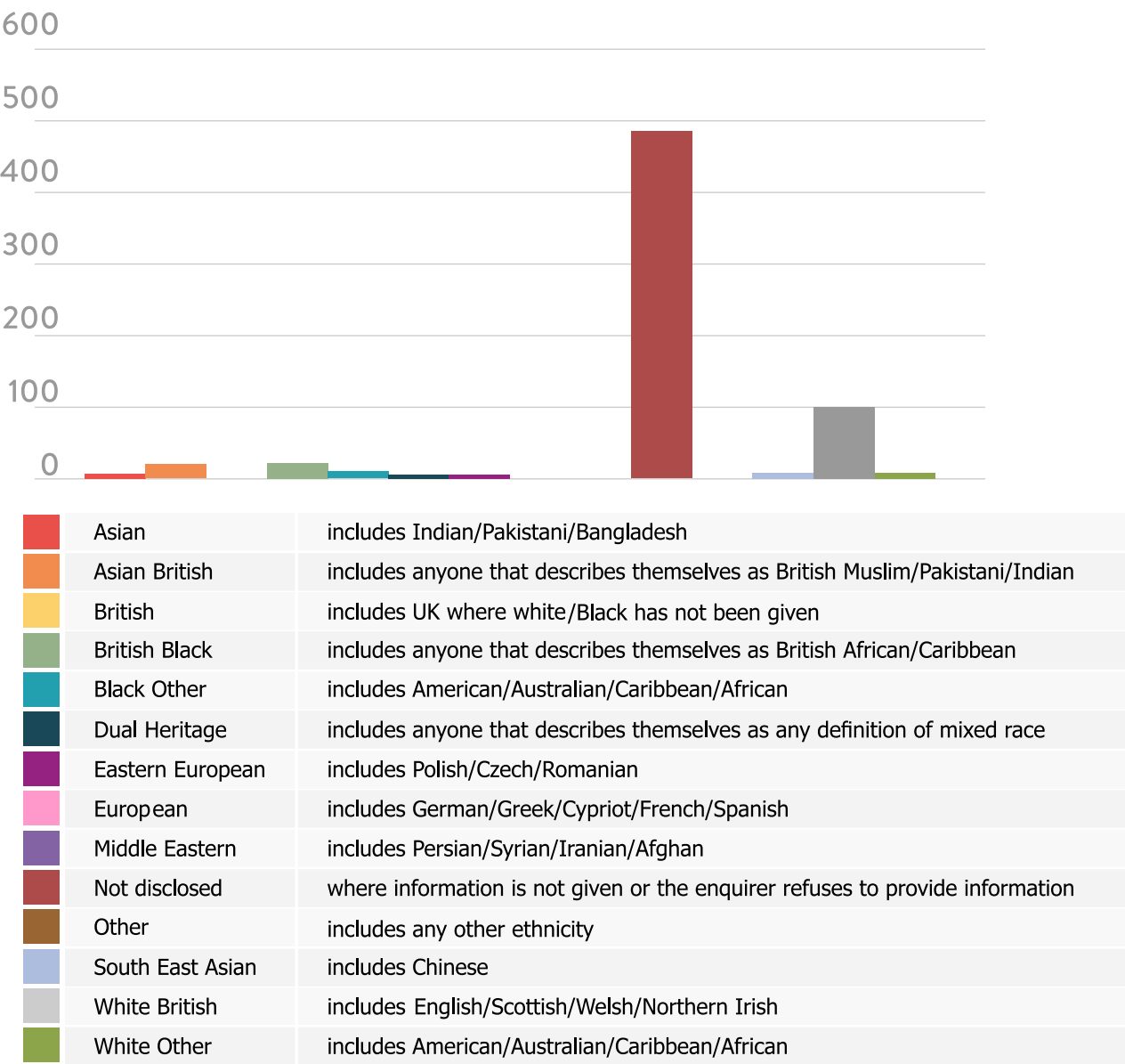
Fosterline has continued to respond to a very broad range of enquiries of concern to foster carers and often they do not fit into discrete categories. The following represents a general description of the topics and many cross over into the realms of another topic.

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.



Spam and Advertising has been removed when calculating ethnicities