



The
Fostering
Network



Exit Interview Toolkit Part One

Exit interview guide for fostering
services: using the toolkit

Exit interview guide for fostering services: using the toolkit

The Fostering Network, with funding from The Exilarch's Foundation (Dangoor Education), has set out to research an exit interview process for fostering services as part of our Foster Carer Retention Project. We are confident that the resources created will improve foster carer retention and can contribute to improving practice in fostering services.

The Foster Carer Retention Project ran from April 2018 to March 2019 and included partnership working with five fostering services, focus groups including approximately 60 foster carers in England, an online review of current practice in industry and a range of surveys which included the general population, foster carers and fostering services. It was our intention to research this process in a wide range of ways to ensure that the toolkit designed is robust and sustainable.

This guide is intended to support the exit interview process, giving everyone involved a reference to what we have found to be most effective so that local processes can work most efficiently. There are three supporting documents which can be used alongside this guide to ensure your methods are as rigorous as possible:

- The toolkit discussion guide, which provides a simple method of arranging a two stage exit interview process with foster carers who are leaving their fostering service.
- A guide for foster carers, designed to support them as they leave their fostering service and advise them of the actions they need to take to inform other organisations.
- A simple data collection form, which we would suggest is used by fostering services to collect, share and maintain records from exit interviews.

The four parts of this toolkit work together so that fostering services can implement an exit interview process for their foster carers and use the findings to help improve local practice. A separate report on the wider findings from the project is also available to download from thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/retention-project

Why fostering services should undertake exit interviews

Fostering services spend thousands of pounds each year recruiting foster carers. Retaining those who can provide the loving, supportive and stable family environment to children and young people in foster care should therefore be of paramount importance.

All foster carers will, though, leave their fostering service at some point in time, so capturing all of the reasons why, as well as their experience of fostering with the service, presents an opportunity to make changes and improve local practice. A foster carer, or a succession of foster carers, leaving due to an easily rectifiable practice issue is a potentially expensive and reputationally damaging but preventable situation.



Current practice suggests that exit interviews are not routinely undertaken for foster carers leaving their fostering service. Our research has shown that foster carers would value the opportunity to take part in an exit interview as they are keen to support their fostering service to improve their local practice so that other foster carers, and children and young people in foster care, can benefit.

Information gathered during an exit interview could also be used to inform management reports, annual panel reports and activities for local foster carer associations (where applicable). They may also contribute to inspections to evidence how foster carers are feeding into local practice.

Foster carers are at the forefront of caring for fostered children and a fellow professional in the team around the child. Each local authority, trust and independent fostering provider has a wealth of experience within their foster carers but, as far as we have been told during this project, that knowledge and expertise is unlikely to be being fully utilised. We know that exit interviews can be an important vehicle for discovering these ideas and exploring how the feedback can be reviewed and acted upon.

No matter what has led to a foster carer informing their service of their intention to leave, we recommend that they all should be offered an exit interview to share their reasons for leaving.

When fostering services should consider inviting foster carers for an exit interview

When a foster carer suggests they are considering leaving they might like to speak to their supervising social worker, or it may be appropriate for a manager to have a conversation with them. One of the fostering services we partnered with for this project has successfully retained two foster carers because of a senior manager's intervention. The manager was able to identify the foster carer's concerns and put into place the support and services that the foster carer felt were missing, enabling them to continue to foster.

Foster carer participants in our focus groups told us that, once they have formally signalled their intention to stop fostering or transfer, they would like the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences on leaving their service and also at some time in the future. Our research identified that there may be a difference in the messages shared by those foster carers immediately after leaving their service and after a period of reflection, with both being equally valid and important. We would suggest that the amount of time between the first and second exit interview will depend on circumstances and the foster carer's wishes, but four to six weeks is appropriate as a starting point for your planning.

Foster carers told us that one of their challenges is that a lot of appointments (for example training and supervision) are cancelled without a reasonable explanation. They understand that sometimes it is unavoidable for cancellations to happen, however if an exit interview is cancelled then a valid reason should be provided, and a rebooking made at the earliest opportunity. Foster carers shared during focus groups that they sometimes feel that there is 'something more important going on for my social worker than my needs'. Although we appreciate that this can be a difficult issue to manage, we believe that prioritising exit interviews will be beneficial to fostering services.



Who should conduct exit interviews with foster carers

There is significant evidence that foster carers should speak to someone independent (so not in the line management team of their supervising social worker) about their experiences when they leave their fostering service. Some foster carers have told us that they would like to speak to their supervising social worker, when they have a good relationship, but that they do not believe that this alone will result in changes in their services.

Foster carers who do not have a good relationship with their supervising social worker would like to speak to someone who is impartial but also able to act upon or escalate their feedback. An independent person will be impartial to the process, able to collate all of the foster carer's feedback and share with the fostering service to review and act upon where possible. Whoever is chosen to conduct the exit interview needs to ensure the process for collecting, reporting on and actioning learning from the findings is clear and transparent to all participants.

Our research also demonstrated how important it is for whoever undertakes the exit interview process with a foster carer to treat them with respect and with an understanding of the fact that the decision to leave their fostering service may not have been a simple one to make. There should be a 'professionals working together' approach to the interview, with both parties acknowledging that this process, to gather information, is a joint responsibility.

Foster carers participating in our focus groups acknowledged the emotional challenges that some will face when they decide to leave their fostering service, and they will need to feel that those who are interviewing them are not judging their decision. For some, the decision to leave their fostering service may not be their own, due to an allegation or due to standards of care. Regardless of the circumstances, all foster carers should still be offered an exit interview as their views and opinions are still valid.

It is important that whoever conducts an exit interview with a foster carer is able to support the foster carer to share all of their views during the process.

How and where should exit interviews be carried out

The toolkit includes a guide to conducting exit interviews. In addition there are a number of principles to consider.

Some foster carers have told us that they rarely feel properly listened to by their services. It is therefore vitally important that the process for carrying out the exit interview is communicated clearly and how the information will be used by the service is transparent to ensure the foster carer sees value in committing to the process.

Foster carers shared throughout the project that they would like their views to be taken into account but, more importantly, to be shared with decision makers in the services that they are leaving so that practice can be improved. We would recommend that services create a mechanism to ensure that foster carers receive feedback from their exit interview, most importantly regarding what the service intends to do to alter practice if the foster carer has suggested ways to do this. It may not be possible to implement all of the changes put forward, but the reasons why they cannot be made should be communicated back to the foster carer to demonstrate they have been listened to.



In the interests of transparency, services should consider publishing non-personally identifiable data relating to what they have been told during exit interviews and what they have done about it. For example, a foster carer may express that they were unaware of the reason why a placement did not go ahead and, as a result, the service adopts a new policy to provide constructive feedback to carers to maintain their engagement and understanding of the situation.

When a service is planning an exit interview, we would recommend that foster carers are asked if they would like to make any specific reference to relationships or personnel prior to the interview. It should be made clear that complaints ought to be made outside of the exit interview, as otherwise these could risk becoming the focus of discussion. Foster carers should also be asked if they would like a peer, colleague or friend to attend the exit interview with them, which might be useful if the information they have may be difficult to share.

The foster carer's home or at the office of a fostering service may both be potential locations to carry out the exit interview, however they might not be the most comfortable environment in which a foster carer is willing to share information. We recommend that both parties agree the location, exploring the option of a neutral location convenient to both if required.

What fostering services could learn from exit interviews and what they might do with the data collected

This project has created the tools to carry out exit interviews with foster carers and we recommend that all fostering services use them to ensure exit interviews are an integral part of their practice.

There are two different ways to treat the information services gather, and both are valid. We discovered that the best way for exit interviews to be conducted, as far as foster carers are concerned, is for them to be open and conversational. One way to assess the usability of the information that services gather from exit interviews is to analyse responses collectively. This would demonstrate the trends and themes that foster carers give for leaving an organisation. An alternative method to analyse the information that services collect is for each exit interview to be recorded and acted on for its own merits on an individual basis. A combination of both approaches, depending on the feedback received, would be advantageous. We recommend that services identify their methodology and communicate transparently with foster carers so they understand the process.

The importance of these approaches is for fostering services to decide whether the issues that are being raised are urgent and need to be addressed immediately (for example has someone acted inappropriately within the organisation) or whether the issues are more thematic and require more responses to decide on a course of actions (for example a foster carer stating that they feel they are not paid enough).

As with all activity it is important to build in periods of review. We recommend the process is reviewed annually, to ensure the exit interviews with foster carers are being conducted appropriately, the information gained is feeding into planning cycles, and that any changes to the process are communicated to all foster carers and appropriate service staff.



About The Fostering Network

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

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

Contact

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