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# Foster carer retention and recruitment in England

A research report for The Fostering Network



Centre for  
Evidence and  
Implementation

## Authors

**Eleanor Ott**, Senior Advisor, Centre for Evidence and Implementation // **Emma Wills**, Advisor, Centre for Evidence and Implementation // **Amy Hall**, Advisor, Centre for Evidence and Implementation // **Sweta Gupta**, Senior Advisor, Centre for Evidence and Implementation

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- Understanding and making sense of the evidence base
- Generating evidence through trialling, testing, and evaluating policies and programs to drive more effective decisions and deliver better outcomes
- Developing methods and processes to get high quality evidence into policy and practice
- Building cultures for evidence use

## About The Fostering Network

As the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation, The Fostering Network are the essential network for fostering and bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of children in foster care. They support foster carers to transform children's lives and work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

The Fostering Network works to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and they are passionate about the difference foster care makes. They champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

## KPMG Foundation

KPMG Foundation work with others to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK, so they are safe, healthy, happy and learning. Their current focus areas include improving the lives of care experienced children and young people.

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# Executive Summary

Retaining, recruiting, and appropriately supporting foster carers throughout their journey can help ensure children in care thrive. More foster carers mean a wider variety of homes available to support better matching and creating stable, well-supported environments for these children; this is a focus of the Government's plans for Children's Social Care Reforms 2023.

The challenge in England is that in the last reported fiscal year (ending March 2022), more mainstream foster carers (not family and friends foster carers) stopped fostering than were approved, leading to a net decrease in fostering capacity. At the same time, the number of children in care increased.

This research provides the most comprehensive picture of foster carer retention and recruitment in England to date. The aim is to provide a robust evidence base that can underpin a strategic approach to foster care recruitment and retention, building on existing evidence. A diverse and stable pool of foster carers, supported to meet the needs of children in care, will contribute better lifelong outcomes for children who have experienced trauma and adversity.

Our research combined different sources of data to create a strong picture of foster carer recruitment and retention. The results fill gaps in our existing knowledge around foster carers' motivations to start, continue or leave fostering in England. We re-analysed national Ofsted data and The Fostering Network's State of the Nation data of foster carers. Alongside this, we collected primary data from almost 2,000 foster carers through a survey, focus groups (with foster carers and recruitment staff), and semi-structured one-to-one interviews with foster carers, former foster carers, and prospective foster carers.

Many people we spoke with considered fostering to be 'in crisis' given the challenges in retaining and recruiting foster carers with the capacity to meet children's needs. Underneath this headline, we found a varied and nuanced picture of fostering. There are trends in joining and leaving fostering that seem related to age and particular ethnic groups. But across all perspectives, the importance of feeling respected and supported

was core to foster carer retention and recruitment. Viewpoints on current fostering and intention to continue fostering correlated strongly with ratings of support, but they did not vary by demographic characteristics in survey findings.

Research participants recommended greater pay, better support, less social work turnover, and being treated with respect as a valued member of the team. Although finances were never a sole driver to begin or continue fostering, financial support was a key recommendation from those with experiences of fostering, especially given the cost-of-living crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, this research highlights that investment in foster carer recruitment and retention is warranted, to ensure a diverse and stable workforce that can offer ‘stable homes, built on love’, meeting the needs of children in care.

#### Key recommendations:

- Provide sufficient funding for the **support** of social workers, foster carers, and the children’s social care system, including **foster carer pay** – allowances and fees - and entitlements
- Provide **recruitment campaigns that focus on realistic expectations** for fostering
- Examine the recruitment and support strategies and the ways in which these may not be fit for purpose for **different demographics of foster carers** (e.g., working adults with enough time, energy and skills to foster, adults in their 20s and 30s, males, and a more ethnically diverse demographics)
- Focus on **respect** for foster carers, which often includes an attitude shift, involving carers in decision-making about the child when appropriate and showing appreciation
- Ensure fostering services are structured to facilitate practice enabling social workers to understand the reality of fostering from the perspectives of foster carers and children. Ensure a single trusted **relationship can be built** from point of enquiry to matching and ongoing support.
- Ensure that services for foster carers are professional, including clear inductions, **professional finance and support systems**, as well as clear communications on timelines for assessment and approval, and processes such as matching with children or investigations of allegations
- Provide consistent conversations when foster carers are considering leaving and **exit interviews** for those who leave fostering, to uncover the reasons behind exit and any supports that can be put in place before leaving
- Undertake **more research** to ensure that foster carer recruitment and retention is built on more than good intentions, but on what is needed to ensure a foster carer workforce to provide ‘stable homes, built on love’

<sup>1</sup> In February the Government announced a 12.43% increase in the national minimum allowance to help foster carers cover the increasing cost of caring for a child in their home. Alongside this announcement in March, the Government also announced an increase in the fixed amount of Qualifying Care Relief a foster carer can claim each year. The findings of this report predate these changes coming into effect.





# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Rationale and context

Foster care plays a vital role in out-of-home care systems in England and globally, and this role depends on there being sufficient numbers of foster carers. In England, the need to improve foster carer retention and recruitment was highlighted in the 2022 Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and in the Government’s 2023 response to the review ‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’ (Department for Education, 2023; MacAlister, 2022). The government response outlines plans to “Deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. This will boost approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage. This will include supporting foster carers better, so they want to continue fostering. We will test and develop a best practice regional model that can then be delivered more widely” (Department for Education, 2023, p. 19).

In England, national statistics for the last fiscal year (1 April 2021-31 March 2022) highlight challenges in building and sustaining sufficient numbers of foster carers. Thirteen percent of all fostering households had stopped fostering by the end of the year, and more foster carers (excluding family and friends foster carers<sup>2</sup>) stopped fostering than were approved, leading to a net decrease in fostering capacity. As of 31 March 2022, there were 36,050 mainstream fostering households, a decrease of 4% in fostering households and 5% in approved fostering places since 2018 (Ofsted, 2022). Additionally, the number of vacant mainstream fostering places decreased by 23% in that time (Ofsted, 2022). While the number of enquiries to foster remained high, the number of applications received in 2021-22 was 21 percent lower than in 2017-18 (from 10,520 to 8,280). At the same time, there were increasing number of children entering care and increasing costs for taking care of these children (Department for Education, 2022; MacAlister 2022). Thus, foster carer retention and recruitment remains a crucial area for improvement to provide quality care for children.

<sup>2</sup> Family and friends foster carers are also called kinship carers or connected carers.

Across high-income countries and globally, there is increasing recognition of the importance of foster care in providing ‘stable homes, built on love’ for those children who must enter the care system and do not have family and friend carers with the capacity to support them. We lack reliable global estimates of the total number of children in foster care, or the proportion of care arrangements that foster care accounts for, but there are an estimated 2.7 million children globally between ages of 0 and 17 living in institutional care (Petrowski et al., 2017). Systematic reviews stress the importance of quality, family-like caring environments for supporting children’s development (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Globally, there is increasing attention from the United Nations (UN) and individual countries on reducing rates of institutional care and increasing the use of foster care (Goldman et al., 2020; Petrowski et al., 2017).

Across the UK and England, the majority of children in care are placed in foster care (Department for Education, 2022; Information Analysis Directorate, 2022; National Statistics Scotland, 2022; StatsWales, 2022). There were 82,170 children in care in England as of 31 March 2022, with 70% of them living with foster families (55% with non-friends and family carers) compared with 73% of the children in care living with foster families in 2018 (60% of children living with non-friends and family foster carers) (Department for Education, 2022). In England, shortages of foster carers are acute in certain geographic areas and for foster carers for teenagers, large sibling groups, and children with certain disabilities, externalising behaviours, and complex needs. Evidence suggests that these patterns are replicated globally.

Extending the pool of quality foster carers is important for better ‘matching’ between foster carers and children and greater stability for children in care. For children in care, stability of living situations is consistently correlated with positive outcomes, including mental health and wellbeing, educational outcomes, and lower behavioural problems (Conger & Redbeck, 2001; Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2013; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Sebba et al, 2015; Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005; Ward, Homes, & Soper, 2008). Stability is highly valued by children in care themselves, and qualitative evidence indicates that repeated moves can lead to children ‘disconnecting’ and ‘giving up’ (Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2013). Stability is also associated with better value for money care trajectories (Ward et al., 2008). Children who live with more experienced foster carers with strong parenting skills are less likely to have unplanned moves (Rock et al., 2013), pointing again to the importance of foster carer retention and support.

Appropriately trained and supported foster carers can help children in care grow and develop, from a neurological and trauma-informed perspective as well as other perspectives. Early experiences affect the architecture of the growing brain, and this includes the trauma children in care have often experienced contributing to their entry into care, and potentially traumatic experiences whilst in care, including moves (Gilmore et al., 2018; Mustard, 2006; Tierney & Nelson, 2009). While positive experiences help build structures that support emotional regulation and executive functioning, adverse experiences can hinder this development, negatively impacting the ability to respond proportionately to triggers and develop positive social relationships (Furnivall & Grant, 2014; Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000). Exposure to traumatic experiences during childhood, without the presence of trusted and supportive adults, places children at higher risk of poorer physical, social and mental health and other outcomes in later life (Center on the Developing Child, 2023a; Boswell, 1996; Wright et al., 2016). Positive social support can help to mitigate the impacts of trauma and enhance resilience to stress (Ozbay et al., 2007; Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019; Center on the Developing Child, 2023b). Foster carers can develop the skills and knowledge to navigate and respond to experiences of trauma in a way that makes a child feel safe, secure and supported (Buckley et al., 2016). It is widely acknowledged that foster care is not the most appropriate living situation for all children in care, but it plays a crucial role in creating supporting environments for children and providing ‘stable homes, build on love’.

The topic of foster carer retention and recruitment is not a new one, but the extent of the need for foster carers to meet the complex needs of children in care is new. The independent review of fostering by Narey and Owers (2018) noted that there was a need for better advertising and shortages of foster carers with particular skills, but the authors noted that they had not seen any widespread shortages and that they had not seen evidence to justify that the retention of carers was a problem in fostering. However, in the last five years the number of children in care has increased and the vacancies of foster carers has dramatically decreased (Ofsted 2023). Both foster carer retention and recruitment are currently widely acknowledged as a major issue. Even with less of a mismatch between the number of carers and children in care, Narey and Owers (2018) highlighted that, “Children and young people told us that they thought it took too long to get them to the right placement where positive relationships could flourish and where stability would follow” (p. 71).

There is some evidence from existing sources about motivations to foster, recruitment of foster carers, and retaining foster carers, but the evidence is sparse and much of the English evidence dates from over a decade ago. Reviews of the existing literature highlight that foster carers are often motivated by altruistic reasons and knowing a fostered child or foster carer, that responses to initial inquiries are often insufficiently prompt, and that misconceptions can be a barrier to recruitment (Gouveia, Magalhaes, & Pinto, 2021; Kantar Public UK, 2022; McDermid, Holmes, Kirton, & Signoretta, 2012; Sebba, 2012). Research also consistently highlights the importance of support in retaining foster carers, including financial support and support with skills and training (Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008; Gouveia, et al., 2021; Hanlon et al., 2021; McDermid et al., 2012).

This project seeks to build on and update this research to look more in-depth at foster carer retention and recruitment in England.

The study focuses on foster care outside the context of family and friends foster care (also called kinship or connected persons care). In England, family and friends care arrangements exist within, as well as outside, of fostering regulated services. Family and friends foster care involves a child in care living full-time with a relative or close family friend (a ‘connected carer’) and is another important part of ensuring that children who are in care have ‘stable homes, built on love’ (Department for Education, 2023; Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2014). There are other types of family and connected care arrangements that exist outside of fostering regulated care. England fostering regulations specify the preference for a connected carer where it safeguards and promotes the child’s welfare: “The responsible authority must give preference to a placement with a connected person who is approved as a local authority foster carer, if that is the most appropriate placement” (Department for Education, 2021, p. 68). The process for recruiting and retaining family and friends foster carers is different from the process for non-connected foster carers, because family and friends carers are often recruited and approved for the specific child or children with whom they are connected. This study focuses on non-family and friends carers. For ease, we use the term ‘foster carers’ in describing our findings but it is important to note that our research findings do not include family and friends foster care. Nonetheless, many of the findings of this report are relevant for family and friends care and carers as well, such as messages around the importance of feeling valued, practical support, and sufficient financial support to be able to meet the needs of the children and family. Whilst family and friends care does not require the same approach in respect of recruitment, if this pool of foster carers were valued, supported and retained, in return the demands placed on non-connected fostering could reduce.

In England, there is a system of local authority fostering services and independent (for profit or non-for-profit) fostering services that recruit and support foster carers. Our research covers both groups of fostering services, and draws out patterns, trends, and differences.

## 1.2. Research aims

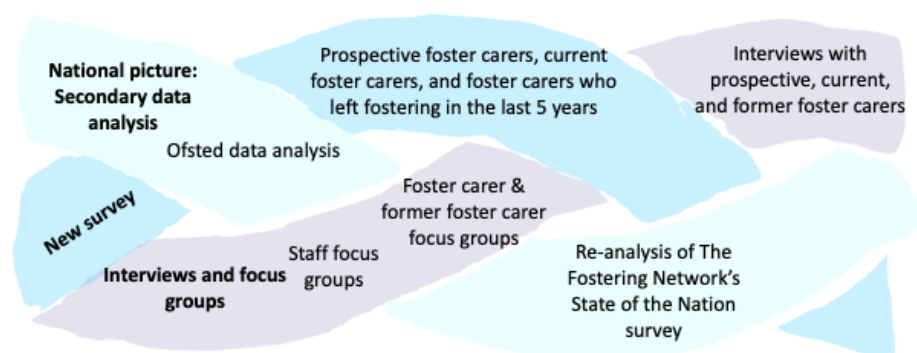
This research aims to provide a robust evidence base to underpin a strategic approach to foster care recruitment and retention in England, building on existing evidence. The overarching goal was to contribute to improving stability of care for children, by understanding how a diverse and stable pool of foster carers can be supported to meet the needs of children in care now and in the future. The research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. **How many foster carers are recruited in England** and how does this differ by age and ethnic group?
2. **What do we know about how to improve foster carer recruitment?** Why do prospective foster carers not become approved foster carers? What motivated foster carers who are approved to apply and complete the foster care process? How does this differ by different characteristics? What do we know from existing research about improving foster carer recruitment?
3. **What do we know about how to improve foster carer retention?** Why are foster carers leaving and staying in fostering and how does this vary by different characteristics? What do we know from existing research about improving foster carer retention?
4. **What recommendations can be made about improving the national data** on foster carer retention and recruitment?

## 1.3. Overall research design

The project aimed to use existing evidence to understand the national picture of retention and recruitment and collect new primary data to fill knowledge gaps and explore, confirm, or challenge existing data. This is called a ‘scoping design.’ We used several different types of data to create a robust picture on recruitment and retention. We analysed national publicly-available data published by Ofsted and data collected by The Fostering Network for their 2021 ‘State of the Nation’ Report. We undertook primary data collection through a survey as well as interviews and focus groups conducted with prospective and current foster carers, those who have stopped fostering, and fostering service staff. Data collection and analysis ran October 2022-March 2023.

**Figure 1: Research design**



### 1.3.1. Ethical appraisal and data protection

Ethical appraisal was undertaken by the Social Research Association (SRA), who offered guidance on the research methods and materials, made suggestions for improvement, and approved changes. This appraisal was completed in February 2023 before primary data collection.

A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) was undertaken, and personal data was processed in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations. Data were collected and processed on the basis of “legitimate interests”, with special category data accessed under the research exemption (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Article 6(1) and Article 9(2)(j)). Data was anonymised and stored securely accessible only to the research team and will be destroyed two years after publication of the final report. A data privacy notice was shared with all research participants.

Information sheets were provided to participants to help them decide whether to take part in the survey, interviews or in focus groups. These information sheets explained the study, and what their involvement in the research would entail, as well as making clear the voluntary nature of participation. They also provided a link to the data privacy notice on CEI’s website, with information about the type of data that will be processed, the legal basis for processing it, how data will be stored and managed, and participants’ rights including how they can access their data.

## 1.4. Research methods

### 1.4.1. Secondary data analysis of national data sets to create a robust picture on recruitment and retention

**Ofsted fostering data** - We re-analysed the publicly available Ofsted data which provides insight into recruitment and retention processes and foster carers who stop fostering. We used it to answer questions such as how recruitment differs by age and ethnic group. We also identified gaps in data coverage which we could then prioritise in our primary data collection.

**Secondary analysis of The Fostering Network’s 2021 State of the Nation Data** - The State of the Nation survey, undertaken by The Fostering Network, offers the largest and most comprehensive source of foster carer data in the UK outside government data, and provides a wealth of knowledge about information such as foster carers' wellbeing, satisfaction, and intention to continue or stop fostering. In total, 3,352 foster carers and 99 fostering services took part in the 2021 survey. The Fostering Network provided an anonymised dataset which was cleaned to look only at non-friends and family foster carers in England. We carried out additional analyses looking at how responses varied by demographics. Insights generated from this analysis were used to shape our primary data collection and triangulated with primary data findings.

### 1.4.2. Survey of prospective, current, and former foster carers

We conducted an online survey (using Qualtrics) of prospective, current and former foster carers, to understand experiences of the recruitment process, and reasons why foster carers remain or cease fostering, with the aim of understanding how retention of foster carers may be improved. The survey was distributed by The Fostering Network in February 2023. Fostering services were encouraged to distribute the survey to foster carers and those who enquired but did not apply to become a foster carer at their service. Participants were eligible if they lived in England and were prospective, approved or previous foster carers. We excluded kinship foster carers, those who had never fostered or

been interested in fostering, and those who had stopped fostering more than 5 years ago (to ensure that we reflected recent contexts).

The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete and included 23 questions which asked participants about their experiences of deciding to enquire, apply, start or stop fostering, and their views and attitudes regarding fostering. The survey contained a mix of closed and open questions and repeated some State of the Nation questions for comparison, and we randomly changed the order of responses options in order to avoid order bias. We deliberately focused on why foster carers continue to foster as well as why they leave to 'flip the narrative' and look at not only the challenges but also at what can be learned from successes.

1958 people consented and completed the survey, of whom 1879 met our eligibility criteria. Table 3 in Appendix A shows the key characteristics of the survey sample. 1751 of the respondents were approved foster carers (93%), 112 (6%) had stopped fostering within the last five years, and 16 (1%) were enquiring or applying to foster. Similar to the national statistics (Ofsted, 2023), the majority of participants were approved foster carers who were female, white, and in the age group 45-64 years.

### **1.4.3. Interviews and focus groups with fostering service staff, prospective foster carers, current foster carers, and former foster carers**

We carried out seven focus groups and 11 one-to-one interviews to gain a deeper understanding of reasons for applying to become a foster carer, the positive and challenging aspects of fostering, and reasons why foster carers stop fostering. Participants were recruited with the help of The Fostering Network, who distributed an expression of interest form to fostering services so that prospective, current and previous foster carers, and those working at fostering services, could express interest in taking part in the interviews or focus groups and share their contact details. A link to this form was also included at the end of the survey. In total, 253 responses were generated from this form, from which participants were sampled to be invited to participate in the research.

Participants for the interviews and focus groups were selected using both purposive and random sampling methods. The seven focus groups each targeted a different group of participants: fostering service staff, current foster carers or recently resigned foster carers. Group composition also reflected whether participants worked for, or fostered with, local authorities or independent fostering agencies, and, for current foster carers, on how long they had been fostering for. We invited all fostering service staff who expressed interest to attend to the focus groups. In order to reflect the views of a diverse group of foster carer participants, we purposively over-sampled those who had expressed an interest in taking part and who were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The remainder of the participants were randomly selected for focus groups, using random number generation in excel. For each focus group, we invited 12-15 participants with the knowledge that far fewer would be able to attend the allotted time.

In total, 52 individuals were spoken to for this research. Eight fostering service staff participated in two focus groups, 29 current foster carers participated in four focus groups, and four recently resigned foster carers participated in one focus group. Table 1 below shows the numbers of participants and characteristics of each focus group.

**Table 1: Characteristics and number of participants of focus groups**

Focus group	Description of focus group	Number of participants
1	Fostering service staff, all working at local authorities	4
2	Fostering service staff, working at a mix of local authorities and independent fostering agencies	4
3	Current foster carers, who had been fostering between 0 to 2 years at local authorities	8
4	Current foster carers, who had been fostering for 2 or more years at local authorities	8
5	Current foster carers, who had been fostering for 11 to 15 years at local authorities	4
6	Current foster carers, who had been fostering for any length of time at independent fostering agencies	9
7	Retired foster carers with over 10 years of experience of fostering	4

For the interviews, prospective foster carers, survey participants who had stated that they had resigned within the past 5 years, and a random sample of current foster carers were invited to participate in an interview. In total, 11 interviews were conducted, and the characteristics of each interview participant are show below in Table 2.

**Table 2: Number of interviews with prospective, current, or former foster carers**

Participant description	Number of participants
Prospective foster carer	2
Current foster carer	4
Had stopped fostering in the past 5 years	5



## 2. Recruitment and approval

This section covers the process of being recruited and approved as a foster carer.

This section covers the foster carer recruitment process from enquiry through to assessment and approval, drawing on Ofsted data, our survey, and interviews and focus groups with foster carers and staff. We then provide suggestions for improving the foster carer recruitment process. We first look at the national picture of foster carer recruitment through demographic and survey data. We then describe the data on motivations to foster, and the reasons why some foster carers do not continue from enquiry to application or from application to approval. Lastly, we present suggestions for improving foster carer recruitment.

### 2.1. Foster carer recruitment and approvals in England

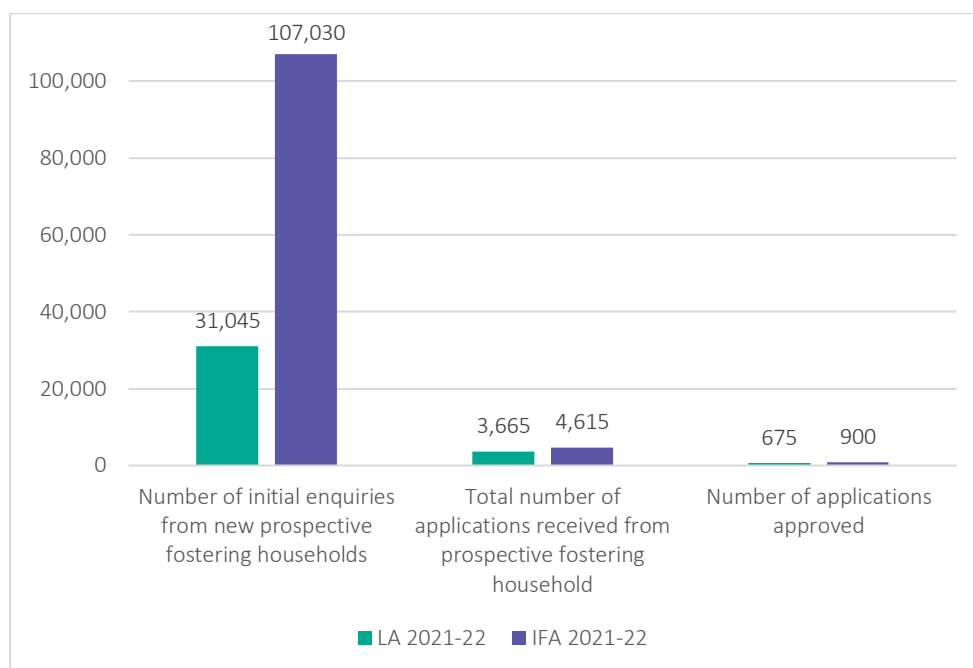
In order to develop an initial understanding of the state of foster carer recruitment and approvals nationally, we examined and conducted secondary data analysis of the Ofsted national data set. The data show a significant gap between the number of enquiries made to fostering services, and the number of those enquiries that go on to become approved foster carers, in both local authorities and independent fostering agencies. However, foster services discussed taking different approach to counting enquiries (e.g., interactions on Facebook, phone calls, or visits), and an individual can enquire to multiple services or – depending on the data – make multiple enquiries to the same service.

As Figure 2 shows, in the year 2021 to 2022, 31,045 enquiries were made to local authorities and 107,030 to independent fostering agencies. In the same year, local authorities only received 3,665 applications which led to just 675 approved applications in



that year (2.17% of the original enquiries made).<sup>3</sup> For independent fostering agencies, the conversion rate to approved foster carers was even smaller, with the independent agencies receiving 4,615 applications and approving 900 of those applicants in the same year (0.84% of the original enquiries made).<sup>4</sup> The Department for Education commissioned research by Ipsos Mori UK undertaken in February and March 2022 to examine conversion rates.

**Figure 2: Number of enquiries, applications received, and applications approved in 2021-2022 by type of fostering service**

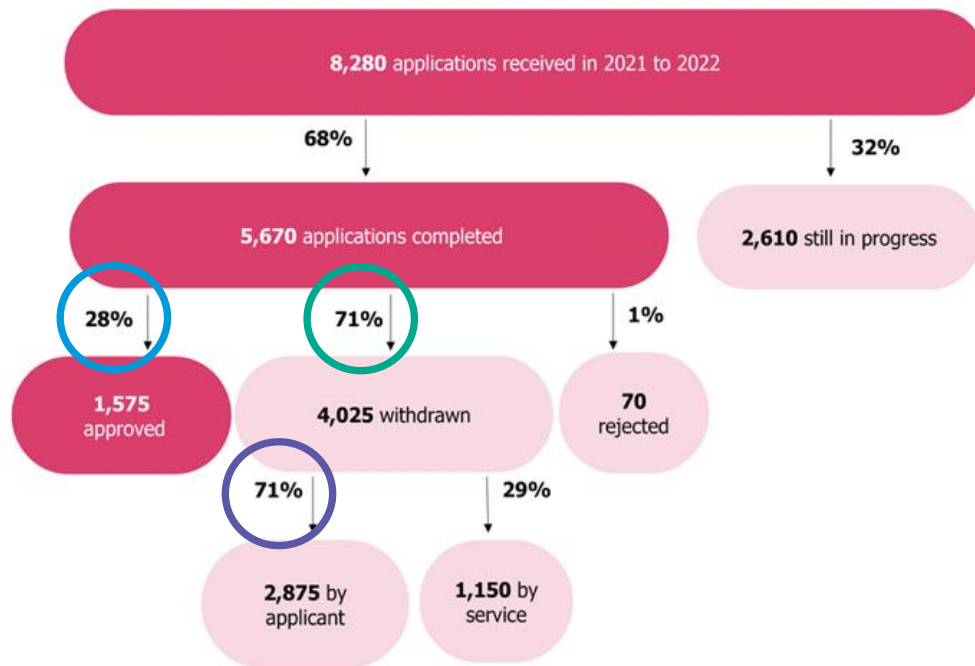


A key reason for applications not proceeding to approval is that they are withdrawn. The Ofsted data show that of the 5,670 completed applications made to fostering services in 2021-2022, the majority (71%) were withdrawn, a rate which had increased from 68% in 2020-2021. In 2021-2022, most of those applications (71%) were withdrawn by the applicant, and 29% by the service. The year before, only 55% of withdrawals were by the applicant. Our data do not shed light on why this change has occurred and it will be important to monitor future trends. A figure taken from Ofsted’s report on this data is included in Figure 3 below.

<sup>3</sup> Although there were only 675 of the 3,665 applications made were approved within the same year, there was a total of 2,075 newly approved households in total in LAs in 2021-22.

<sup>4</sup> Whilst only 900 of the applications made in 2021-22 were approved within the same year, there was a total of 1,955 newly approved households in IFAs in 2021-2022.

**Figure 3: Applications received in 2021 to 2022, by status on 31 March 2022 (from Ofsted, 2022 – circles added)**

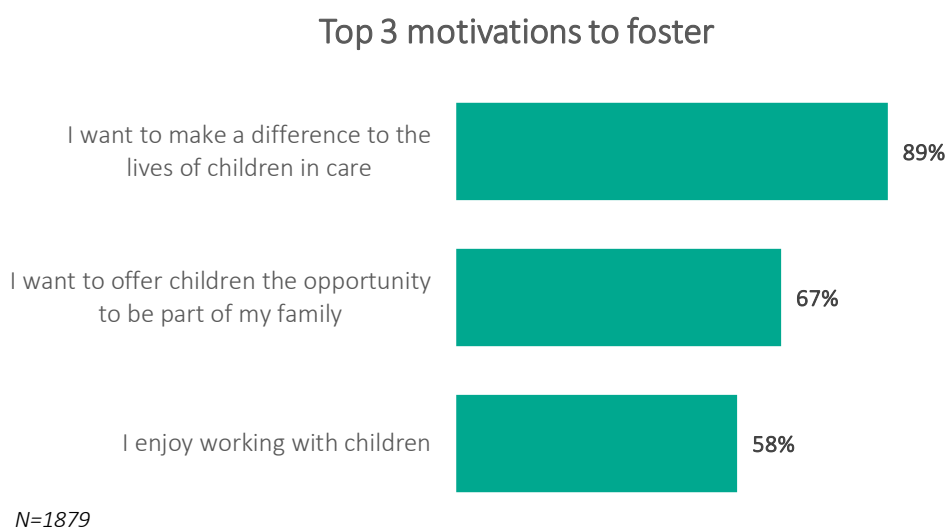


The Ofsted data point to some changes in the demographic characteristics of newly approved foster carers, compared with previous years and with the current population of foster carers. Foster carers in their 20s and 30s accounted for a quarter (26%) of all newly approved foster carers in 2021-22, despite forming only 10% of foster carers overall. When looking at ethnicity, the data shows that the total number of Asian/Asian British foster carers has increased linearly over the past five years whereas the number of Black/Black British foster carers has stayed about the same, with a slight decrease.

## 2.2. Foster carers' motivation to apply to become a foster carer

Our survey and The Fostering Network's State of the Nation survey found the same top three motivations identified by survey participants when we asked about their key motivations to foster. These all relate to a desire to improve the lives of the children in foster care and echo broader findings from international literature around altruistic motivations to foster to help children (Gouveia et al., 2021). Wanting to make a difference to the lives of children in care, wanting to offer children the opportunity to be part of their family, and enjoying working with children (Figure 4) were the top motivations in both surveys. Table 4 in Appendix A shows the full breakdown of responses. In our survey, the top 3 motivations did not differ by participants' gender, age, ethnicity, or education.

**Figure 4: Survey data on participants' top motivations to become a foster carer**



Participants in the interviews mirrored these findings. Wanting to care for children and offer them support was highlighted as the main motivation for becoming a foster carer. Becoming a foster carer was sometimes noted by interviewees as having been a long-standing desire, echoing earlier literature of especially younger foster carers often considering fostering over a number of years (McDermid et al., 2012).

The interviews also highlighted several lifestyle factors as being facilitators to deciding to apply to be a foster carer. Previous experience working with children, having flexible work arrangements or finishing full-time employment, and gaining spare bedrooms due to moving to a bigger house or their children moving out were all noted as important when determining the right time or situation to apply to become foster carers. Knowing other foster carers or those involved in social care also supported foster carers' decisions to apply. Financial motivations were not generally noted by interviewees as being reasons to begin fostering. In fact, some participants noted that they felt that they would only be able to foster because they had alternative income or financial stability. Similarly, other research found that being paid to foster was not a motivating factor in England (Kantar Public UK, 2022).

Participants in the focus groups echoed these motivations, but they additionally discussed the interruption of work during the Covid-19 lockdown in their decision making: 'We planned to foster once we retired but then we had loads of time on our hands to do the assessment.' Participants also emphasised that their motivations go beyond a superficial sense of 'wanting to give back' and that 'our reason for doing it is actually far deeper' than the recruitment process recognises.

*"[We foster] to try and make these children's lives better, give them choices they never had"* (focus group participant)

*"We went into fostering because their lives had already been mapped out for them and I'm not willing to accept that"* (focus group participant)

## 2.3. Recruitment approaches

The effectiveness of different recruitment strategies was discussed by recruitment staff and foster carers in the focus groups and interviews. Staff reported that in the last few years they are having to take a 'back to basics' approach, spending more time interacting with the community (such as stalls at supermarkets and speaking to church congregations) to encourage enquiries in addition to using promotion and campaigns online via social media. They are also placing up front the financial support available for foster carers more than they have in the past, letting people know that they can afford to foster 'rather than stay in a job they don't like.' Additionally, fostering services were advertising other benefits, such as local council tax deductions for some local authorities. Fostering services expressed attempts to use all potential avenues to find carers, including looking at whether friends and family carers can come forward to undergo mainstream assessment of suitability to accept additional children who are not friends and family and contacting all foster carers who recently left via retirement or foster carer initiated resignation to see if they would be willing to come back to fostering, pending satisfactory assessment process.

Foster carers were often critical of the public-facing recruitment strategies. For example, they felt that it was important to have adequate financial compensation, but that fronting the financial compensation may attract the wrong people. Additionally, many felt that images and advertisements of 'superheroes' or small children without challenges were unrealistic. Research on behavioural insights into fostering recruitment campaigns found that communications should be "realistic, concrete, inclusive and nurturing" (Kantar Public UK, 2022). It also found that the reality of fostering should be illustrated with "snapshots of real life" and "validate prospective applicants' feelings by providing an honest portrayal of the challenges and balancing this with the prospect of accessible and ongoing support" (Kantar Public UK, 2022, p. 97).

Fostering services use many methods to increase recruitment, including mentoring schemes and 'refer a friend' schemes which involve a cash incentive for foster carers. They have also found that putting more time into forming relationships with prospective foster carers by following up individual enquiries has been effective.

While there was a recognition that it is important to have a diverse pool of foster carers that reflects the young people in each area, recruitment staff put more emphasis on recruiting carers with the capacity and willingness required for children with specific needs. They have identified a need for more carers with skills to work with teenagers, children with special educational needs and disabilities, and large sibling groups.

The staff we spoke to did not report many large-scale recruitment campaigns targeted at particular demographic groups: the general message was 'we will consider anybody.' However, there were some specific pushes, such as using social media to reach a younger cohort of applicants, attending Pride events to encourage members of the LGBTQ+ community to foster, using specific language such as 'gay couples welcomed', working with faith groups, and ensuring an ethnic mix in all their visual imagery to help people feel welcome.

## 2.4. Experiences of the application process

The interviews and focus groups showed that experiences of the application process were varied. However, participants generally found the process to be long and intensive, some reporting that they only had time due to being furloughed during the Covid-19 lockdowns. The typical timeframe for interviewees' application processes was around 6 months, but often extended up to a year, and in one case the entire process took 2.5 years due to administrative errors. Younger participants felt that the time and intensity would be a

barrier to younger adults without alternative income applying to become carers. Throughout the process, participants described having to complete training, attend interviews, facilitate home visits, and fill out numerous forms.

Whilst participants understood the need for a rigorous application process, they also described it as being an invasive and exhausting process, and 'bureaucratic', with repetitive forms and checks to complete. The interviews and background checks were also very personal, and some described feeling judged about their past or their personal situations – most particularly if they were then rejected for what they felt were assumptions having been made about their situation and ability to care for children adequately. Experiences such as these led to participants describing the process as 'gruelling' and 'tortuous.'

Positive application experiences were reported by some interview participants who had experienced reliable communication with their fostering service and were able to ask questions as they arose. Foster carers who had applied to multiple services sometimes experienced a much higher and more consistent level of contact from one service, which made the application process easier. Being given accurate expectations of the timelines and process also contributed to positive application processes, where participants had a clear idea of what the application process entailed.

Some members of the focus groups also discussed finding the assessment process straightforward, less intrusive than they expected, or enjoying the assessment process, as it gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own early life experiences and personal motivations to foster. Positive experiences appear to be facilitated by fostering services providing lots of opportunities to ask questions in a judgement-free space, arranging visits around prospective carers' work hours, and providing opportunities for prospective carers to engage with experienced foster carers.

However, negative experiences of the process were common. Contributing to the negative experiences of some of the participants were unexpected delays to the application process due to changes in social workers processing the application and administration errors. In some cases, this led to participants having to repeat parts of the application. Foster carers also found it challenging when communication with fostering services was poor and unreliable, and when they felt they were not able to have their questions answered, particularly when challenges arose with their applications. Insufficient information about the application process or timelines, and incorrect information about how to transfer to another service also led to unnecessary delays.

Interview participants highlighted the importance of the assessment team's treatment of prospective foster carers during the application process. Prospective foster carers identified the need for social workers and services to be culturally sensitive and aware of the different religious practices among foster carers and for social workers to be flexible around different working situations. For example, one interviewee described experiences of feeling judged when they asked social workers to take their shoes off when entering the house during home visits. Focus group participants stressed the importance of seeing other carers like them during the process – whether by age, ethnicity, or culture. The interviews revealed that foster carers had experienced feeling disrespected and discriminated against by the assessment team.

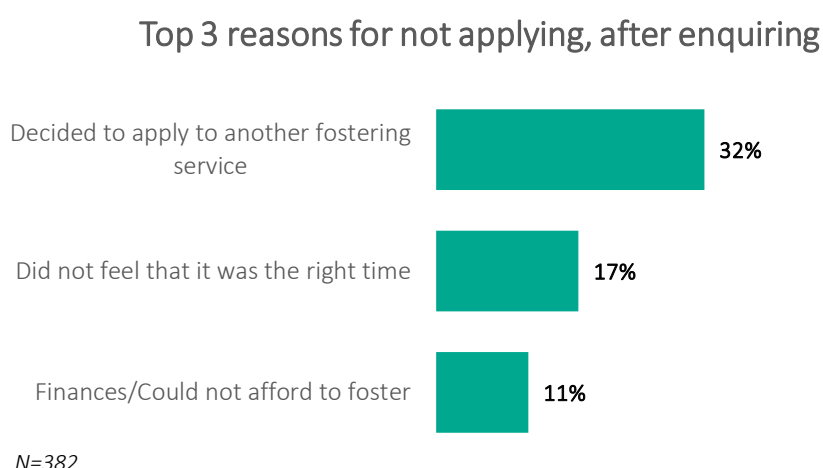
Feeling judged or disrespected was a wider theme that also emerged from interviews and focus groups, which negatively impacted foster carers' perceptions of the application process. Foster carers mentioned that they would have valued social workers recognising the time and effort that the application process required of them. Similarly, for foster carers who were working at the same time as applying, they often had to take time off work and felt that this was not negotiable, flexible, or appreciated.

Offering prospective foster carers an experienced foster carer as a mentor was seen positively by recruitment staff, and a mentor was offered in some locations. Interaction with experienced foster carers during the assessment process was also viewed positively by foster carers. Providing the opportunity to hear about the day-to-day experience of fostering and to ask questions that they would be hesitant to put to an assessor were deemed to contribute to approved foster carers who were more likely to be retained. However, some services struggle to find enough mentors, and some fostering service staff expressed reluctance to offer mentors in case they 'put off' applicants by sharing negative experiences.

## 2.5. Reasons for not progressing enquiries and withdrawing applications

Our survey investigated why there are such high rates of prospective foster carers who make enquiries to fostering services but decide not to apply. In the survey, 21% (n = 382) of the respondents had decided not to apply after initially enquiring to a fostering service. These respondents were asked to select the main reasons for not applying, and the results showed that the top three reasons were: deciding to apply to another service, feeling that it was not the right time, and realising that they could not afford to foster. Figure 5 below shows these survey results.

**Figure 5: Survey reasons for not applying after enquiring to a fostering service**



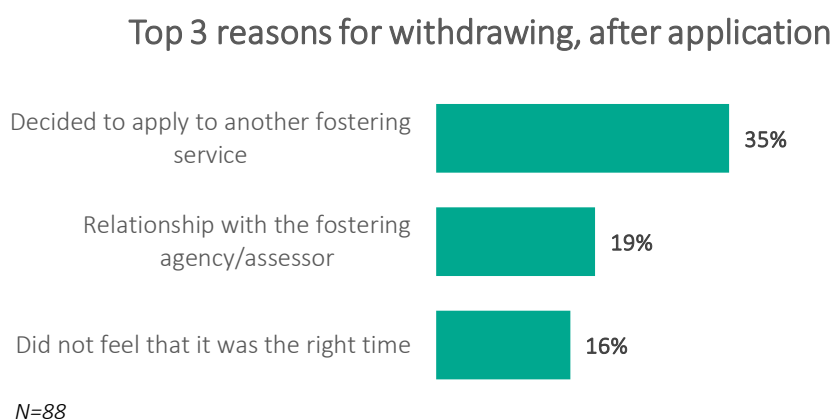
Conversion rates from enquiry to application differed by gender, age, ethnicity, and education level in our survey:

- Gender:** Male respondents were more likely to submit an application after applying than female applicants ( $p < 0.05$ ). The main reasons for not applying also differed by gender. Finances was one of the top reasons to not apply for female applicants, while wanting more practical support from the service was in the top three reasons for male applicants.
- Age:** Older (65+) applicants were more likely to submit an application after making an initial enquiry ( $p < 0.05$ ). The main reasons for not applying also differed by age: applicants in the 35-44 year age group felt the service took too long to reply, while applicants in the 65+ age group highlighted the need for more or different support from the fostering service. Financial concerns only appeared in the top three reasons for not applying in the 45-64 years group.

- **Ethnicity:** Applicants of Asian (24%) and Black/African/Caribbean (23%) ethnicity were more likely not to apply after initial enquiry than those of Mixed (19%) or White (20%) ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> The top reasons for not applying differed by ethnicity. Given the small sample sizes for ethnicities other than White, the findings have to be presented by combining Mixed, Asian, African, and Caribbean ethnic groups. For this combined group, applicants highlighted that the service took too long to respond as a top three contributing factor, but not financial factors.
- **Education:** Applicants with higher levels of education (higher than GCSE/O level) were more likely not to apply after enquiring ( $p < 0.01$ ). The main reasons for not applying for applicants with higher levels of education were the same as the top three reported by the overall population. However, applicants with lower levels of education reported wanting more support and the service taking too long as key factors for not applying, but not finances.

The survey also investigated why so many applications are withdrawn. In the survey, 5% ( $n = 88$ ) of respondents had withdrawn an application. The top three reasons for withdrawing their applications were deciding to apply to another service, feeling it was not the right time for them, and their relationship with the assessor. There was no difference in the rates of application withdrawal depending on gender, age, ethnicity, or education.

**Figure 6: Survey results on top reasons for withdrawing applications**



The top reasons for choosing not to apply after enquiring and for withdrawing applications are similar.<sup>6</sup> The fact that deciding to apply to another fostering service was a key factor in both processes suggests that prospective foster carers are enquiring and applying to multiple fostering services at once. Interviews and focus groups similarly highlighted foster carers exploring multiple services and switching between services over the years, with some saying that the support or relationship with one assessor or supervising social worker was often not sufficient. They also noted the tension between being treated as ‘self-employed’ for tax purposes and only being allowed to be an approved foster carer for one fostering service.

For both not proceeding with an enquiry and withdrawing an application, a key factor was the feeling that the time was not right to begin fostering. In the interviews, participants

<sup>5</sup> The difference in conversion rate from initial enquiry to application by ethnicity cannot be reliably tested for statistical significance due to the small number of respondents identifying as Asian ( $n=26$ ), Black/African/Caribbean ( $n = 58$ ), and Mixed ( $n = 37$ ).

<sup>6</sup> There were no notable differences in withdrawal of applications or the reasons by demographics, but this could be due to small number of respondents who highlighted having withdrawn an application to begin with (Overall withdrawals = 88).

reported that they had decided to apply because their personal or work circumstances had aligned to make fostering a realistic possibility. Financial factors and relationships with the fostering service/assessor were the other two top reasons for respondents withdrawing applications. Finances and support by service staff are mirrored in participants' top recommendations for improving foster carer recruitment as noted in the survey, and they are important considerations for fostering services to take into account during the recruitment process. Focus group discussions explored these barriers to approval further. Participants in these groups were approved foster carers and recruitment staff, so they reported perceived trends and other foster carers' experiences. Staff reported that prospective foster carers often withdraw their applications once they realise the complexity and intensity of fostering, and that this can arise late in the assessment process. Foster carers also reported that initial messaging (e.g., radio and bus adverts) are misleading, and that applicants withdraw once they learn the challenging reality of fostering.

Applications are also withdrawn in the process by applicants or the fostering service because of health issues developing or coming to light, an incompatibility of children with existing pets or lifestyles, and participants realising the implications for their finances and jobs. For example, prospective carers may believe they can continue working in their current employment, but once they are given an example of a weekly schedule of required meetings, they realise their job does not provide enough flexibility. For some, fostering was felt not to be the right fit at the time; for other prospective carers, they may have thrived if given more support or if there were more flexibility.

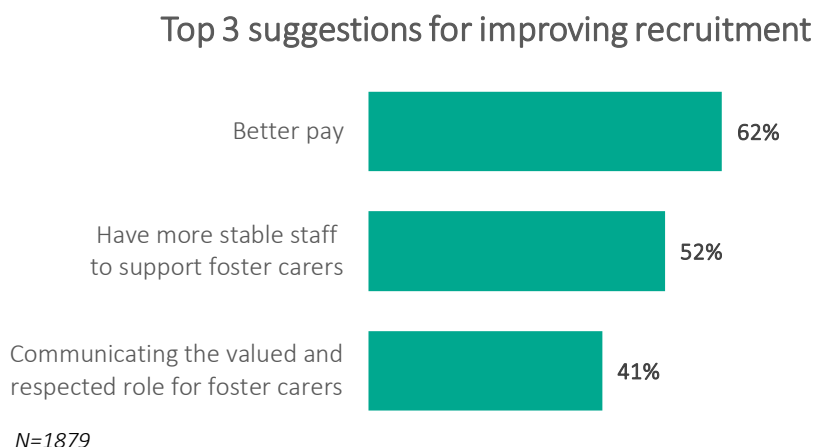
Together these findings imply that applicants are not being given sufficient information to support their decision early enough in the process, leading to those individuals and the services putting resources into prospective carers to whom the current foster carer system is not the right fit.

## **2.6. Improving the recruitment and approval process**

The survey asked participants about their top recommendations for improving recruitment, with the aim of generating a better understanding of how to improve the application process. The survey results found that the top three suggestions for improving recruitment were: providing better pay, having more stable staff to support applicants, and valuing and respecting the role of foster carers more highly (see Figure 7 below, and Table 5 in Appendix A for the detailed table of all responses). The top three suggestions did not differ significantly by gender, age, ethnicity, or education. The survey findings are also supported by information gathered in the interviews and focus groups conducted with foster carers and recruitment staff. The interviews showed that foster carers viewed having stable and supportive staff, feeling valued and respected, and being given honest information early on as top suggestions for improving the application process.



**Figure 7: Survey findings on top suggestions for improving recruitment**



Fostering service staff discussed increasing payments, providing payments between placements, and offering council tax deductions and other benefits in order to improve recruitment and increase the pool of foster carers. This was particularly considered important in light of the recent cost of living crisis. However, interview participants did not emphasise better pay to the same extent as the survey results. In fact, they suggested that having stable financial situation regardless of fostering income was a key factor in deciding to apply to become a foster carer. Participants also recommend that prospective foster carers consider their finances carefully before applying. This implies giving prospective candidates in a less stable financial situation the confidence that fostering will provide enough pay to live on may encourage more applications.

Similarly, while focus group participants considered it important to compensate foster carers fairly for their work, and to provide honest financial information upfront, they did not consider it a key factor in recruitment.

*“Getting a sufficient [payment] rate is important but it’s not the hook that’s gonna get people to apply” (focus group participant)*

Focusing recruitment messaging on financial compensation could even be damaging to the service. Recruitment staff reported that children in care had reported that such campaigns made them feel unwanted, and like their carers were just in it for the money. Furthermore, experienced carers expressed concerns that emphasising the fees may encourage applications from people in applying ‘for the wrong reasons’, and waste services time or put children at risk, although ‘it is easy to weed them out’.

In addition to having **stable and supportive staff, feeling valued and respected**, and **providing accurate information early in the process**, participants brought up several other areas for improvement. These were:

- **Respect throughout the process:** foster carers valued two-way decision making throughout the process, being treated with respect and when fostering services valued the time and effort put into the application. This finding reflected the results from the survey that 41% of foster carers would like better communication around the valued and respected role of foster carers, and highlights how important this is when recruiting foster carers.

- **Better communication throughout the application process:** foster carers valued transparency throughout the process and would have valued being given a timeline and information about what to expect. Where this is not possible, or when unexpected changes occur, participants value being able to contact their social workers with questions.
- **A more streamlined application process:** simpler and less bureaucratic administration requirements, including for switching fostering services. This could involve a national register of foster carers.
- **More cultural sensitivity:** the interviews highlighted how important it is for services to ensure that they are aware and appreciative of different cultural norms, holidays and festivals, and to use appropriate and respectful language when they are working with foster carers.
- **More personalised approaches, including flexibility for applicants who are also working:** including looking at cases on an individual-level rather than blanket rules (e.g., number of pets, not requiring a spare room for under 2s), and for the application process to offer alternative options for those who have specific access needs, or are working, such as by offering visits and meetings outside working hours or support with digital forms.
- **Discuss finances early:** fostering services and foster carers suggested regardless of the pay rate, providing realistic financial information early in the recruitment process to enable foster carers to plan around other jobs, mortgages or rent, etc.
- **Assistance for prospective foster carers deciding whether fostering is a good fit for them:** to provide time and space for honest discussions around the fostering task, set up buddies or mentors, and provide more opportunities for gaining experiences of what it's really like to become a foster carer. Additionally, many felt initial advertising messages did not accurately represent the children and young people in need of fostering and showed unrealistic ideals of foster carers as 'superheroes.'

## 2.7. Summary

Overall, the findings from this research have shown there is a major issue in the recruitment of foster carers in England and added insight into the reasons for the significant drops between the number of enquiries made to fostering services and the number of applications made and then approved.

The findings from this research provide insights into prospective foster carers' motivations to apply to become a foster carer and highlight how recruitment may be improved. The survey found that the top motivations were all focused around helping children and providing them with support and care. Tapping into these motivations while providing realistic expectations of challenges and support may help recruit quality, motivated carers. The interviews added to these findings by showing that foster carers also tended to want to have personal and work circumstances in place before they applied so that they had the time and resources to provide the appropriate level of support when caring for a child as a foster carer. When looking at the reasons as to why applications drop off between making enquiries and applications being approved, the results showed that the top reason was that foster carers had decided to apply to another fostering service. Interestingly, however, another top reason was that prospective foster carers 'did not feel that it was the right time' to begin fostering, which reflects the findings from the interviews about foster carers' motivations to apply and needing to have the right personal circumstances in

place before applying (e.g., having a flexible job or a spare bedroom). These circumstances are important considerations when determining how recruitment can be improved, for example, by providing more support and information for prospective foster carers to help them decide if fostering is the right decision for them at this point in time or through providing 6 monthly messages in case personal circumstances have changed.

One of the focus group participants highlighted, “retention is how you recruit.” Existing foster carers were not only used explicitly in fostering processes, but also having a happy, well supported group of foster carers was seen as both key to recruitment and retention, as discussed in the next section.

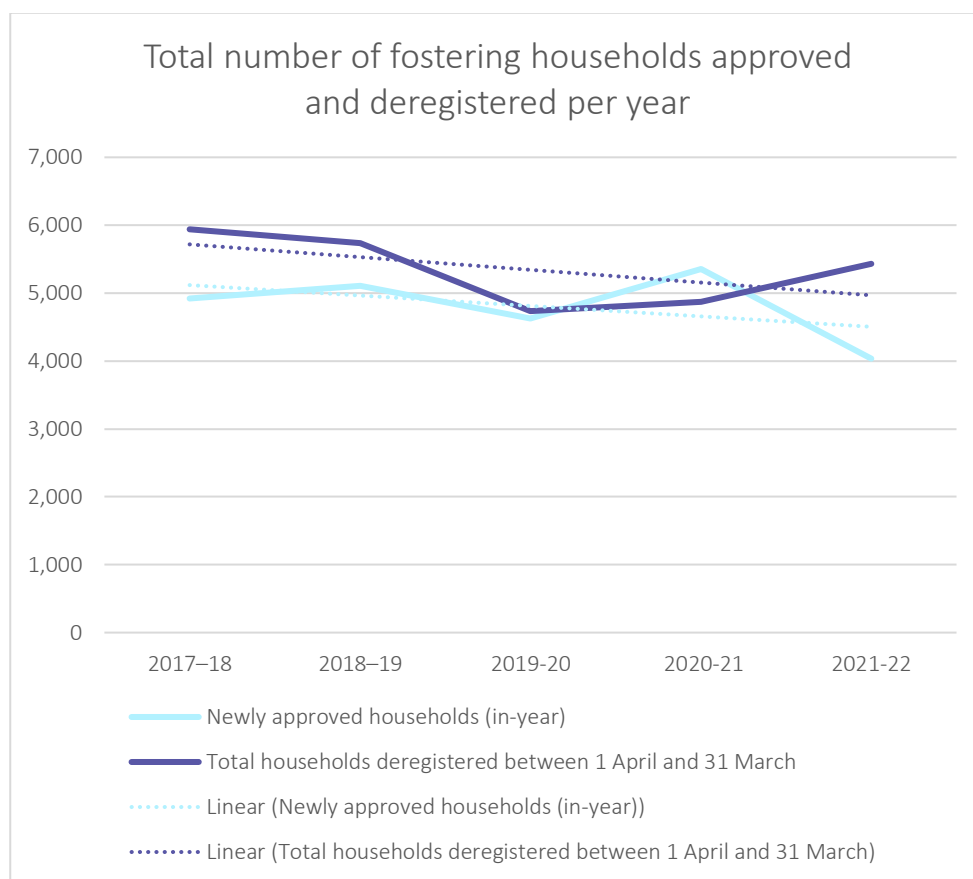


### 3. Retention: who is leaving and who is staying

This section covers what is known about foster carer retention and what is known about those who leave.

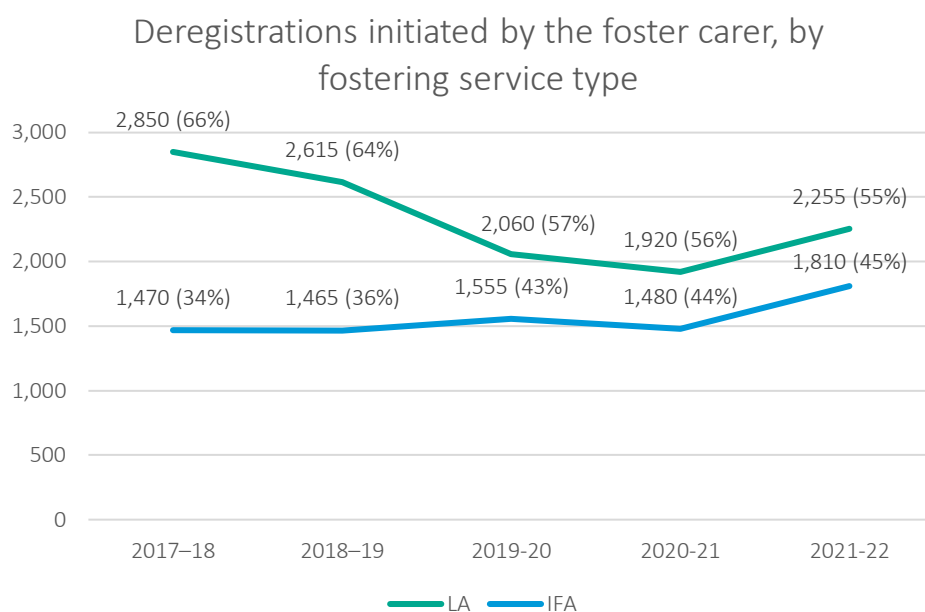
In order to understand the picture of foster carer retention across England, we conducted secondary analysis of Ofsted's published data on foster carers. There are major concerns around retention that extend earlier than the past fiscal year and there are gaps in the data around which foster carers are being retained and the reasons for leaving. Ofsted use the term 'deregistered' to describe those who leave fostering. For ease we use this term in the following section even though foster carers are not registered as other members of the children's social care workforce are. The image below shows the 5-year trend in deregistration and in the number of newly approved households. This past year stands out in the net decrease in the workforce, but the five-year trend also shows a decreasing workforce, with the main increase in newly approved households appearing during the first year of Covid (when participants in the last section mentioned as a time to reconsider work and when it was easier to be assessed while virtual and on furlough). The fostering household turnover rate in the past year was 11.0%, and the previous three years varied between 12.4%-14.4%.

**Figure 8: Five-year trends in newly approved and deregistrations of fostering households from Ofsted**



Several trends emerged underneath these overall trends, including a perplexing dramatic decrease in the number of deregistrations initiated by local authority fostering services between 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 fiscal years (from 850 to 285 deregistrations initiated by the local authority fostering service). Additionally, there have been fairly constant numbers of foster carers deregistering to facilitate a transfer to a local authority or an independent fostering service. However, this research was particularly interested in deregistrations initiated by foster carers (Figure 9), as an important indicator as retention of foster carers overall. In 2020-21, Ofsted added additional categories of foster carers leaving for permanency arrangements for the child or children in their care (that is adoption or special guardianship orders), and this change and Covid may have partially explained the decrease in deregistrations initiated by foster carers in 2020-21. However, the increase in deregistrations initiated by foster carers in 2021-22 suggests that there are underlying reasons for foster carers leaving services that these data do not tell us. It is essential to understand why foster carers are leaving fostering so that services are able to put processes in place to improve retention and the stability of the foster carer workforce.

**Figure 9: Ofsted data on deregistrations initiated by foster carers**



*Note: the data labels show the number of deregistrations initiated by the foster carer in local authorities (LAs) and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and that number as a percentage of the total deregistrations initiated by foster carers in that year.*

We drew upon Ofsted’s data on the rates of deregistrations initiated by foster carers by age to gain further insights into the increased number of deregistrations in 2021-22. Foster carers in their 20s and 30s accounted for 14% of deregistrations in 2021-22, despite making up only 10% of foster carers overall; while this group of carers were more likely to adopt or take a special guardianship order (SGO) for the child or children than the older groups, it does not fully explain the disproportionality. We probed further into foster carer experiences in our primary data collection and secondary analysis of the State of the Nation survey data to understand why foster carers leave or stay.

### 3.1. Foster carer satisfaction and plans to continue fostering

To try to understand the state of foster carer satisfaction, we combined insights from analysis of the State of the Nation survey, our own survey created for this research, and interviews and focus groups with fostering service staff and foster carers. Understanding the determinants of foster carer satisfaction is crucial to understanding how retention can be improved, and how efforts can be effectively targeted to retain foster carers.

Both surveys explored foster carer satisfaction. The 2021 State of The Nation survey found 55% of foster carers in England would recommend fostering to others, 33% would maybe recommend fostering, and 12% would not recommend fostering to others (n = 1986). In contrast, our 2023 survey found less than half (45%) of the respondents said that they would recommend fostering to others who may be considering it, 33% answered ‘maybe’, and 22% said that they would not recommend it (n =1751). One explanation for the shift in foster carer satisfaction between the two surveys (2021-2023) is that the underlying challenges causing low satisfaction have been exacerbated in the recent years. However, an alternate explanation is that respondents to our 2023 survey, which focused on recruitment and retention specifically, were more likely to be dissatisfied and considering

leaving fostering than those who chose to answer the State of the Nation survey. It may be both reasons and/or another reason that explain the change in satisfaction.

The 2023 survey also asked approved foster carers whether fostering matched their expectations, using a 5-point Likert scale. The results showed that 47% strongly or slightly agreed that fostering had met their expectations, while 32% slightly or strongly disagreed. It also investigated whether approved foster carers planned to continue fostering, with the aim of understanding whether satisfaction levels may be correlated with leaving fostering. Foster carers were asked to rate how far they agreed with the statement that they plan to continue fostering a year from now, on a 5-point Likert scale. The results showed that 65% of approved foster carers strongly or slightly agreed with the statement that they would still be fostering a year from now, whilst 21% either slightly or strongly disagreed. To delve into the determinants of foster carer satisfaction, we conducted analysis into the demographic differences in satisfaction.

### 3.1.1. Demographic differences in foster carers' satisfaction

Secondary analysis of the State of the Nation survey showed that there were no statistically significant associations between overall satisfaction with fostering, and gender, employment status, age, ethnicity, education, or religion. In contrast, our survey found that there were demographic differences in responses to whether participants would recommend fostering to others and whether fostering matched their expectations.

The results of our 2023 survey showed that there was no statistically significant difference in participants' satisfaction in fostering depending on their gender. However, older foster carers (65+) are more likely to recommend fostering to others ( $p < 0.1$ ), as well as more likely to agree that fostering has matched their expectations, than those aged between 35 and 64 ( $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>7</sup>

Asian and Black/African/Caribbean foster carers were more likely to recommend fostering than those of other ethnicities, and Asian foster carers were also most likely to agree that their experiences of fostering matched their expectations.<sup>8</sup> In terms of education level, foster carers with higher levels of education (higher than GCSE/O levels) were less likely to recommend fostering to others than those with lower levels of education ( $p < 0.01$ ), and were also less likely to agree that fostering has matched their expectations ( $p < 0.01$ ). Experiences of and attitudes towards fostering by demographics are presented in Figure 155 in Appendix A.

### 3.1.2. Demographic differences in intention to continue fostering

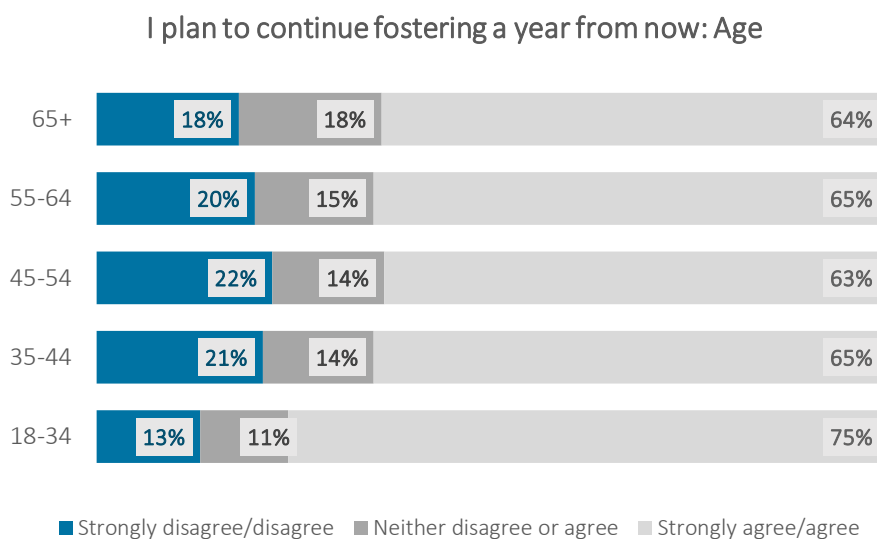
Plans to continue fostering a year from now differed depending on participants' age, ethnicity, and education level, but there were no statistically significant differences detected between foster carers of different genders. Parallel to the trends around satisfaction, foster carers with higher education levels (higher than GCSE/O level) were less likely to intend to continue fostering in a year ( $p < 0.1$ ) (Figure 16 in Appendix A). However, the findings around age and ethnicity and intention to continue fostering are surprising when compared to other questions or sources.

<sup>7</sup> While younger age group (18-34) are more likely to recommend fostering to others and more likely to agree that fostering has matched their expectations, than those aged between 35-64, the differences are not statistically significant. This may be due to the small number of respondents in this age group (n = 59).

<sup>8</sup> The difference in satisfaction by ethnicity cannot be reliably tested for statistical significance due to the small number of respondents identifying as Asian (n = 26), Black/African/Caribbean (n = 58), and Mixed Ethnicity (n = 37). However, on combining the Asian and Black/African/Caribbean ethnicities, these ethnicities are more likely to recommend fostering than White foster carers ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Younger foster carers (18-34) were more likely to agree that they plan to continue fostering than disagree to the statement ( $p < 0.1$ ), with no statistically significant difference for other age groups (Figure 10). However, as discussed, younger foster carers were over-represented in those who stopped fostering compared to other age ranges in the Ofsted data.

**Figure 10: Agreement with intention to continue fostering with age**

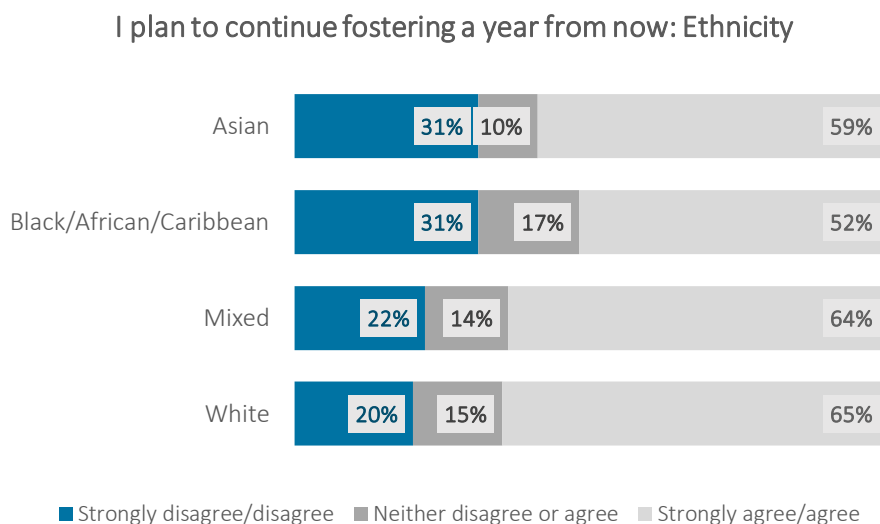


Similarly perplexing, Asian or Asian British Carers and Black, Black British, Caribbean or African carers were more likely to recommend fostering, but they were less likely to agree that they intended to continue fostering a year from now (Figure 11).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>The difference in satisfaction by ethnicity cannot be reliably tested for statistical significance due to the small number of respondents identifying as Asian (n = 26), Black/African/Caribbean (n = 58), and Mixed Ethnicity (n = 37). However, on combining the Asian and Black/African/Caribbean ethnicities, these ethnicities are less likely to continue fostering than White foster carers ( $p < 0.05$ ).



**Figure 11: Agreement with intention to continue fostering by ethnic group**



These seemingly perplexing findings may reflect a number of factors. Firstly, foster carers may recommend fostering but still not plan to continue. One local authority fostering staff member spoke about having several foster carers return to the Caribbean in the past year due to the cost-of-living crisis and quality of life in London. Likewise, younger foster carers may intend to continue fostering, but may count as ‘deregistered’ because they switch fostering service, enter into a permanency arrangement for their foster child, an unexpected circumstance arises that makes them decide to stop fostering temporarily, or the fostering service decides to terminate their approval. It is also very possible that the sample sizes for these minority groups in fostering are not able to reflect the national trends or that there are statistical anomalies. Nonetheless, it is important to examine retention not just through the lens of the final numbers retained, but also by looking at satisfaction and intentions to ensure a contented and diverse workforce to meet the needs of children in care.

## 3.2. Reasons for continuing or stopping being a foster carer

We explored the reasons for foster carer satisfaction levels, and how they contribute to people leaving fostering in the interviews and focus groups with foster carers and fostering service staff. We sought to learn what we could from foster carers and from situations where foster carers have considered or decided to stop fostering, in order to understand what contributes to retention. Three key themes arose from these conversations: feeling valued and respected by fostering services and social workers, receiving sufficient support from fostering services, and the adequacy of administrative and financial systems.

### 3.2.1. Support from fostering services and social workers

Support – especially from the fostering service, child’s social worker, and supervising social worker – was core to being retained or to considering and leaving fostering. Being easy to contact, honest, and providing practical support was appreciated. One participant explained about having previously considered leaving fostering, but that her supervising social worker is ‘the only reason’ that she is still a foster carer. There was also recognition that social workers are overworked and often inexperienced and that the services are overstretched.

*“It’s sort of a bit luck of the draw. And when it works it’s amazing, but when it doesn’t, it’s awful”* (Focus group participant)

Positive experiences of support while fostering included having a reliable and easily contactable social worker and being given support without having to ask for it. Additionally, having a consistent social worker over time allowed for foster carers to develop strong and trusting relationships, which was noted as being a positive aspect of support as was formal structures such as Mockingbird constellations<sup>10</sup> or support hubs.

Foster carers particularly reported a lack of support during times of transition of children’s placements, when trying to access and coordinate support for children’s extra needs (for example, for special educational needs or mental health), and when crises arose. Foster carers noted that they had to solve issues that they did not have experience of dealing with alone (for example, dealing with the police or solving issues with the child’s school), and that they would have valued advice from the service on how to navigate these issues. At times, even when support was received, it felt like ‘a tick box exercise’ rather than an attempt to help them solve the issue in a meaningful way. Foster carers felt that receiving support more regularly would have prevented issues from escalating.

*“I wouldn’t do it [foster] again. I think you have to be fully committed, and you have to have the right support”* (Interviewee who left fostering)

Foster carers reported that social workers often dismissed their concerns – or felt judged for their concerns – instead of being provided with support. They also experienced difficulties in reaching social workers and sometimes felt that social workers ‘drag their feet’ on simple decisions. Foster carers reported feeling that the role of the supervising social worker was to appease foster carers rather than actively support them. Foster carers noted that high staff turnover, high staff workloads, a lack of understanding of the fostering role, and a lack of communication and coordination between social workers and social care teams all contributed to a lack of support. Others felt that they were expected to deal with issues alone because they had chosen to become foster carers.

*“It always feels like you’re being looked at with a sceptical eye, like you could be the ones abusing the children”* (focus group participant)

*“We’re not treated as human beings who are allowed to have difficult times”* (focus group participant)

A key issue that arose around support was the ability or the lack of ability to access sleepovers or short break care (also called respite care). There was great variation in this practical support – with some foster carers in focus groups shocked about what was on offer at other local authorities or independent fostering services. Some had sleepovers written into their child’s care plan every four to eight weeks, while one focus group participant had not received sleepover care in twenty years of fostering. Some who had left fostering discussed being unable to access a short break despite it being promised as a contributing factor to burnout. When it was on offer to those with placements that would benefit from this type of support, the sentiment below was common:

*“A carer coming back from [a short break] is a better carer”* (focus group participant)

Foster carers also expressed a need for greater emotional support from fostering services. The interviews highlighted that placement transitions, serious behavioural challenges, and

<sup>10</sup> Mockingbird is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides run by The Fostering Network in the UK.

allegations had an impact on foster carers' emotional wellbeing, and foster carers would value greater emotional support throughout these times. Some noted that existing support groups were inflexible to the diversity of carers, such as support groups meeting during the day while some foster carers worked.

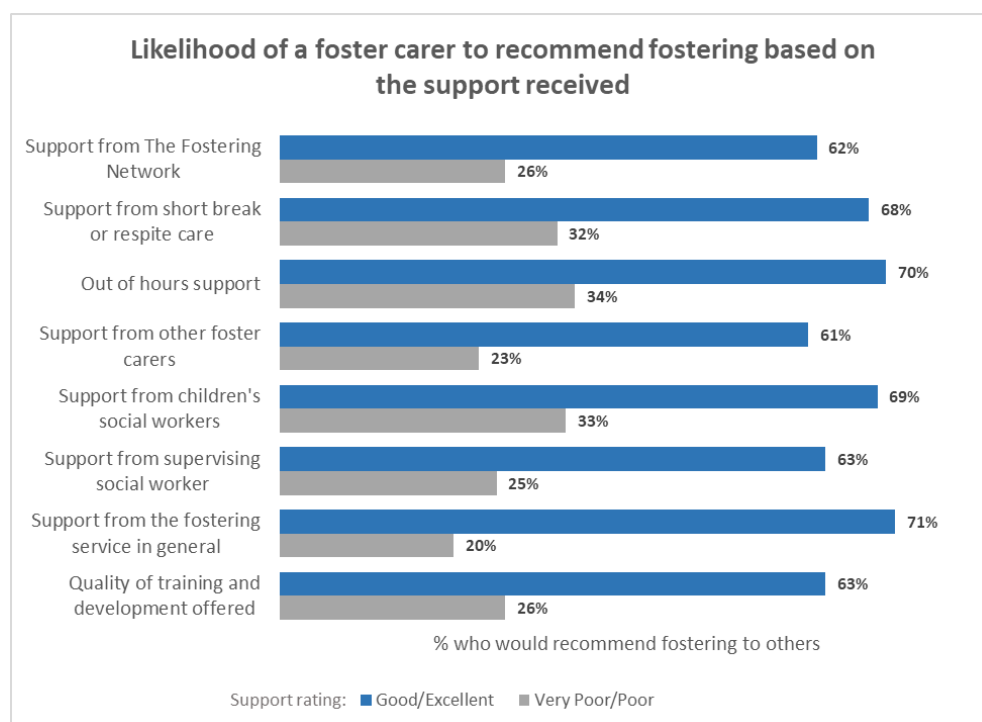
*"We're all trying to do the same job, we're all trying to look after children, but you need to look after the foster carers too"* (interviewee who has left fostering)

Supporting these qualitative findings were the findings from our secondary analysis of the 2021 State of the Nation survey data. The analysis showed that the support received from out of hours support and children's social workers, and from short break or respite care, was poorly rated, while the support provided by The Fostering Network, other foster carers, and supervising social workers were highly rated, as shown in Figure 18 in Appendix B.

Our analysis also explored whether the quality of support that foster carers received was associated with their overall ratings of fostering. The analysis showed that foster carers who rate the support received as Good/Excellent rate their overall experience between 7-8, while those who rated the support received as Very Poor/Poor rate their overall experience between 5-6 ( $p < 0.1$ ).

Additionally, foster carers who rate the support that they received from different sources as Good/Excellent were more likely to recommend fostering to others, compared to those who rated the support received as Very Poor/Poor ( $p < 0.01$ ).

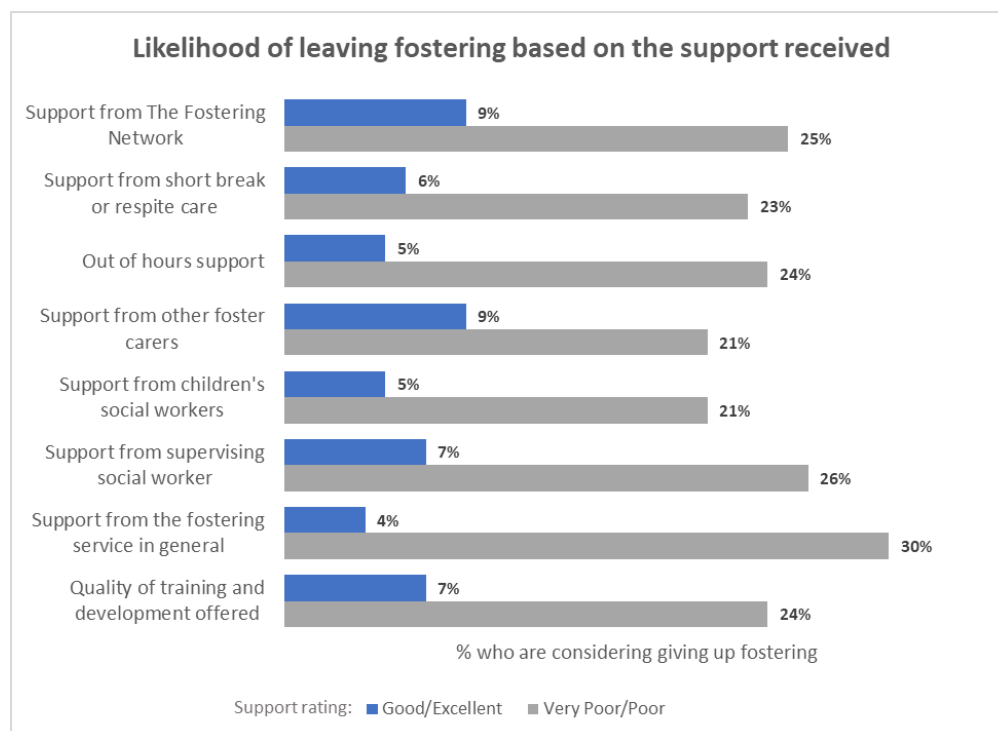
**Figure 12: Findings from the State of the Nation on likelihood to recommend fostering to others based on the quality of support offered**



Finally, our analysis of the State of the Nation data explored how likely a foster carer is to give up fostering, based on the quality of support that they have received. The analysis showed that foster carers who rated the support that they received as Good/Excellent were also less likely to give up fostering as compared to those who rated the support

received as Very Poor/Poor, and that these associations were statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). For instance, as shown in Figure 13, 4% of foster carers who rated the support from the fostering service in general as Good/Excellent would give up fostering, while 30% of foster carers who rated the support from the fostering service in general as Very Poor/Poor would give up fostering.

**Figure 13: State of the Nation survey results comparing considering giving up fostering in comparison to rating of quality of support**



Overall, the findings highlight that receiving insufficient support is a challenge faced by foster carers, and that this is likely one of the determinants of foster carer retention.

### 3.2.2. Feeling respected and valued as a foster carer

Feeling respected or valued as a foster carer was seen both as part of being supported as well as an aspect that stood on its own and was related to staying or leaving fostering. Foster carers noted that they wanted to continue fostering when they felt respected by social workers and when they felt valued by their fostering service. More often, a lack of feeling respected was expressed as a challenge and as contributing to leaving or considering leaving fostering. Foster carers often felt that their knowledge around how to care for a child and their knowledge of specific children’s needs was dismissed and not respected.

*“To be constantly undermined...it gradually ground me down. I got so fed up of being told I didn’t know”* (interviewee who has left fostering)

*“They make you feel stupid despite being very experienced and having a degree”* (focus group participant)

*“We are treated like we are bottom of the pile”* (focus group participant)

Foster carers also expressed frustration around feeling judged by some social workers, which they report as being particularly prevalent when they raised issues or concerns whilst fostering.

*“If there is an issue, [social workers] can make you feel worthless or like you’ve not been doing a good job. I think that’s why many people leave. It’s the judgmental attitude that people find hard to swallow, and hence decide to move on”*  
(interviewee who is a current foster carer)

Communication from fostering services and social workers was reported to feel ‘dictatorial’ and non-collaborative. Instead, foster carers preferred when they were involved in decision-making and their views and opinions around the care of the children were respected. Positive experiences were noted when they were treated as an equal member of the professional team caring for a child by the social workers and fostering services, by being invited to professional meetings and actively involved in decision making around the child. Foster carers feel that social workers should recognise and acknowledge the difficult work that they do. Foster carers also shared that they could tell the difference between ‘lip service’ and genuine respect. Being made to feel genuinely appreciated was noted as a key factor in feeling valued and respected.

*“I really admire the social workers. I think it’s an amazing job. And I think it’s really hard and incredibly responsible. But they need to accept the foster carers are doing a good job, too, and that without the foster carers, the entire thing does fall apart. So for retaining them, they should be doing nice things, and they should be giving them just a bit more encouragement...We’re really easily pleased”*  
(interviewee who has left fostering)

*“Your social worker goes home at the end of the day and gets weekends off, but you are with the kids 24/7 and yet social workers think they know better than you about how to care for the children”* (focus group participant)

### 3.2.3. ‘Decent work’: Financial factors and administration

A third key challenge raised by the research for retention was financial compensation in comparison to the task and burdensome administration requirements for foster carers.

Whether the financial support provided by the fostering service covered the expenses incurred by the foster family in caring for a child contributed to the overall feeling of satisfaction in fostering. From our secondary analysis of the State of the Nation survey, there was a significant association between whether the allowance and expense claims cover foster carers’ costs of fostering and the overall experiences of fostering. Overall, only 61% of respondents to the State of the Nation survey reported that the allowance and expense claims cover their cost of fostering. Of those who say that costs are met, 63% would recommend fostering to others, while those who say that the costs are not met, 44% would recommend fostering to others; this difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, foster carers who report that their allowance/expense claims cover the cost of fostering rate their overall experience at 7.5, while those who say that the costs are not met, rate their overall experience as 6.6; this difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Overall, foster carers in interviews and focus groups noted that the money received overall was low. Covering costs was particularly challenging for single foster carers who did not have financial support from a partner, and most participants noted that the financial compensation was not sufficient to sustain themselves without alternative income. There was a call from some to increase the fee rate paid to foster carers and to increase local or national standards of allowances.

*“We shouldn’t be worrying about making ends meet; we should be focusing on caring for the children” (focus group participant)*

However, the more prevalent issues that arose in interviews and focus groups was the manner in which payments were sent and the administration around finances. Foster carers reported that payments were often very delayed (in some cases by months), that they received incorrect payments, and that there was no way of knowing what payments covered the allowance, fee, or other expenses. Several participants reported being overpaid by several thousand pounds without knowing due to the lack of paperwork, and they reported that local authorities then demand repayment with very little notice, which was especially challenging for foster carers who operate on a tight budget. This lack of consistency in payment was emphasised more strongly than the value of the payments themselves. A lack of information around rates of pay for different types of care they provide and other types of compensation (council tax exemption, parking permits, etc.) made it challenging to plan. Foster carers said that the financial aspects of fostering did not feel professional, which was frustrating and demotivating and took time and effort away from their caring role.

*“They need to get this right so as soon as you start you are properly compensated and don’t have to fight for it” (focus group participant)*

Focus group discussions also revealed that social workers are often closed to discussions around pay. Several participants reported that social workers had accused them of being ‘in it for the money’ when they asked to resolve financial issues which was noted to be “ridiculous because we don’t get paid enough to be in it for the money” (focus group participant).

In addition to financial administrative challenges, foster carers also experienced administration errors being made around documents for the child. This included incorrect information about children before and during placements, forms having to be repeated because information had been lost, and delegated paperwork being delayed. These issues had effects on their ability to provide adequate care for the children in their care. Foster carers explained that a lot of the administration that they were required to do (for example, to take a child on holiday) felt bureaucratic and often confusing, with lots of jargon and a lack of transparency. The lack of advance notice for meetings and tight deadlines by social workers make it difficult for them to plan their time, and again related to feelings of not being respected.

Foster carers preferred when they had clear administrative tasks to complete and social workers planned upcoming appointments and deadlines with them. Clear rules and clarity around processes were also appreciated.

### **3.2.4. Other contributing factors to considering stopping or continuing fostering**

Interview and focus group participants raised further challenges. These included challenges around flexible arrangements provided for those that work full-time alongside fostering, being given honest and clear communication about children that foster carers would look after, and difficulties around allegations.

Foster carers who worked alongside fostering experienced difficulties with building social connections with other foster carers (many of those who do not work meet up during the day) and with joining meetings and being available for visits from social workers if they were organised during working hours. Interviewees explained that generally their employer would have to be very flexible in order for them to keep their work alongside fostering, particularly during the earlier stages of becoming a foster carer, or at times of

transition of placements. One foster carer, after considering fostering for many years, began fostering once having flexible, remote work that could be done during a school day. However, she found that she was not able to do her own work alongside fostering due to the intensive support and limited education schedule of the teenagers she cared for.

Foster carers also described that they had experienced challenges around receiving little or no information about a child that was to be placed in their care. Foster carers found it difficult to plan for what the child would need, and one foster carer didn't even know which school the child that was placed with them attended (and so they had to drive the child around local schools until the child recognised their school). Some others had experiences of the fostering service or social worker giving incorrect information about the child that was coming to live with them. This contributed both to it being more challenging to care for that child and not feeling valued and trusted as a foster carer.

Matching between foster carers skills, experiences, and availability and the child or children they care for – which could be affected by the information available – was reflected in focus groups, interviews, and surveys as a reason for continuing or stopping fostering, echoing other theory around the importance of matching for foster carer retention (Ott et al., 2021). If foster carers felt that the match with a child was not good, they were more likely to consider giving up fostering; 20% of those who have not had a positive match in the past 24 months would consider giving up fostering as opposed to 7% of those who have had a positive match in the State of the Nation Survey, and this difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Allegations were discussed as another reason that foster carers resigned or considered resigning, with some noting that if they experienced another unfounded allegation, they would resign as they could not go through the process again. There were 3,010 allegations of abuse made against foster carers during the 2021 to 2022 fiscal year (Ofsted, 2022). From The State of the Nation's focus on allegations, 66% of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the past two years stated that they considered resigning from fostering during the investigation (The Fostering Network, 2022). In Sebba and Plumridge's (2016) study on unproven allegations, foster carers experienced emotional and financial impacts, with some choosing to switch fostering services or stop fostering. Our research reiterated these messages, with foster carers particularly reporting the feeling of being abandoned by social workers during investigations and noting that – because of the public nature of allegations (e.g., police coming to the house for investigations) and need to notify workplaces with children (e.g., schools) – allegations could ruin families' livelihoods and reputations even if proved false.

### **3.3. Reasons why foster carers continue fostering, despite facing challenges**

In addition to continuing fostering when they felt well supported, respected, and provided with a professional financial administration with adequate pay, foster carers noted other reasons that they continued fostering.

Foster carers reported that if you expected the challenges before you began fostering, you were more likely to continue. The relationships with other foster carers and support staff – particularly supervising social workers – led foster carers to continue fostering despite challenges. These relationships often contributed to a sense of community, for example the Mockingbird model being described as a family that individuals both felt part of and wanted to continue to be part of.

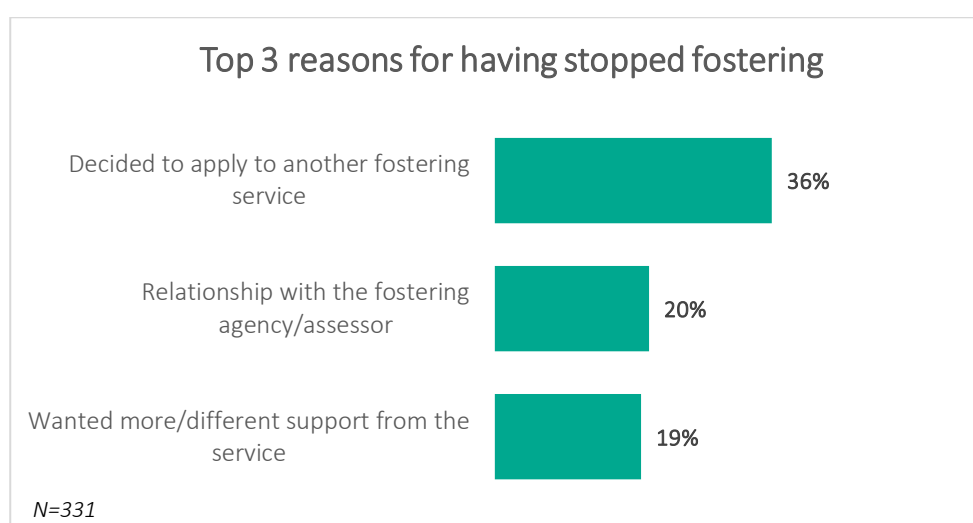
Foster carers explicitly noted staying for children, with some foster carers noting that the motivations to foster are more complex and deeper than 'wanting to give back' and than

the system acknowledges or covers in assessments and supervision. Someone may say they decided to foster after seeing an advertisement on a bus, however “that’s what made us discuss it, but our reason for doing it is actually far deeper” (focus group participant).

### 3.4. Reasons for leaving a fostering service

The challenges experienced in fostering that were raised in the interviews and focus groups – particularly around support and relationships with fostering services – were reflected in results of the survey around foster carers’ motivations for having stopped fostering. Of the survey respondents, 18% (n = 331) had stopped fostering for a service, and these respondents were asked to select the main reasons for having stopped. The results found that the top 3 reasons were related to the decision to apply to another service, their relationship with the fostering service, and that they wanted more support from the service, as show in Figure 14 below.

**Figure 14: Survey top reasons for stopping fostering for a service**



It is unsurprising that the top reason for stopping fostering in our survey was deciding to foster for another service; it was 9% of the deregistrations in the 2021-2022 Ofsted data, between 10-12% for the previous four years, and our survey would likely over-sample from those who have deregistered but continued fostering. A higher percentage of foster carers resigned to transfer to an independent fostering agency than transfer to a local authority, but the split of overall deregistrations was relatively even between the two sectors, with 54% (2,925) of deregistrations occurring in LAs and 46% (2,510) in IFAs. Overall deregistrations represented 14% of the overall households for LAs and 17% of the overall households for IFAs (Ofsted, 2022). Foster carers in our focus groups spoke about switching services primarily for better support, greater respect, and better professionalisation (including pay and working conditions and perceived support if there were an allegation).

Overall, a clear picture emerged around the key challenges that foster carers faced, which included feeling unsupported, lacking respect by fostering services, and facing processes around fostering felt bureaucratic and unprofessional. These issues often interlinked and played into one another. These issues were clearly linked to the reasons for foster carers having stopped fostering (e.g., decision to apply to another service, their relationship with the fostering service, and that they wanted more support from the service), as shown by the results of the survey, suggesting that these issues are key when considering how to improve the retention of foster carers.



## 3.5. Improving foster carer retention

The results from the survey, highlight that the top three 3 suggestions for improving retention were:

1. **Improving pay for foster carers**
2. **Reducing the rate of turnover in social workers**
3. **Providing greater respect for foster carers valuing the role of fostering**

The detailed table showing the distribution across all the above options can be found in Table 6 in Appendix A. These top three suggestions for improving retention did not significantly differ by gender, education, or age. However, while the top 3 suggestions are the same as those above for foster carers of White and Mixed ethnicities, foster carers of Black, African, and Caribbean ethnicities found more practical support to be of greater importance, foster carers of Asian ethnicity placed clearer and easier paperwork and administrative requirements in their top three recommendations to improve retention.

Reflecting the findings of the survey, focus group and interview participants also highlighted that the most common recommendations from foster carers around how they could improve retention involved: providing more practical and emotional support for foster carers, shifting attitudes to respecting and valuing foster carers more, and professional administration, including pay.

**Provide more support to foster carers:** the interviews highlighted that foster carers who had stopped fostering would have valued more in person and proactive support offered by social workers. If that is not possible, carers noted that having a hotline or method of having questions answered quickly was something that they would find supportive and would prevent issues from escalating. Carers would have liked support when coordinating care and services for children, in urgent and safeguarding situations, and in organising short breaks through support networks known to the carer and the child. Foster carers mentioned support programmes like Mockingbird, which has been shown through research to retain more foster carers than comparison foster carers (Ott et al., 2020). Lastly, foster carers mentioned that they felt as though some social workers did not have sufficient training or an in-depth understanding of what it was like to be a foster carer, and that this prevented them from being able to provide insightful advice and support when needed. Therefore, they recommended that up-to-date training be provided for social workers to ensure that the support is as helpful as possible, in order to retain more foster carers.

**Show appreciation and respect towards the role of foster carers:** a key recommendation coming out of interviews with foster carers, who were either considering stopping fostering or who had stopped fostering already, was that social workers and fostering services change any negative views or attitudes that they may hold about foster carers or the value of their role of caring for children. Foster carers wanted to be treated as equals to the other professionals supporting the children, and for their knowledge and skills in caring for children to be respected and heard in decision making processes.

*“I think the main thing they need to do [to retain foster carers] is make the foster carers feel genuinely appreciated” (interviewee who has left fostering)*

Foster carers want to be invited to ‘professional meetings,’ feel appreciated, and for social workers to collaborate with them to find solutions to issues. This would generate a feeling that foster carers are on the ‘same team’ as social workers, which would, they feel, increase retention and feelings of wellbeing among foster carers.

**Act on foster carers' feedback and complaints:** Foster carers value when their complaints and issues are listened to and taken into account by the fostering services. As highlighted in the interviews, when this didn't happen, foster carers tended to feel more dissatisfied with fostering and were more able to leave.

**Treat foster carers as professionals and standardise fostering processes:** An overarching recommendation for improving multiple challenges that foster carers experienced was ensuring that systems worked well and felt professional. Foster carers wanted better pay and for financial administration to be accurate and treated more professionally. Foster carers also felt that retention would be improved if foster carers had inductions, better training and support, and more consistent and professional interactions from fostering services.

**Be more respectful and aware of different cultures and diversity:** This was spoken about generally and in particular instances, with one interviewee noting "discrimination pushes people out."

**Reduce social worker turnover:** High social worker turnover led to foster carers' experiences of errors in administration, and inability to form strong, consistent relationships with social workers.

**Provide appropriate support for children:** Foster carers feel that appropriate support – such as life story work and in school – was important for both the children and carers.

**Provide opportunities to discuss leaving and provide exit interviews:** From the small numbers of interviews with foster carers who had left fostering, the carers had generally not had a conversation with the fostering service about their decision to resign, and they would have valued the chance to think about resigning more carefully with the service, since it is difficult to change the decision once notice was given.<sup>11</sup> One foster carer explained that if they had been given more time to take back their resignation, then they may have continued fostering, and one local authority was contacting all foster carers who had resigned to see if they wanted to return to fostering. The need to re-complete the application process if they decided that they would like to start fostering again was noted as a barrier to return, and carers would have valued a fast-track option for recently resigned foster carers to allow for changes in decisions around stopping. Lastly, foster carers would have found it helpful to have the option to do something around fostering that was less intense than having to be a full-time foster carer. One interviewee noted that they did not feel that they had many other options when thinking about stopping fostering, other than to resign, and so a conversation around this would have been beneficial for retaining them.

### 3.6. Summary

Given the increasing demand for foster carers and the decreasing number of foster carers for the last reported year (2021-2022), retaining foster carers who can provide stable homes with the skills and support to enable children in care to thrive is crucial. While some deregistration is necessary for retirement and people deemed unsuitable to foster, the turnover rate could be reduced. National data categories provide little insight into the reasons foster carers leave, but they do show disconcerting trends and that young foster carers leave at higher rates than expected.

<sup>11</sup> Regulation 28 (13) of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 explains that a foster carer's approval will be terminated from 28 days of given notice. Some fostering service guidance specifies this cannot be retracted.

This research provides new insights into why foster carers leave and consider leaving as well as what we can learn from those who stay about what motivates them to stay, and from what foster carers and services think would improve retention. The three central themes for retention were around support, treatment with respect, and professionalism of services, including sufficient reimbursement for the costs of caring for children. Ratings of satisfaction of support consistently correlated with other ratings of satisfaction with fostering and the intention to continue fostering. Perceptions of a positive match also correlated with the intention to continue fostering. Experiences with unfounded and unsubstantiated allegations also contributed to considering stopping or stopping fostering. These correlations only tell a partial picture, but they are supported by the qualitative stories and by other research on why foster carers stay and why they leave. Foster carers wanted greater pay, respect, and support to improve retention as well as system changes to decrease social worker turnover and provide needed support to the child.

Finally, when foster carers are considering leaving there are missed opportunities to have open and supportive conversations to see if that decision is right, or if there are other options to be explored such as additional support or different types of fostering. There are also missed opportunities for exit interviews and for services and systems to learn from those who choose to leave.

## 4. Discussion: Improving the current picture

This section summarises and discusses the findings and offers recommendations for research, Government, and fostering services to improve foster carer retention and recruitment in order to build a more stable and diverse workforce to care for children.

### 4.1. Summary and discussion of findings

Throughout this document, we refer to ‘retention and recruitment’ by foregrounding the word ‘retention’ for two reasons. Firstly, the best recruitment strategy is good retention of foster carers – this was explicitly expressed in our research. Additionally, it is implicit in the work of fostering services in their use of existing foster carer buddies for prospective foster carers and ‘refer a friend’ bonuses. Secondly, it does not matter how many new foster carers are recruited if they cannot provide quality care to meet the needs children in care in England or if those who can provide the quality care are not retained. One participant shared that she and other foster carers in their service’s ‘foster carer recruitment and retention’ working group threatened to all leave because the group was only focusing on recruitment, and they thought their major issue was retention.

For those immersed in the fostering sector in England, they may not be surprised by many of our findings, but they nonetheless should not be overlooked or discounted: feeling valued and supported, including through regular and sufficient financial support, and being able to focus on the role in helping provide ‘stable homes, built on love’ for children is critical for retention and recruitment. Motivations to foster were centrally driven by the desire to care and help children. Likewise, many foster carers emphasised that they stayed in fostering *in spite of* the lack of support, the fostering system, social worker staff turnover, or fostering challenging them financially compared to less stressful jobs, but *because of the children*. Connected to this, the recommendations for foster carer recruitment and retention focused on having adequate support and feeling valued in the daily role of caring for children. Those who left fostering – even if it counted as ‘retirement’ - expressed that aspects such as inadequate support and not feeling valued contributed to their decision-making.

There is the real potential to improve foster carer retention, and thus recruitment, by cultural and practical change. Practical change included simple aspects such as expressing appreciation and not taking for granted the work that foster carers have done, considerations of ‘professional meetings’ and who that includes, ensuring clear communication around processes (from assessment to review meetings to allegations) in a respectful way, and providing short breaks for foster carers. Other systemic changes – including a more stable social work workforce and ensuring sufficient allowance for covering the costs of caring for children – are needed and called for by the Government’s 2023 implementation strategy for children’s social care.

The research set out to explore how to achieve ‘a more stable and diverse’ group of foster carers, and it found that the needs of a more diverse group of foster carers or how to make the workforce more stable, was often overlooked. This was due to a number of factors such as a drive to get eligible foster carers through the door from fostering services

and the increasing number of children in care, increasing costs, and a decreasing pool of foster carers. Across England, the number of approved Asian carers increased year on year in the last five years – possibly due to targeted retention and recruitment, such as through mosques or fostering services that specialise or target Asian populations in certain locations – but the numbers overall are still very low and the same trend was not seen for Black African, Black Caribbean, or Mixed-Ethnicity foster carers. The sample sizes in our survey and interviews were too low to comment significantly on trends, but there were new demographic differences in foster carer satisfaction and intention to continue fostering. This included those with higher levels of education expressing that fostering matched their expectations less, they were less likely to recommend fostering, and they were less likely to be sure that they planned to continue to foster a year from now.

Key to achieving a more stable and diverse foster carer workforce are the findings in this research around age, gender, class, and working status. The fostering workforce is older than the general workforce. Despite a younger group of foster carers in their 20s and 30s representing a higher percentage of newly-approved foster carers, they are also a higher percentage of foster carers who leave fostering (even taking into account permanency such as adoption and special guardianship orders). While progress had been made visually in terms of more diverse groups of foster carers being represented in recruitment materials (including different ages, ethnic groups, and images of LGBTQ+ foster families), foster carers spoke about fostering services having working models for both recruitment and assessment that assumed you were of a certain age and demographic. For example, processes assumed that you could easily take time off work for training and assessment, that you could easily pay back if you were accidentally overpaid by thousands, and that female carers were the primary carers. These processes led some people to stop the assessment process or contributed to other feelings of lack of respect, which then led to considering or stopping fostering.

## 4.2. Recommendations for research

This report provides the most comprehensive picture for England on foster carer recruitment and retention. The survey and interview data are limited by those foster carers who choose to take part in these activities, and may be more likely to have negative experiences and express dissatisfaction. Interviewee and survey participants spoke about wanting to contribute to the research as they felt that they had no other outlet to try to change the system or to express why they left fostering or what they wanted changed. This research was a scoping design and presents correlations and experiences rather than being a design that conclusively explains what works for retention and recruitment.

Prospective foster carers were underrepresented in our survey and interview research samples. However, other research such as Kantar Public UK (2022), confirms much of our findings around motivations to foster and the behavioural insights that lead to someone being ‘warm’ to the idea of fostering and those who have never considered fostering. Further research is needed with those who have never considered fostering, as well as those who have left fostering.

From the research, we recommend areas for future research and data collection, such as:

- Improvement in the national Ofsted data, including ensuring fostering services understand and apply the data guidance around enquiries, reasons for withdrawing applications, and reasons for exiting / de-registration
- Further research on how the application process and length varies for different demographics in order to recruit and approve a more diverse workforce

- Further research with prospective foster carers, especially those who do not complete applications, to confirm why they do not continue fostering
- Further research into why foster carers leave including 'retirement' (which may hide other reasons), other reasons for deregistration initiated by foster carers, and deregistration by services to unpick reasons for leaving, and see if there are lessons in what information and training should be provided during the recruitment and assessment process as well as throughout a foster carers career
- Further research targeting the experiences of specific demographics of potential foster carers that are under-represented in the current workforce and our research sample (such as Black Caribbean, working foster carers, and younger prospective, current, and former foster carers)
- Further evaluation on the effectiveness of different fostering recruitment and retention strategies.
- Research into the effectiveness of payment schemes offering rewards for word-of-mouth recruitment.
- Research into foster care assessment tools to identify which ones facilitate more positive assessment experiences within tighter timescales.

### 4.3. Recommendations for Government

Based on our research findings, we recommend that Government:

#### *Recruitment*

- **Communications and marketing:** Ensure that recruitment marketing and communications target needs and diverse prospective foster carer populations, are child-focussed, communicate the complexity of the foster carer role, provide a realistic picture on the fostering role and support, and showcase the difference foster carers can make to children and young people.
- **Mentoring schemes:** Evaluate buddying/mentoring schemes to assess the effectiveness in offering wraparound support to prospective foster carers during the approval process. These schemes could be trialled and evaluated through the regional pathfinders.

#### *Retention*

- **Financial support:** Conduct a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances using up to date evidence to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child and ensure all foster carers receive a regular fee payment which recognises their time, skills, and expertise.
- **Short breaks:** Amend the foster carer assessment process to include the establishment of a support network of known trusted adults who can offer short breaks for children and support to foster carers.
- **Information sharing:** Introduce information sharing standards for children's placing authorities to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching. In developing these standards, Government could

consult with foster carers about what level of information they feel is appropriate to enable them to care for children.

- **Allegations:** Commission a ‘deep dive’ into allegation investigations in foster care including analysis of current policies and processes and how they are working in practice for children and carers.

#### **Recommendation for Ofsted:**

- **National data collection:** Introduce clear definitions around enquiries to become a foster carer, categories to code the reasons for withdrawing applications and main reason for leaving fostering, including if foster carers left as a result of an allegation.

## **4.4. Recommendations for fostering services**

From the research, we recommend that fostering services:

### ***Recruitment***

**Application and approval process:** Review the application and approval process considering the following principles:

- **Lived experience:** initial recruitment, open evenings, pre-approval training and mentoring should reflect the realities of fostering and the lived experience of children in care.
- **Quality relationships:** limit the number of social workers that prospective foster carers work with. This allows prospective foster carers to build trusting relationships with a key social worker ensuring consistency, stability, and limiting bureaucracy. It also allows honest conversations about the role to be facilitated early in the process to inform decision-making and ensure newly approved foster carers are well-equipped for the role.
- **Flexibility:** the assessment should consider the needs and schedules of the applicant.
- **Transparency:** there should be transparency about what the process entails, how long it is expected to take and the support available.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** all social work professionals (including panel members) assessing and approving foster carers should respect different individuals and their culture and identities, and should feel confident in discussions about matters related to culture, language, ethnicity, and religion.

**After an application is withdrawn:** Fostering services should seek the relevant permissions to store the details of and keep in touch with people who enquire to foster but don’t submit an application or withdraw an application. This would allow the service to keep engaging with people who are thinking about fostering (e.g., through newsletters and inviting them to follow-up events).

### ***Retention***

- **Support:** Ensure there is quality, pro-active, wraparound support for foster families available at the point of need, including specialist out of hours and peer support.

- **Delegated authority:** Actively involve foster carers in decision making about a child in their care including being invited to meetings and having the appropriate authority delegated to them to make decisions for the children they look after, as any other parent would.
- **Transparent administration:** Provide timely transparent administration of payments to foster carers including what covers the allowance, fee, and any other expenses.
- **Leaving conversations and exit interviews:** Offer all who are considering leaving fostering conversations about support and other pathways within the fostering role. Additionally, offer all foster carers who leave an exit interview to inform service development and retention and recruitment strategies.

## 4.5. Conclusions

This report provides the most comprehensive picture of foster carer retention and recruitment in England. It brings together numerous data sources including a re-analysis of the national Ofsted Fostering in England data and the 2021 State of the Nation survey of foster carers and combines that with new primary data. This included a 2023 survey on retention and recruitment which received responses from 1,879 prospective, approved, or recently resigned foster carers and interviews and focus groups with 52 prospective, approved, or former foster carers.

The data overall provides important insights into the retention and recruitment of foster carers. In relation to recruitment and approval, we found that:

- Tapping into people's motivations to foster while providing realistic expectations of the challenges and support available may help recruit quality, motivated carers.
- There are differences by age, gender, ethnicity, and education level as to whether someone who enquires to foster submits an application.
- Applicants are not being given sufficient information to support their decision early enough in the approval process, leading to individuals and services investing time and resources when fostering might not be the right fit.
- Having stable, supportive social work staff who are skilled and experienced in all aspects of the fostering role could improve foster carers' experiences of the recruitment process and beyond. Feeling valued and respected and providing accurate information early are considered key in improving the recruitment and approval process.

In relation to retention, we found that:

- Receiving sufficient, consistent support is a challenge faced by foster carers and that this is one of the determinants of foster carer retention.
- Contributing to the overall feeling of satisfaction in fostering, was whether the financial support provided by the fostering service – the allowance – covered the expenses incurred by the foster family in caring for a child. We also found differences in levels of satisfaction in the fostering role by ethnicity and education.



- Foster carers reported continuing fostering because of the children they care for, in spite of a lack of support. Foster carers are more likely to be retained and can provide better care for children when they feel well supported, respected, and are provided with a well-organised fostering service with adequate pay.
- Feeling unsupported, being treated with a lack of respect by fostering services and having bureaucratic and unprofessional processes around fostering are key when considering how to improve the retention of foster carers.

Overall, this research highlights that the situation in England warrants further Government investment in foster carer recruitment and retention. This includes providing the funding that is needed to meet the needs of all children in need of care and for foster carers to be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child. By doing so, this will ensure a stable workforce that can continue to provide loving homes for children and the recruitment of diverse foster carers with a range of skills able to meet the needs of children in care.

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# Appendix A: 2023 survey

**Table 3: Characteristics of the CEI survey sample**

Sample Description		
	%	N
<i>Foster carer journey</i>		
Enquiring or applying	1%	16
Approved	93%	1751
Stopped in the past 5 years	6%	112
<i>Region</i>		
North West	14%	257
North East	6%	105
West Midlands	10%	189
East Midlands	9%	163
South West	16%	305
South East	18%	335
London	8%	142
East of England	7%	137
Yorkshire and the Humber	13%	242
<i>Service provider</i>		
Local authority/children's trust	73%	1363
Independent fostering agency/charity	27%	503
<i>Gender<sup>12</sup></i>		
Male	17%	314
Female	83%	1516
<i>Age</i>		
18-34	3%	59
35-44	11%	207
45-54	31%	570
55-64	42%	770
65+	13%	244
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	92%	1700
Black/African/Caribbean	3%	64
Asian	2%	34
Mixed Ethnicity	2%	42
Others	0%	6
<i>Highest educational qualification obtained</i>		
University Higher Degree or equivalent	13%	221
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	27%	464
Post-secondary school certification	10%	167
A/AS level or equivalent	18%	310
GCSE/O level or equivalent	27%	469
No formal qualifications	5%	80
None of the above	2%	34

<sup>12</sup> Too few participants choose Nonbinary, genderfluid, multiple gender identities, or other to report.

**Table 4: Distribution across all survey suggestions on motivations to foster**

<b>Motivation to foster</b>	<b>Overall</b>
<i>Fostering fits in with my family</i>	28%
<i>I like being part of the fostering community</i>	21%
<i>I enjoy working with children</i>	58%
<i>I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care</i>	89%
<i>I want to have the opportunity to develop and improve my skills</i>	19%
<i>I am care-experienced myself</i>	7%
<i>I am from a family that fostered/fosters</i>	7%
<i>I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family</i>	67%
<i>I want to work from home</i>	18%
<i>I am committed to the child I am currently fostering</i>	52%
<i>I feel valued and supported by my fostering service</i>	16%
<i>My fostering income is an essential part of my household income</i>	27%
<i>My partner wants to foster</i>	4%
<b>N</b>	<b>1879</b>

**Table 4.1: Distribution across all motivation survey options by age**

<b>Motivation to foster</b>	<b>18-34</b>	<b>35-44</b>	<b>45-54</b>	<b>55-64</b>	<b>65+</b>
<i>Fostering fits in with my family</i>	34%	31%	30%	27%	21%
<i>I like being part of the fostering community</i>	24%	19%	21%	20%	26%
<i>I enjoy working with children</i>	61%	60%	58%	58%	59%
<i>I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care</i>	97%	92%	90%	89%	84%
<i>I have the opportunity to develop and improve my skills</i>	25%	20%	19%	19%	20%
<i>I am care-experienced myself</i>	14%	8%	5%	7%	7%
<i>I am from a family that fostered/fosters</i>	24%	8%	7%	7%	5%
<i>I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family</i>	71%	75%	69%	64%	66%
<i>I want to work from home</i>	22%	19%	18%	18%	16%
<i>I am committed to the child I am currently fostering</i>	53%	46%	51%	54%	53%
<i>I feel valued and supported by my fostering service</i>	12%	12%	14%	17%	21%
<i>My fostering income is an essential part of my household income</i>	32%	25%	27%	29%	20%
<i>My partner wants to foster</i>	5%	4%	4%	3%	8%
<b>N</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>570</b>	<b>770</b>	<b>244</b>

**Table 4.2: Distribution across all motivation survey options by ethnicity**

<b>Motivation to foster</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black/African/Caribbean</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Mixed</b>
<i>Fostering fits in with my family</i>	27%	31%	35%	24%
<i>I like being part of the fostering community</i>	21%	23%	24%	29%

I enjoy working with children	58%	59%	62%	69%
I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care	89%	97%	82%	81%
I have the opportunity to develop and improve my skills	19%	27%	32%	24%
I am care-experienced myself	7%	11%	3%	12%
I am from a family that fostered/fosters	7%	22%	12%	7%
I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family	67%	66%	68%	62%
I want to work from home	18%	22%	21%	14%
I am committed to the child I am currently fostering	53%	38%	41%	57%
I feel valued and supported by my fostering service	15%	20%	21%	21%
My fostering income is an essential part of my household income	27%	19%	24%	26%
My partner wants to foster	4%	3%	0%	7%
<b>N</b>	<b>1,700</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>42</b>

**Table 4.3: Distribution across all motivation survey options by education**

<b>Motivation to foster</b>	<b>Uni Higher Degree or equiv.</b>	<b>BA/BSc degree or equiv.</b>	<b>Post-school cert</b>	<b>A/ AS level or equivalent</b>	<b>GCSE/O level or equiv.</b>	<b>No qual</b>	<b>None of the above</b>
Fostering fits in with my family	25%	25%	28%	28%	31%	24%	32%
I like being part of the fostering community	23%	19%	26%	18%	22%	33%	26%
I enjoy working with children	54%	60%	53%	60%	59%	55%	65%
I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care	87%	91%	94%	89%	87%	85%	82%
I have the opportunity to develop and improve my skills	15%	16%	21%	21%	23%	16%	24%
I am care-experienced myself	8%	6%	7%	7%	8%	5%	12%
I am from a family that fostered/fosters	12%	5%	4%	8%	7%	9%	12%
I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family	66%	66%	59%	65%	72%	73%	62%
I want to work from home	13%	15%	28%	17%	20%	19%	21%
I am committed to the child I am currently fostering	43%	50%	51%	51%	57%	70%	50%
I feel valued and supported by my fostering service	14%	15%	16%	15%	18%	19%	15%
My fostering income is an essential part of my household income	20%	27%	32%	30%	27%	28%	44%
My partner wants to foster	8%	5%	4%	3%	3%	3%	0%
<b>N</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>464</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>469</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>34</b>



**Table 5: Distribution across all survey suggestions to improve retention**

Suggestions for improving retention	Overall
Better pay	60%
Greater respect for foster carers	59%
Have less turnover of social workers supporting children and foster carers	57%
Better short breaks/respice/sleepovers for children in care	35%
More support for children in care	33%
Clearer and easier paperwork and administrative requirements	30%
More practical support for foster carers	28%
More opportunities for professional development/transferable skills	9%
More peer support or community activities for foster families	8%
Targeted retention of different foster carer communities	5%
Better training for foster carers	5%
N	1879

**Table 5.1: Distribution across all survey suggestions to improve retention by gender**

Suggestions for improving retention	Male	Female
Better pay	68%	59%
Greater respect for foster carers	59%	59%
Have less turnover of social workers supporting children and foster carers	58%	57%
Better short breaks/respice/sleepovers for children in care	30%	36%
More support for children in care	26%	34%
Clearer and easier paperwork and administrative requirements	24%	31%
More practical support for foster carers	26%	28%
More opportunities for professional development/transferable skills	8%	10%
More peer support or community activities for foster families	7%	8%
Targeted retention of different foster carer communities	5%	5%
Better training for foster carers	7%	5%
N	314	1,516

**Table 5.2: Distribution across all survey suggestions to improve retention by age**

Suggestions for improving retention	18-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
More practical support for foster carers	31%	34%	27%	26%	27%
More support for children in care	36%	34%	35%	33%	26%
Better pay	64%	66%	64%	57%	52%
Have less turnover of social workers supporting children and foster carers	59%	52%	54%	59%	61%
Greater respect for foster carers	64%	55%	56%	59%	66%
Targeted retention of different foster carer communities	2%	5%	6%	5%	3%

Better training for foster carers	10%	7%	4%	5%	5%
More opportunities for professional development/transferable skills	10%	10%	9%	9%	10%
More peer support or community activities for foster families	8%	11%	7%	7%	7%
Better short breaks/respites/sleepovers for children in care	36%	37%	35%	36%	29%
Clearer and easier paperwork and administrative requirements	27%	27%	32%	28%	35%
N	59	207	570	770	244

**Table 5.3: Distribution across all survey suggestions to improve retention by ethnicity**

Suggestions for improving retention	White	Black/African/Caribbean	Asian	Mixed Ethnicity
More practical support for foster carers	27%	45%	26%	31%
More support for children in care	33%	38%	26%	31%
Better pay	60%	69%	74%	45%
Have less turnover of social workers supporting children and foster carers	58%	39%	32%	52%
Greater respect for foster carers	59%	48%	56%	55%
Targeted retention of different foster carer communities	5%	9%	9%	5%
Better training for foster carers	5%	11%	12%	7%
More opportunities for professional development/transferable skills	9%	23%	18%	5%
More peer support or community activities for foster families	7%	8%	12%	5%
Better short breaks/respites/sleepovers for children in care	35%	36%	32%	40%
Clearer and easier paperwork and administrative requirements	30%	33%	44%	24%
N	1,700	64	34	42

**Table 6: Distribution across all survey suggestions for improving recruitment**

Suggestions for improving recruitment	Overall
Better pay	62%
Have more stable staff to support foster carers	52%
Communicating the valued and respected role for foster carers	41%
Communicating the support for children in care	26%
Communicating that there is practical support for foster carers	22%
Communicating training and development opportunities	19%
Streamlined administrative and reporting requirements for foster carers	18%
More peer support or community activities for foster families	17%
Streamlined approval processes	15%
Targeted recruitment of different foster carer communities	9%
Better advertisements around foster care	8%
Streamlined responses to enquires to foster carers	5%
N	1879

**Table 7: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to not apply, after enquiring**

Reasons for not applying, after enquiring	Overall
Caring or health needs changed	1%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	32%
Did not feel that it was the right time	17%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	0%
Did not have the space in our house	3%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	11%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	1%
Found the approval process too invasive	5%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	1%
Incompatible with my employment/career	5%
Moved house	2%
My children did not want to foster	2%
My partner did not want to foster	1%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	7%
Took the service too long to reply	9%
Wanted more/different practical support from the service	9%
N	382

**Table 8: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to not apply, after enquiring by gender**

Reasons for not applying, after enquiring	Male	Female
Caring or health needs changed	0%	1%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	34%	32%
Did not feel that it was the right time	18%	17%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	2%	0%
Did not have the space in our house	0%	3%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	6%	12%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	0%	2%
Found the approval process too invasive	6%	5%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	0%	2%
Incompatible with my employment/career	6%	5%
Moved house	0%	2%
My children did not want to foster	6%	1%
My partner did not want to foster	0%	2%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	16%	6%
Took the service too long to reply	10%	9%
Wanted more/different support from the service	20%	8%
N	50	323

**Table 9: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to not apply, after enquiring by age**

Reasons for not applying, after enquiring	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
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Caring or health needs changed	0%	0%	2%	3%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	44%	30%	32%	22%
Did not feel that it was the right time	17%	22%	12%	16%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	0%	0%	1%	0%
Did not have the space in our house	4%	4%	2%	0%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	10%	12%	10%	5%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	0%	2%	1%	3%
Found the approval process too invasive	2%	8%	3%	8%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	2%	1%	2%	0%
Incompatible with my employment/career	15%	4%	4%	0%
Moved house	6%	1%	1%	3%
My children did not want to foster	0%	3%	1%	5%
My partner did not want to foster	0%	1%	2%	3%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	6%	5%	8%	11%
Took the service too long to reply	21%	10%	7%	3%
Wanted more/different support from the service	13%	8%	8%	14%
N	48	125	155	37

Category related to age group 18-34 not presented due to small sample size

**Table 10: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to not apply, after enquiring by ethnicity**

Reasons for not applying, after enquiring	White	Non-White
Caring or health needs changed	1%	0%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	32%	32%
Did not feel that it was the right time	17%	23%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	0%	3%
Did not have the space in our house	2%	7%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	11%	10%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	1%	0%
Found the approval process too invasive	4%	10%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	1%	3%
Incompatible with my employment/career	3%	16%
Moved house	1%	7%
My children did not want to foster	2%	3%
My partner did not want to foster	1%	3%

Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	8%	0%
Took the service too long to reply	8%	23%
Wanted more/different support from the service	10%	3%
<b>N</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>31</b>

*Non-White category combines all other ethnicities due to small sample size.*

**Table 11: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to not apply, after enquiring by education**

<b>Reasons for not applying, after enquiring</b>	<b>University Higher Degree or equivalent</b>	<b>Bachelor's degree or equivalent</b>	<b>Post-secondary school certification</b>	<b>A/AS level or equivalent</b>	<b>GCSE/O level or equiv.</b>
Caring or health needs changed	0%	1%	0%	1%	3%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	32%	35%	32%	34%	30%
Did not feel that it was the right time	20%	23%	13%	13%	11%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%
Did not have the space in our house	4%	3%	5%	1%	3%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	14%	12%	24%	6%	8%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	0%	2%	0%	0%	3%
Found the approval process too invasive	6%	4%	3%	4%	4%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	2%	3%	0%	0%	1%
Incompatible with my employment/career	12%	7%	3%	3%	3%
Moved house	2%	3%	0%	1%	0%
My children did not want to foster	2%	2%	0%	3%	0%
My partner did not want to foster	0%	3%	0%	3%	0%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	12%	4%	8%	6%	11%
Took the service too long to reply	10%	7%	5%	13%	12%
Wanted more/different support from the service	6%	10%	3%	12%	13%
<b>N</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>76</b>

*Categories related to 'no formal qualifications' and 'none of the above' not presented due to small sample size*

**Table 12: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to withdraw application**

<b>Reasons for withdrawing, after applying</b>	<b>Overall</b>
Caring or health needs changed	1%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	35%
Did not feel that it was the right time	16%
Did not have sufficient social network to foster	2%
Did not have the space in our house	0%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	6%
Fostering did not feel like the right fit	3%

Found the approval process too invasive	10%
I/we would not be able to meet the needs of children in care	1%
Incompatible with my employment/career	6%
Moved house	2%
My children did not want to foster	2%
My partner did not want to foster	2%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	19%
Wanted more/different practical support from the service	10%
<b>N</b>	<b>88</b>

**Table 13: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to stop fostering**

<b>Reasons for having stopped fostering</b>	<b>Overall</b>
Adoption/Special guardianship order for children in care	5%
Caring or health needs changed	3%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	36%
Did not feel that it was the right time	3%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	4%
Fostering no longer felt like the right fit	6%
Fostering service terminated the approval	3%
I/we was/were not be able to meet the needs of children in care	2%
Incompatible with my employment/career	3%
Mental health/stress/isolation/impact on my social network	7%
Moved house	5%
My children wanted me/us to stop	5%
My partner wanted to stop	3%
Not getting matched with children as envisioned	13%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	20%
Result of a substantiated allegation	0%
Result of an unfounded allegation	5%
Result of an unsubstantiated allegation	5%
Wanted more/different support from the service	19%
Wanted to retire	4%
<b>N</b>	<b>331</b>

**Table 14: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to stop fostering by gender**

<b>Reasons for having stopped fostering</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Adoption/Special guardianship order for children in care	4%	5%
Caring or health needs changed	0%	4%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	32%	37%
Did not feel that it was the right time	4%	3%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	4%	4%
Fostering no longer felt like the right fit	7%	6%
Fostering service terminated the approval	2%	3%

I/we was/were not be able to meet the needs of children in care	2%	3%
Incompatible with my employment/career	4%	3%
Mental health/stress/isolation/impact on my social network	4%	8%
Moved house	5%	5%
My children wanted me/us to stop	5%	5%
My partner wanted to stop	4%	3%
Not getting matched with children as envisioned	13%	14%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	30%	18%
Result of a substantiated allegation	0%	0%
Result of an unfounded allegation	5%	4%
Result of an unsubstantiated allegation	5%	5%
Wanted more/different support from the service	16%	19%
Wanted to retire	4%	5%
<b>N</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>266</b>

**Table 15: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to stop fostering by age**

<b>Reasons for having stopped fostering</b>	<b>35-44</b>	<b>45-54</b>	<b>55-64</b>	<b>65+</b>
Adoption/Special guardianship order for children in care	4%	6%	5%	4%
Caring or health needs changed	0%	0%	4%	6%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	29%	31%	39%	35%
Did not feel that it was the right time	4%	5%	4%	1%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	7%	7%	1%	4%
Fostering no longer felt like the right fit	18%	7%	4%	6%
Fostering service terminated the approval	4%	3%	3%	3%
I/we was/were not be able to meet the needs of children in care	7%	2%	3%	0%
Incompatible with my employment/career	0%	3%	4%	1%
Mental health/stress/isolation/impact on my social network	14%	7%	7%	3%
Moved house	4%	8%	4%	3%
My children wanted me/us to stop	7%	3%	5%	6%
My partner wanted to stop	4%	1%	3%	4%
Not getting matched with children as envisioned	14%	15%	13%	12%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	36%	20%	12%	25%
Result of a substantiated allegation	0%	1%	0%	0%
Result of an unfounded allegation	7%	2%	4%	7%
Result of an unsubstantiated allegation	18%	0%	4%	10%
Wanted more/different support from the service	46%	15%	14%	20%
Wanted to retire	0%	1%	2%	14%
<b>N</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>69</b>

*Category related to age group 18-34 not presented due to small sample size*

**Table 16: Distribution across all survey options for reasons to stop fostering by ethnicity**

Reasons for having stopped fostering	White	Non-White
Adoption/Special guardianship order for children in care	5%	3%
Caring or health needs changed	3%	7%
Decided to apply to another fostering service	37%	28%
Did not feel that it was the right time	4%	0%
Finances/Could not afford to foster	4%	4%
Fostering no longer felt like the right fit	7%	3%
Fostering service terminated the approval	4%	0%
I/we was/were not be able to meet the needs of children in care	2%	3%
Incompatible with my employment/career	3%	3%
Mental health/stress/isolation/impact on my social network	7%	7%
Moved house	5%	7%
My children wanted me/us to stop	5%	4%
My partner wanted to stop	3%	3%
Not getting matched with children as envisioned	13%	14%
Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor	20%	20%
Result of a substantiated allegation	0%	0%
Result of an unfounded allegation	5%	3%
Result of an unsubstantiated allegation	5%	7%
Wanted more/different support from the service	17%	34%
Wanted to retire	5%	0%
N	298	29

*Non-White category combines all other ethnicities due to small sample size.*

**Figure 15: Figures (A-E) of variations on foster carer satisfaction based on age, ethnicity, and education**

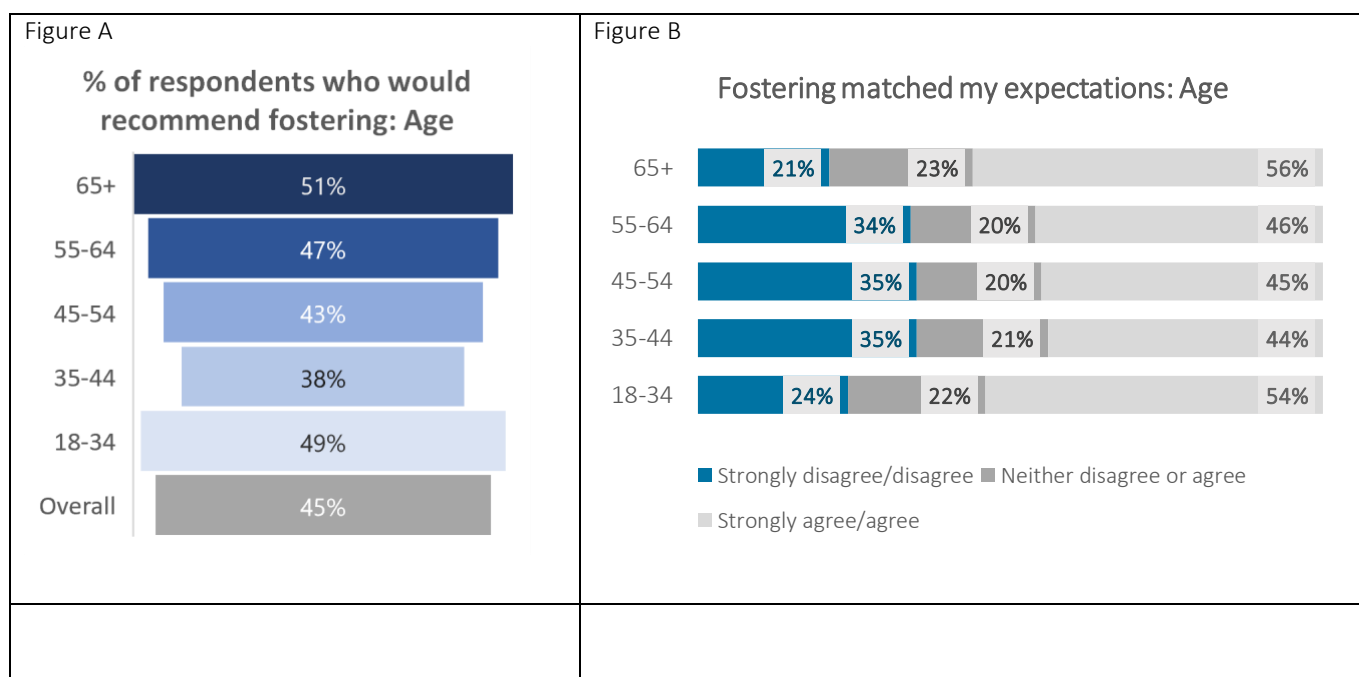




Figure C

**% of respondents who would recommend fostering: Ethnicity**

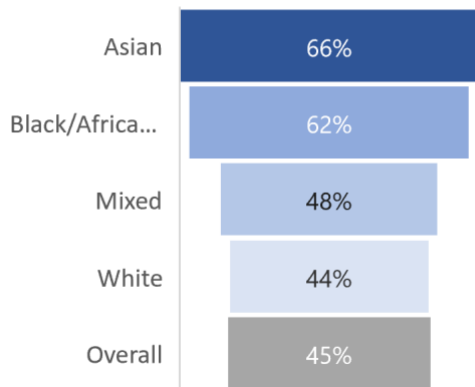


Figure D

**Fostering matched my expectations: Ethnicity**

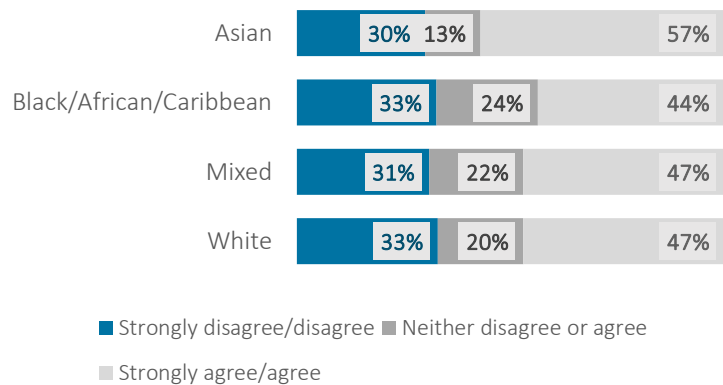


Figure E

**% of respondents who would recommend fostering: Education**

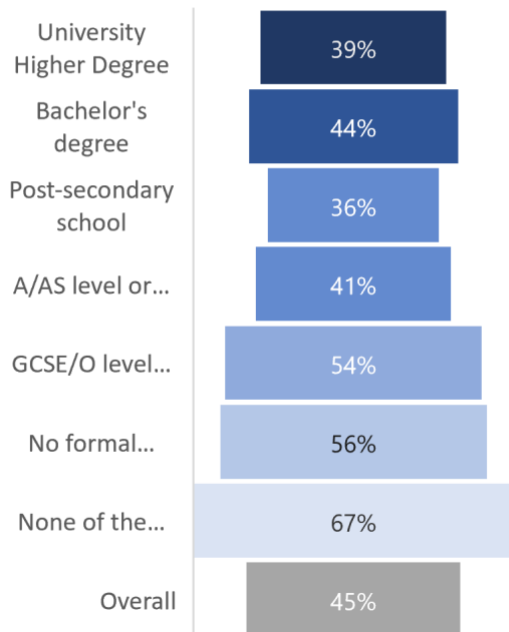
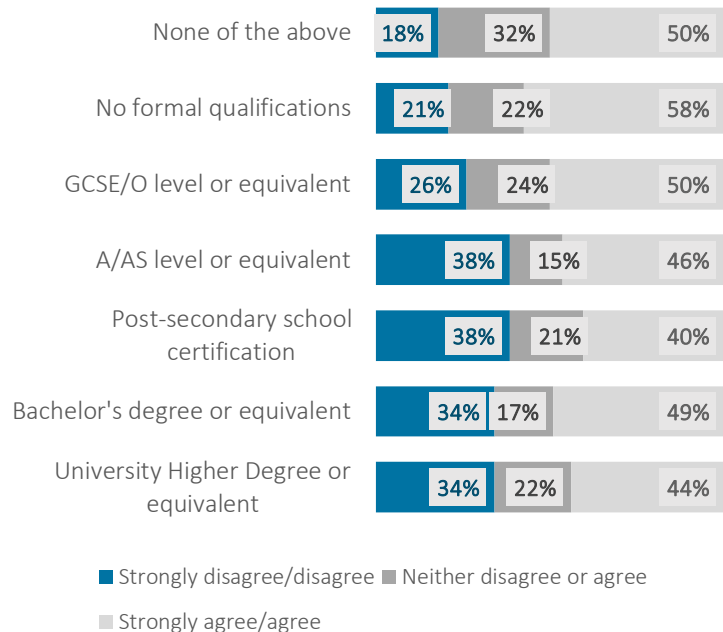


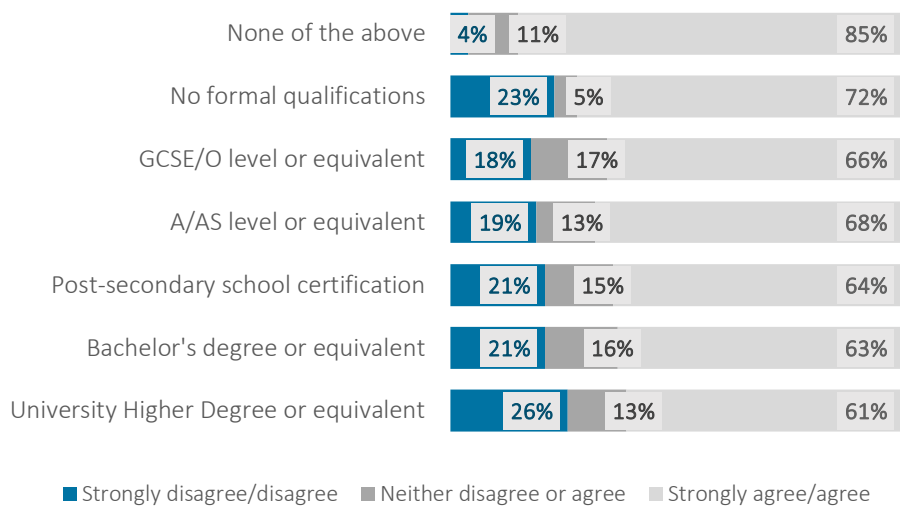
Figure F

**Fostering matched my expectations: Education**

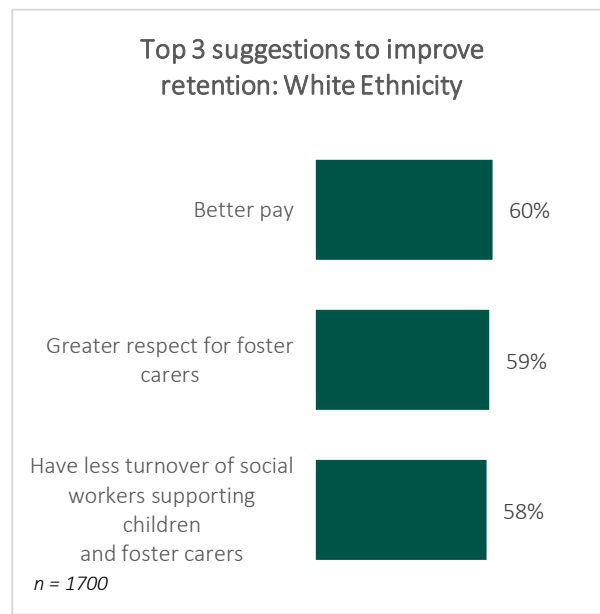
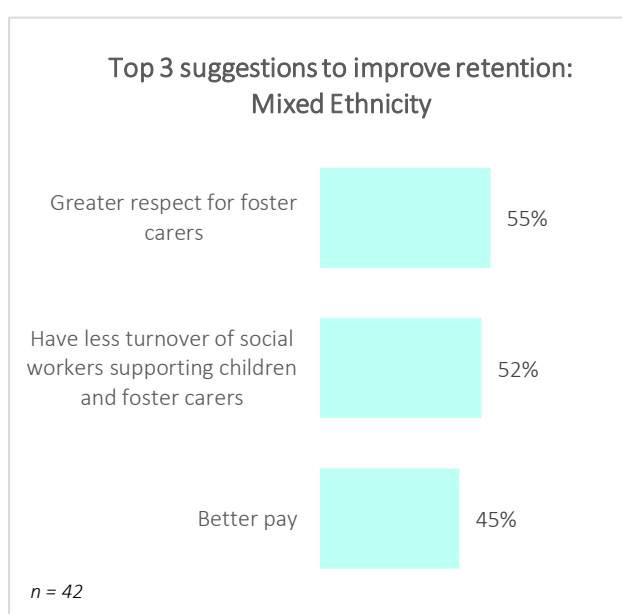
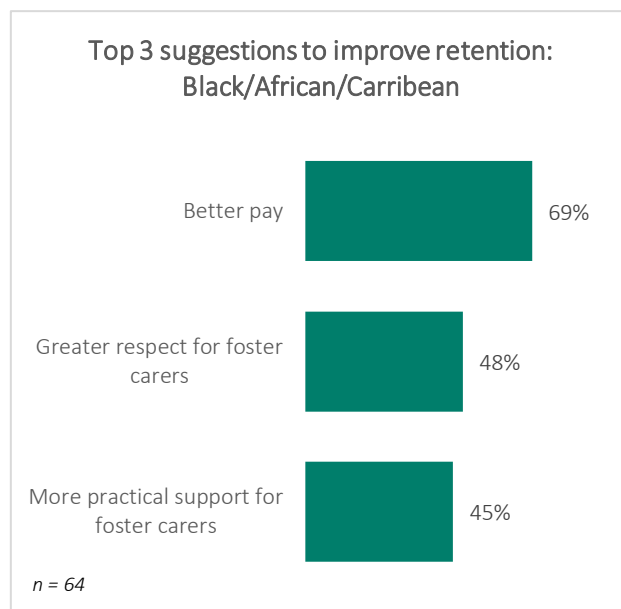
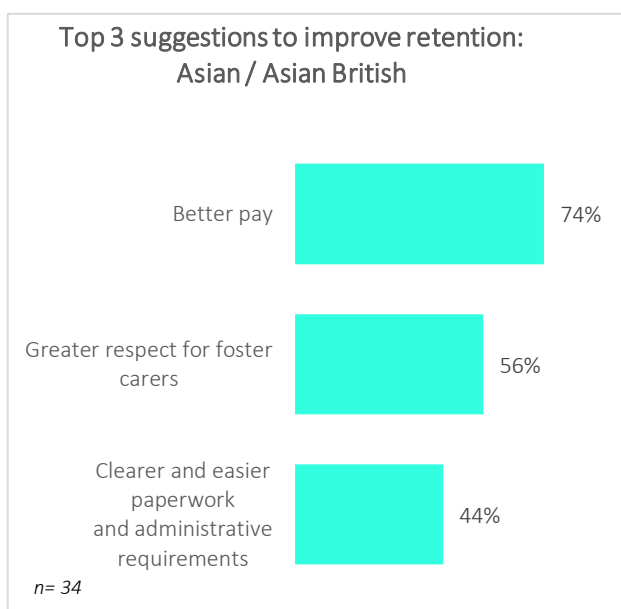
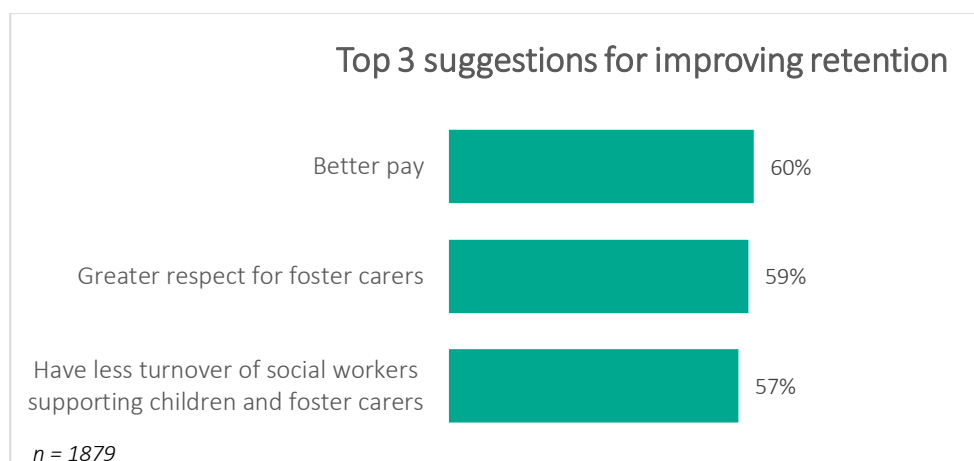


**Figure 16: Agreement with intention to continue fostering by foster carer education level**

I plan to continue fostering a year from now: Education

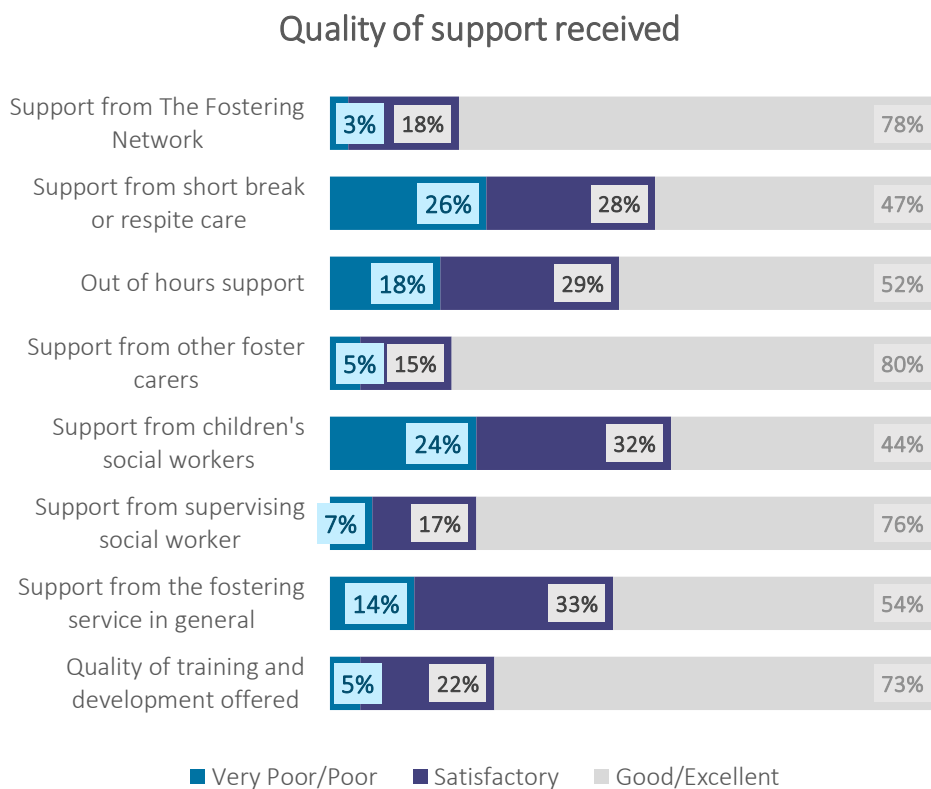


**Figure 17: Graphs of top suggestions for improve retention, including by ethnicity**

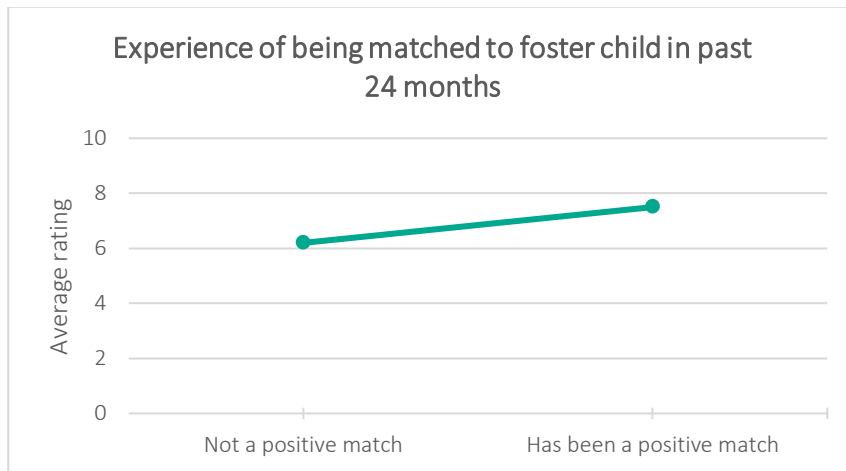


# Appendix B: Additional highlights from analysis of the State of the Nation survey data

Figure 18: Rating of quality of support received



**Figure 19: Average rating of fostering and experience being matched with a child**



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