Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates

Research report

July 2023

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Ipsos were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in November 2022 to conduct a piece of qualitative research to gain a better understanding of the fostering conversion rates from enquiry to application and approval. A greater understanding of the challenges and enablers of the recruitment process, key reasons for dropouts, strategies in place to address these, as well as data accuracy and use, will contribute to building an evidence base. This will inform better practice and appropriate fostering conversion rates that maximise the number of enquirers who go forward to apply and be approved to become a foster carer.

The overall objective of this research was to gain a better understanding of fostering conversion rates from enquiry to application and approval. This research aimed to shed some light on why enquiries are increasing, but the enquiry to application rate is decreasing.

Data collection started in January 2023 with a stakeholder online workshop involving key organisations and academics from across the sector. The research then involved carrying out 10 case studies, 5 with local authorities (LAs) and 5 with independent fostering agencies (IFAs), hereafter collectively referred to as 'services' throughout the report. Fieldwork for case studies took place between February and March 2023.

We sampled fostering service providers across a range of criteria using data provided by Ofsted. This included geographical region, whether services were in rural or urban locations, Ofsted ratings, organisational size, and conversion rates.

After fieldwork concluded, the research project team held two analysis sessions, using both deductive and inductive analysis to create a thematic framework. The project team coded data into sub-themes, pulling out key themes and differences from interview and focus group notes and from documents provided in the paper exercise. Key findings were produced from the stakeholder workshop and then circulated to stakeholder participants, and then were incorporated into the overall analysis.

Key findings

The key findings discussed throughout this report are as follows:

Marketing and advertising

- Services use a variety of marketing channels, this includes digital, media, physical and in-person methods. Whilst there has been a significant shift toward digital

marketing, it is felt that there is no one best or most successful approach to marketing and using a mix of all of these channels works well.

- Some of the enablers highlighted include word-of-mouth referrals, creating engaging online content, using payments and initiatives, highlighting what makes you different, and marketing to underrepresented groups.

- There were also several challenges to marketing discussed. This included aspects of fostering that are hard to market, competition amongst services, the impact of negative press and the current economic and political context.

- Suggestions for improvement were raising the profile of fostering, a centralised approach to advertising and a national fostering package where fees and benefits are consistent across services.

The recruitment process

- There was variation in what an average profile of prospective and existing foster carers looked like between services and regions. Common themes were females, people who were middle-aged, couples in their 40s to 60s with children that had left home, people at the end of their career or transitioning to part-time work, and people who were high earners with a stay-at-home parent. Participants spoke about a significant shift towards being more open to profiles that they would have turned away in the past and an urgent need for more proactive initiatives to reach more diverse audiences.

- Participants had varied approaches in how they managed recruitment. Common themes were having a designated team to respond to enquiries, usually via the phone, and following up with home visits before progression to an application form and into the assessment process. The assessment process involves two stages, often run concurrently, as well as a panel process with support and training for applicants alongside this.

- The following were highlighted as enablers to the recruitment process; responding to enquiries quickly, using a relational and strength-based approach, giving enquirers and applicants a chance to hear from foster carers and adults with lived experiences of fostering, a streamlined and informative process, aiming to equip, empower and support applicants, being flexible and reducing anxiety about the panel process.

- There were also challenges to recruitment noted, including; a lack of staff resources, not always being able to get a response from enquirers, a lack of understanding of the foster carer role, eligibility checks eliminating people straight away, a lengthy assessment process that can feel invasive, elements of the panel process and applicants experiencing unexpected changes in circumstances.

- Suggestions for improvement were diversifying the foster carer population, moving away from a culture of assessment, and exploring other roles that prospective foster carers could take on.

- Whilst the distinction between LAs and IFAs may initially appear useful, contextual factors (size, geography, demographics, local needs, housing stock, data collection practice) are stronger explanatory factors to explain differences in conversion rates than the type of fostering service. Participants also noted that using this distinction to understand conversion rates was not particularly helpful, could exacerbate existing tensions, and could prevent the collaboration and sharing of learning between LAs and IFAs going forward.

Data collection and use

- Different data is collected at each stage in recruitment, with much less captured during enquiries and much more by the time an applicant has reached the assessment stage. Whilst this was often viewed as being appropriate and ensuring prospective foster carers are not deterred early on, it can mean data is not always available to analyse thoroughly who enquires but does not progress and why.

- Participants felt that the majority of data collected is quantitative data but that it would be beneficial to gather more qualitative data. This would enable them to explore the story behind the numbers, and better understand why people do not progress through various stages of the recruitment process. Qualitative data would more effectively inform strategy around how to improve the recruitment process.

- Defining enquiries was a key challenge explored, with many examples given of how enquiries are measured and interpreted differently both amongst and within services. For example, an enquiry can be seen as the number of those who have engaged in any way, such as visiting the website or taking a leaflet at an event stand, or the number of those who have got in touch, those who have provided basic contact details, or sometimes an enquiry only includes those that have had an initial conversation with a member of staff.

- Which database and systems each service uses can affect the collection of data. Different databases and systems have different functionality available that can make the collection, analysis, and use of data easier or more complex.

- Participants reported that uses of data were for internal budgeting purposes, to evaluate their own recruitment processes and to feed into discussions on what works well or less well. However, participants felt data is not always utilised and this can be due to lack of engagement with data or the necessary resource to do so.

- Suggestions for improvement were to share good practice at a regional level and to ensure effective data collection.

Conversion rates

- Participants reflected that it is not always clear what data Ofsted are asking them to send through in the annual return. The perception was that this lack of clarity can lead to open interpretation and, therefore, services send datasets which have all been collected, interpreted, and analysed differently.

- Participants discussed how conversion rates can to an extent not paint an accurate picture. This is partly due to a lack of consensus on the definition of an enquiry and varied approaches to recruitment and the stages within it. Therefore, the numbers being gathered do not necessarily allow a fair comparison.

- Participants also noted that low conversion rates are seen as negative, but this was countered with the view that a low conversion rate can also reflect a suitable recruitment process that ensures only suitable applicants make it through and go on to be foster carers.

- Participants indicated that there is some use to the data collected and conversion rates drawn from it. However, this usefulness is best when the context is considered, and qualitative data is also gathered. There are also challenges to best making use of data, such as having the resource needed to do so.

- Suggestions for improvement were for Ofsted to breakdown the conversion rate into a set of measures and provide clear guidance on their definition, to capture the journey of prospective foster carers, add more granularity to the data and for a shift in the narratives around conversion rates at a national level.

Overall recommendations

Further to the suggestions for improvements made by participants in each of the sections of the report a further set of recommendations we propose from the research is summarised here and explained at the end of the report:

- **Establish a centralised recruitment service**: National or regional recruitment services that can pool resources from across multiple LAs or IFAs (or both) and hire dedicated staff with expertise in digital marketing and advertisement.

- **Social media requires a distinctive strategy:** Resources need to be invested to ensure that fostering services can heavily influence the narratives around fostering on social media platforms, as they can rapidly become a forum to voice frustration about a role that can often be challenging. This requires creating content that is fun, engaging and captures the attention of the public.

- **Better utilise existing foster carers in the recruitment process:** Offering existing foster carers more opportunities for skills development during the recruitment process of new foster carers.

- **Include qualitative data:** Services collecting more qualitative data, particularly from prospective foster carers on why they did not progress or withdrew an application.

- **Sharing learning and good practice around effective data collection and use:** To share learning and good practice between services. In particular around gathering qualitative feedback from prospective foster carers about the recruitment process in the least resource intensive way. Including disseminating information about eligibility criteria that is often misunderstood by services at the national level to all fostering services, as well as encouraging services to share examples with one another about how and when existing flexibilities within the regulations have been successfully used.

- **Always include a focus on retention:** By improving the experiences of existing foster carers the hope is that retention will improve and in turn reduce pressure on recruitment.

1. Introduction

Overview

Ipsos were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in November 2022 to conduct a piece of qualitative research to gain a better understanding of fostering conversion rates from enquiry to application and approval. Since 2018, the number of approved fostering places not provided by friends or relatives has decreased by 5%[1] whilst the number of children living in care has risen by 9% over the same period.[2] Latest figures from Ofsted on the recruitment of foster carers shows that the number of people who make initial enquiries about becoming a foster carer has increased over the last 5 years: the number of initial enquiries to foster was 18% higher in the year ending 31 March 2022 than in the year ending 31 March 2018, and has been slowly rising over that period, with the exception of 2021 to 2022 where enquiries dropped.[3] In the same period, however, there has also been a downward trend in the proportion of enquiries that convert to applications to become a foster carer[4]. In the year ending 31 March 2022, 6% of enquiries at fostering services progressed to the application stage.[5] This percentage represents the conversion rate from enquiry to application. It is worth noting that the number of enquiries is affected by the fact that some people enquire more than once, while only one of those enquiries can lead to application. After application, successful applicants progress to the assessment and approval stage.

A greater understanding of the challenges and enablers of the recruitment process, key reasons for dropouts, strategies in place to address these, as well as data accuracy and use, will contribute to building an evidence base. This will inform good practice and appropriate fostering conversion rates that maximise the number of enquiries who go forward to apply and be approved.

There are a few current streams of work taking place that are also important to note. Firstly, the recently published 'Independent review of Children's Social Care'[6] sets out some recommendations and objectives around the recruitment and retention of foster carers, noting the specific need to focus on conversion[7]. The government response announced that the DfE are funding a pilot fostering recruitment and retention

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[1] Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[2] Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)
[3] Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[4] Ibid
[5] Ibid
[6] Independent review of children's social care - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[7] To improve the current conversion rate of prospective foster carers who express an interest, the programme should provide a high level of support to people going through the application process. The programme should be designed to improve the overall application experience even if it does not make the final decision to approve a carer.

programme in the North East.[8] This includes the development of a regional support hub to support individuals interested in applying to foster, facilitating targeted communications, and improving retention through the evidence-based 'Mockingbird' model. Secondly, whilst not related to work being carried out by the DfE, it is important to highlight that the Coram assessment form (often used by fostering services to assess whether an applicant should be approved as a foster carer) is currently being amended.

Whilst this research has been ongoing, there have been two major announcements related to foster carers. The first is the raising of the National Minimum Allowance (NMA) for fostering by 12.43% to help foster parents cover the increasing costs of care[9], announced in February 2023, during case study fieldwork. The second change is an increase in Personal Tax Qualifying Care Relief (QCR), increasing the amount of income tax relief available to foster carers, which was announced in March 2023, also during case study fieldwork.

The current economic and political climate can of course not be ignored, and this research has also considered and explored how the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the current cost of living crisis has impacted on the recruitment of foster carers.

Aims and objectives

The overall objective of this research was to gain a better understanding of fostering conversion rates from enquiry to application and approval. In order to address this the following questions were considered:

Research questions

This research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do services currently collect data on conversion rates, and do they think that the data Ofsted collects on conversion rates is accurate?
2. What do services and stakeholders think are the reasons behind prospective foster carers not going on to make an application after initially enquiring?

To explore fostering conversion rates, this research focused on the following sub-questions:

1. How do fostering service providers advertise their services?
2. What are the key challenges and enablers of marketing a fostering service?
3. What opportunities are there to improve marketing and advertising?

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[8] [Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation (publishing.service.gov.uk)](publishing.service.gov.uk)

[9] Ibid

4. Across the enquiry, application, and approval process

   a. What works well about this part of the recruitment process?

   b. What does not work so well?

   c. What might help address any challenges?

   d. What would fostering services improve about this part of the process?

   e. How do services define an enquiry?

   f. What are the key reasons why enquiries do not progress into applications?

   g. What are the key reasons for applications being withdrawn or rejected?

   h. What about the current process can make the recruitment experience easier or more difficult for prospective foster carers?

5. To what extent could data inform better recruitment strategies and conversion rates?

6. What do fostering service providers see as being the key gaps in the data collected around recruitment?

7. What are the overall key challenges in collecting, recording, and the use of data?

Methodology

Data collection started in January 2023 with a stakeholder online workshop involving key organisations and academics from across the sector. Views were discussed on the key factors behind conversion rates and what can be done to improve them. It was also an opportunity to seek feedback on the key research questions. Workshop participants included representatives from foster carer forums, foster carer network organisations, independent fostering agencies, local authority fostering services, independent consultants in the field, and relevant academics.

To meet the objectives of this research it was necessary to also hear directly from fostering services around the country. Research involved carrying out 10 case studies, 5 with local authorities (LAs) and 5 with independent fostering agencies (IFAs). Fieldwork took place between February and March 2023.

Each case study included an initial interview with 1 or 2 staff members who provided a comprehensive overview of the recruitment process. This was followed by a focus group with a wider group of staff (typically 3 to 5 people) involved in marketing, enquiries, applications, the assessment process, and approvals. The final part of the case studies was a paper exercise, which collected examples of how and what data is collected, as well as examples of marketing and advertising. At each step of the process, participants were reminded that their answers would be completely anonymised, reported in aggregate form, and handled sensitively.

After fieldwork concluded, the research project team held two analysis sessions, using both deductive and inductive analysis to create a thematic framework. The project team coded data into sub-themes, pulling out key themes and differences from interview and focus group notes and from documents provided in the paper exercise. Key findings were produced from the stakeholder workshop and then circulated to stakeholder participants, and then incorporated into the overall analysis.

Sampling

We sampled fostering service providers across a range of criteria using data provided by Ofsted. This included geographical region, whether services were in rural or urban locations, Ofsted ratings, organisational size, and conversion rates. The sample also included a range of conversion rates compared with the national average, including from 'enquiries to applications' and from 'application to approval'. For example, a range of higher, average, and lower conversion rates. The sample included 5 local authorities and 5 independent fostering agencies. Table 1 in Appendix 1 provides details on the main criteria used for sampling local authorities and independent fostering agencies for case studies.

Limitations

A key limitation of this research is that whilst representatives from local foster carer forums were invited to take part in the stakeholder workshop, foster carers were not included in the sample of those spoken to within the case studies. However, the Fostering Network and the Centre for Evidence and Implementation have conducted research into the retention and recruitment of foster carers in England which includes interviews with foster carers[10]. Both pieces of research focus on different research questions and will complement one another.

It is worth noting that the sample for this research was very small. Speaking to 5 local authorities and 5 independent fostering agencies does not allow for reliable generalisations, as the views of these 10 fostering services do not necessarily represent the views of all fostering services.

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[10] Foster carer retention and recruitment in England (thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

Structure of this report

This report begins with 3 chapters exploring current practice of the fostering services we spoke to. Chapter 2 explores services' approaches to marketing, chapter 3 explores approaches to recruitment, and chapter 4 explores approaches to data collection and use. Each of these chapters covers the approaches the fostering services use, elements they find work well, challenges they face and suggestions for improvement proposed by participants. The insights from the stakeholder workshop also contribute to the findings throughout these sections.

Chapter 5 explores the two conversion rates that Ofsted reports on, from enquiries to applications and from applications to approvals. The section discusses participants' reflections on these conversion rates and their use.

Finally, chapter 6 provides a conclusion, summarising the key themes and recommendations from each of the preceding chapters and outlining suggested next steps.

The views shared throughout the following chapters of this report are those of the participants, shared with us throughout this research, unless otherwise stated.
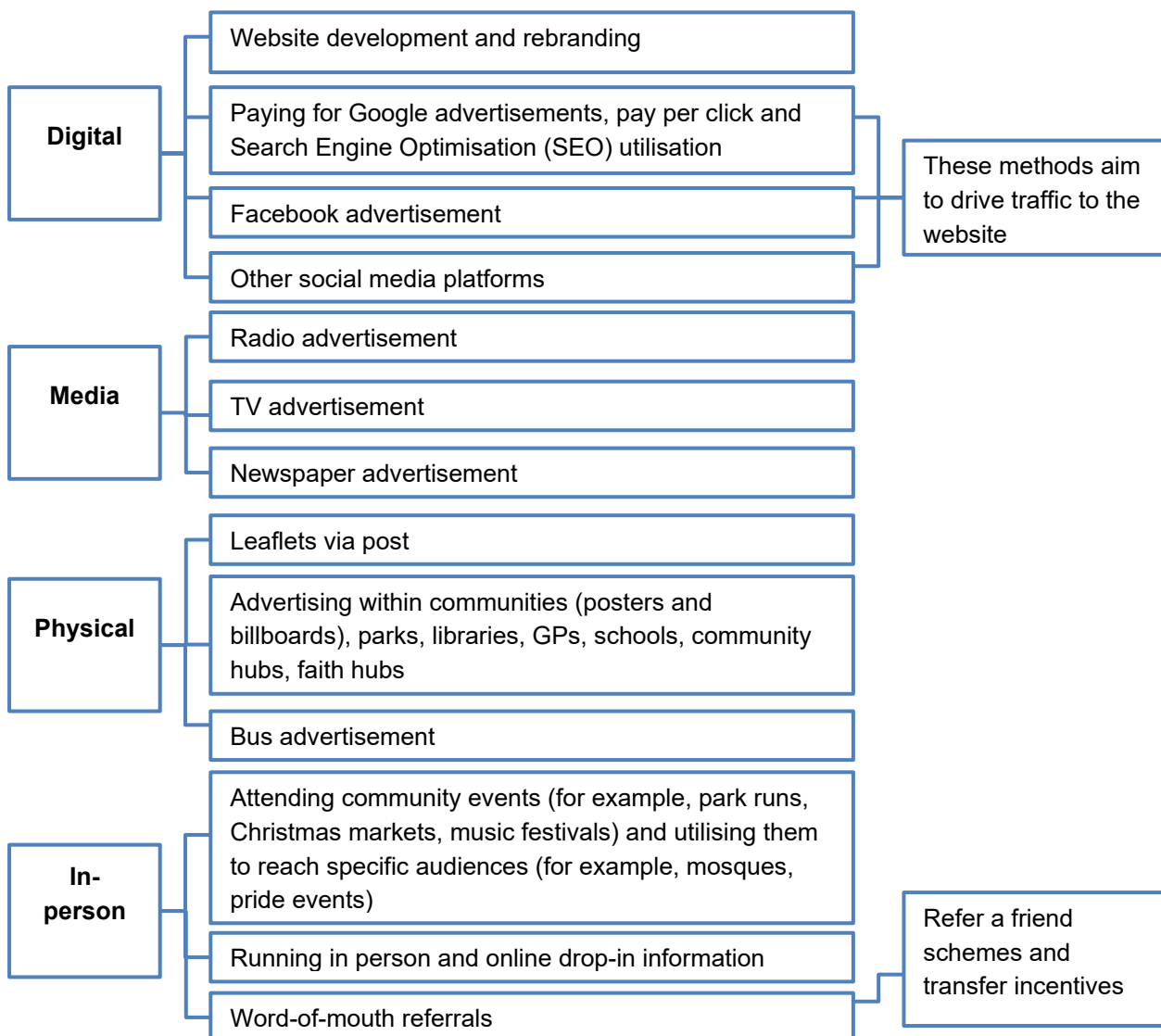
2. Marketing and advertising

This chapter highlights the key marketing approaches of the fostering services across the 10 case studies, as well as detailing what works well, the challenges and finally suggestions for improvement.

Approach to marketing

When discussing approaches to marketing with participants there was a feeling that marketing strategies have become increasingly important, not just because of a need to recruit more foster carers, but because this space has become an increasingly competitive marketplace. There were four areas that emerged in relation to marketing approaches. Figure 1 highlights these.

Figure 1. Examples of different approaches services take to marketing

Digital
- Website development and rebranding
- Paying for Google advertisements, pay per click and Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) utilisation
- Facebook advertisement
- Other social media platforms

These methods aim to drive traffic to the website

Media
- Radio advertisement
- TV advertisement
- Newspaper advertisement

Physical
- Leaflets via post
- Advertising within communities (posters and billboards), parks, libraries, GPs, schools, community hubs, faith hubs
- Bus advertisement

In-person
- Attending community events (for example, park runs, Christmas markets, music festivals) and utilising them to reach specific audiences (for example, mosques, pride events)
- Running in person and online drop-in information
- Word-of-mouth referrals

Refer a friend schemes and transfer incentives

A key theme that participants discussed in relation to these four overall areas was an increased focus on digital forms of advertising, especially social media platforms, and moving away from more traditional methods, such as newspapers, radio, and physical advertisements within the community. However, traditional approaches such as word-of-mouth and community outreach were still seen as important methods. In addition, advertising through community events was cited as often being part of a longer-term strategy that aimed to raise general awareness around fostering in prospective foster carers minds. This is acknowledging that prospective foster carers often spend years thinking about fostering before being ready to make an enquiry.

> You go to a music festival for 2 days… and it never generates an application from that event. But it's still a space where you create that thinking. – *Local Authority*

Participants also discussed who the responsibility for marketing sat with and this varied across fostering services. Although there is usually a dedicated person or team whose focus is on marketing and communications this can be either a standalone responsibility or part of another role, such as recruitment or service management. It was also noted that some services who work in more than one region have a centralised marketing team focusing on digital advertising and a marketing team at a local level focusing on community outreach. Services may also choose to use external marketing agencies for further support.

What works well

The following are examples participants gave of elements that work well regarding marketing.

Utilising multiple strategies

Participants emphasised the importance of employing multiple marketing strategies at once, across digital, physical and in person platforms, rather than relying on one approach. This allows them to appeal to a diverse range of individuals and to build overall brand recognition and awareness of fostering over time. In addition, participants felt that when they had tried to focus on just one strategy it had not given the best results.

> You're not talking to one type of person… to attract different people, you have to use all types of pathways to get to people, from social media platforms, to visibly being present in the community, to having posters, information, and word-of-mouth, getting carers to talk about 'what do I do as a foster carer'... It's not helpful just to rely on one pathway to reach the community. – *Local Authority*

Word-of-mouth leads to strong enquiries

Word-of-mouth was seen as a strong marketing strategy. Although this approach does not tend to generate high numbers of enquiries, it seems to lead to the strongest enquiries. When a prospective foster carer makes an enquiry because they have spoken to an existing foster carer, it is more likely to result in a successful application compared with other marketing strategies. Participants felt that this is because they enter the process better informed, with more realistic expectations and with an existing support network in place.

> What works best is using our foster carers. There's nothing better than a current foster carer telling a story, and somebody sort of knowing that real-life experience... that is the best advert for us. – *Local Authority*

Participants did, however, raise the concern that it is becoming harder to rely on word-of-mouth referrals. They felt that this is due to existing foster carers being less willing or able to share positive stories. Some services said that this is because foster carers have less time to support recruitment because fostering has become more challenging. Participants described that this is due to factors including the social care workforce crisis which has reduced the number of social workers available to support foster carers, more being asked of foster carers particularly due to the increasingly specific needs of children and young people, and the cost of living crisis. Further impacting this is that social media has led to the creation of many fostering groups where foster carers are able to share their experiences, both good and bad, in a way that fostering services cannot control.

Creating engaging online content

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, participants noted an increased focus on digital marketing methods. This includes Google and Facebook advertisements, 'pay per clicks' advertisements which involves paying to push fostering services websites to the top of online search engine result pages, and search engine optimisation which entails designing website content around key words that will boost fostering services' presence in search engine results and drive traffic to their website. Two key benefits of this were described. Firstly, an increased online presence is seen as an effective way to reach a higher number of prospective foster carers. Secondly, online methods allow services to learn about what engages people the most and tailor content and messaging. For example, by looking at how much time is spent on certain website pages or which topics they click on.

> We run a Facebook ad, which is, again, targeted. And that's based off our FAQ page, so that's much more specific questions; it's a carousel ad. If you're wanting to know specifically about finance, [for example], and you've googled before 'how much does a foster carer earn?' that ad will pop up for you. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

To fully benefit from using digital marketing approaches, it was noted that it is important to create fun, engaging, short and up-to-date content that goes beyond the written word. This is to capture the attention of prospective foster carers.

> It's about understanding what people want to interact with, what people's attention spans are... people want those short videos; they don't want to sit and read an article for 5 minutes; they want to be able to watch a 1 minute video that gives them all the information that they need at their fingertips. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Search engine optimisation is another way to benefit from digital approaches. Participants reported that visits to services websites which originate from Google searches (rather than visits originating from social media) can result in longer viewings of the website, viewing more pages, and an increased likelihood of an enquiry.

Participants, however, also highlighted some challenges with using these digital approaches. Firstly, whilst digital marketing methods reach many more people and generate a higher number of initial but non-committal enquiries, including visiting the website and leaving their contact details, they can often be hard to get hold of. This was particularly the case for those clicking through Facebook. This type of enquiry is less likely to result in progression to the application stage and also drains resources as staff are obliged to spend their time following up on some enquiries that will never lead to applications. Some participants questioned whether the budget spent on digital marketing was value for money but saw it as necessary to maintain a level of presence online to keep up with others in the sector.

Secondly, participants noted that GDPR had an impact on the use of digital platforms, such as Facebook, as they can no longer be used to target marketing at particular audiences in the same way. This results in capturing less information about viewers, therefore having less data to analyse and utilise in marketing strategies about the characteristics and demographics of audiences.

Using payments and incentives

Disclosing upfront the financial compensation for the role of a foster carer was acknowledged by participants to be useful for attracting prospective foster carers as this is a key piece of information they look for when enquiring. Analysis of documents shared by the research participants confirmed that this information is included in their leaflets and websites. Monetary incentives were also seen as a way to attract prospective foster carers, for example offering a certain amount to refer a friend so as to encourage word-of-mouth referrals.

> We know that it's important because we know from analytics that actually it's one of the most common searches, 'how much will I get paid?' … we had our internal market research done a couple of years

ago, and we know that finance is top of the list of what people are
looking for. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

There were, however, a couple of themes that emerged in relation to this being difficult to do. Firstly, services have varied and often limited budgets available which makes offering competitive financial compensation and incentives difficult. It was suggested that services aligning their package (including fees) for foster carers could help with this.[11] Secondly, it can feel uncomfortable to discuss finance as it feels unethical or akin to putting a price on a child. Though doing so was seen as necessary in order to compete with other services. Some participants also noted that monetary gains should not be at the forefront of the discussion as they do not want it to be prospective foster carers' main motivation.

Highlight what makes you different

Participants felt that the market can feel saturated with fostering services which creates strong competition to attracting prospective foster carers. Highlighting a service's unique selling point was described as a key enabler for recruitment. This can include a service's smaller size, ethical values, connection to other services, support offered to foster carers and involvement with local communities. This was cited as being important for LAs who felt they were not always able to compete with what IFAs can pay, and conversely for IFAs as they tend to place more children and young people with complex needs.

> A key marketing strategy is trying to sell [name of LA]. It's trying to have that local element to it... It is about the ethics, the values, and I think particularly as a local authority, that is something that's really, really important that we get across. – *Local Authority*

> One of our unique selling points is obviously we're not for profit, so I think people like that, the kind of morals around that. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Marketing to underrepresented groups

Targeting marketing towards underrepresented groups was highlighted as an important element of marketing, such as LGBTQ+ and ethnically diverse communities. This is because participants felt it was important to recruit a pool of foster carers that fully represent the local community, especially services located in ethnically diverse communities. In addition, this can mean the needs of children are better met. One example of this is being able to meet the cultural and religious needs of refugees and

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[11] The Department for Education is raising the National Minimum Allowance (NMA) by 12.43% to help foster parents cover the increasing costs of foster care. This was announced in February 2023, in the middle of fieldwork.

asylum seekers. Another example was how a same sex female couple better met the needs of a child who had difficulty interacting with men due to past trauma.

To reach these groups, services attend local community events where these groups are represented, such as LGBTQ+ pride parades, community hubs or mosques. It was noted that one group which has not been targeted much in the past is prospective foster carers with disabilities and this group holds potential for recruitment.

> We did a project in recruiting foster carers with disabilities; a lot of foster agencies have websites and buildings that aren't accessible to people with disabilities, and they aren't really promoting having disabled foster carers. And we're quite active in that regard; we do have foster carers with disabilities here. And we've also done another project recruiting Muslim foster carers to reflect the children who need fostering placements. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Challenges

Participants also raised several challenges around marketing.

Aspects of fostering that are hard to market

Participants cited insufficient benefits that are offered to foster carers as a significant challenge that reduces the marketability of the role for prospective foster carers. For example, while foster carers do receive an allowance to cover costs of caring for a child and some services choose to pay them a fee, being a foster carer is not considered a profession and is therefore not salaried. Participants mentioned that as being a foster carer requires responsibility for a child for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, any fee or allowance they receive is equal to a rate below minimum wage if it was seen as a professional role. Participants also said that they are also not entitled to sick pay, holiday pay or a pension, and there is no guarantee of consistent pay, as they are only paid when they have a placement. Participants spoke about the frustrations involved in having no control over these policies and suggested that they needed to be addressed at a national level. Participants discussed what could potentially be done at a national level to address this which is covered in the section on suggestions for improvement.

> The big elephant in the room that is so rarely talked about: it is a zero hour [contract] job; there's no guaranteed income. So, it is a big leap for anyone earning a guaranteed income to want to start to foster... They have no employment rights, no sick pay, no pension. And yet, we expect people to want to jump into that. We need to look at how we are rewarding and respecting these people. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Competition amongst services

Competition was cited as a key challenge by participants. The demand for foster carers is rising, with the number of children in the foster care system increasing at a higher rate than the number of foster carers, it further creates a competitive market where prospective foster carers have a lot of choice of who to foster with.

Organisations pointed to low budgets as a significant barrier to the ability to recruit foster carers, and as an additional factor that further exacerbates competition between services. Budgets vary at each service. LA budgets cover a range of services, not just fostering. LAs can also feel they have less freedom to make decisions about marketing as they need to fit within the regulations and marketing style of the LA as a whole. Whereas for IFAs, smaller services can feel they lack the resources to effectively recruit, finding themselves in competition with larger services who may be able to offer greater financial incentives to prospective foster carers or hire specialists to help with marketing.

> It has become so much more of a marketplace now. The IFAs have a lot of financial clout and power behind them. One of the agencies that's recruiting out of [the geographic area] is offering every newly approved foster carer a £1,000 golden handshake. We can't compete with that. – *Local Authority*

There was also a perception amongst participants that IFAs tend to have a cohort of older children with more complex needs that can make marketing strategies more complex. This is because it is less relevant for services to use pictures of babies which can be appealing and instead requires strategies to recruit the right foster carers with appropriate skills and circumstances.

Negative or misleading press

The impact of negative press relating to foster care, and the effect it has on people's motivation to be a foster carer emerged as a challenge. Participants were concerned that statements made in the national press were helping create a poor image of the foster care sector. When this contrasts with a more positive view presented by services it can result in prospective foster carers hearing conflicting narratives which they find untrustworthy, rather than a consistent and balanced perspective on the experience. Connected to this theme was an encouragement from participants for the government to run a national campaign to demonstrate the value of foster carers.

Another way local authority fostering services can experience negative press is from poor Ofsted ratings following an inspection of their overall children's service. This can have a knock-on effect on the reputation of a local authority fostering service, even when that part of the service is running well.

Participants also noted that the content used in marketing and advertising should be more honest, balanced, and transparent about the reality of the role. Otherwise, information provided later in the recruitment process does then not always match expectations and an increased awareness of the reality of fostering can make enquirers decide they are not ready or willing to take on the responsibility. A more efficient process would be having enquirers opt themselves out early on based on more honest information about the role upfront. For example, some advertisements can include unrealistic narratives, such as adverts depicting foster carers as superheroes, or showing only very young children or babies. Participants noted in particular the mismatch between prospective carers' preferences to foster babies or young children and the current cohort of young people needing foster placements who have increasingly complex needs.

Economic and political context

Participants reported certain economic and political events having negatively impacted their ability to recruit foster carers. Firstly, the cost of living crisis has reduced people's ability to foster due to financial concerns and instability. In some cases, young people are returning home as they can no longer afford rent, which reduces spare room availability for some prospective foster carers[12]. In other cases, a spare room is available, but households report the lack the financial resources to heat it.

Secondly, the COVID-19 pandemic increased working-from-home opportunities, turning spare rooms into offices, and taking interest away from fostering due to not wanting to risk leaving a career.

> Post-pandemic and lockdown, everybody's situations and views on life and careers really changed, and people are now much less willing to take the risk of leaving a career. It's not guaranteed income, and people really need that now with the cost of living crisis. It's harder to persuade people… they have to pay the bills. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Finally, participants highlighted that the war in Ukraine has diverted some attention away from housing foster children and towards housing those impacted by the war, an initiative targeted at the same people who might otherwise foster.

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[12] The national guidance provides some flexibility around spare rooms.

Suggestions for improvement

These suggestions were proposed by participants. Participants emphasised that the government has a role to play in addressing certain challenges. For instance, in leading some of the initiatives highlighted here:

Raise the profile of fostering

Participants felt that the narrative around the foster carer role needs to evolve. It should be viewed as a 'profession' in the sense that it requires expertise, leads to the development of further skills, and contributes positively to society. Foster carers or prospective foster carers want to be seen as equal partners and feel respected and valued by all other professionals in the fostering sector. Their role should be recognised as integral to the care and wellbeing of looked-after children.

Centralise advertising

Participants noted that the market for foster carers is saturated, and the numerous services advertising via different pathways is confusing for prospective carers. One way to centralise fostering advertising might be the creation of a national website for fostering, including a centralised job board similar to other sectors. This could become a resource for prospective foster carers where all services can provide information and advertise fostering opportunities.

Regional campaigns might also offer an opportunity for services to work together to increase the pool of foster carers for all and reduce the overall sense of competition between services. Examples shared included services which are geographically close to each other grouping together and pooling their budgets to run bigger campaigns and services sending prospective applicants who are not a good fit for their own service to another service that better suits their circumstances.

A consistent fostering package across services

A consistent fostering package from fostering services, including the national fostering allowance and consistent fees and benefits, could encourage collaboration between services and help reduce competition and poaching.

3. The recruitment process

This chapter looks at the recruitment process in its entirety, from enquiry through to approvals. Within this it covers the key themes related to the average profile of prospective foster carers, the approach services take at each stage, what works well, and the challenges. Participants did not always articulate the enablers and challenges in direct relation to the conversion rates themselves but spoke about how challenges impacted on the success of the recruitment process and on the experiences of prospective foster carers.

Average profile of prospective foster carers

Whilst participants spoke about the average profile of prospective foster carers expanding in recent years, some common themes did still emerge. Participants perceived a shift towards a higher proportion of those who are; female, middle-aged, couples in their 40s to 60s with children that have left home, at the end of their career or are transitioning to part-time work, and high earners with a stay-at-home parent. A potential divide in the average foster carer profiles between the north and south of the UK was also perceived by participants spoken to, with more middle to low income foster carers in northern urban areas and more middle to high income foster carers in the south. It is important to acknowledge that the average profile may vary across various fostering services, and these descriptions reflect solely the viewpoints of the 10 services participating.

Participants explained that they perceived the 'average profile' to be shifting with an increase in carers who are younger and older compared with previously, single, in same-sex couples, from ethnic minorities, with disabilities, and employed in related professions (for example, social workers, youth workers or teachers). Participants described this shift as resulting from services being more open to profiles that they would have turned away in the past (for example, for being perceived as 'too old') or through myth-busting the idea of who is and is not suitable for fostering.

> We've always had an idea about who we think might be a good foster carer-- but sometimes the people who we think have the right skills and experience, and who we think could do it standing on their head, are actually a bit rubbish, and the people we are not sure about do really well. So, we have to move away from that picture of what we think we are looking for. – *Local Authority*

Participants argued that more needed to be done to effectively dismantle outdated ideas about who a foster carer should be and that there is an urgent need for more proactive initiatives to reach more diverse audiences as highlighted in the previous chapter on marketing. However, when recruitment is at a low participants referenced the tendency to

target groups that they have historically had most success recruiting and who fit the mould of a typical foster carer.

> Diversity is a challenge. You want to represent the community you serve to the best of your ability. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Participants noted that prospective foster carers from different communities and ethnicities have different experiences and face different barriers during the application to approval process, both cultural and language barriers. Cultural awareness and a tailored recruitment process are therefore essential.

Managing enquiries

Participants reported that they responded to enquiries quickly, often within 1 to 2 working days. Some services responded to enquiries in the evenings or on the weekends when enquirers are more likely to be available. This is typically done by a designated member of staff or small team and done so via the phone. Where this responsibility sits varies across services, for example it can sit within marketing teams, recruitment teams or with social workers.

Scheduling a home visit was another step discussed by participants as part of the enquiry process. Home visits allow relationships and trust to be built and the sharing of information and learning about the prospective foster carer to assess their eligibility. This may be scheduled in as soon as possible or scheduled in later once the service feels like the prospective foster carer is ready for it.

The need to balance between a focus on being welcoming with communicating key information and eligibility requirements, such as some services requiring them to have a spare room, was discussed.

> What's really difficult is, at enquiry stage we need to screen for suitability so there's certain bits of key information we need to get so we don't waste our time and their time… some people will happily tell you their life story so you can do that screening. Other people are really guarded, and it's about us being as respectful as we can, so that we're going at the enquirers pace. One size doesn't fit all when you're working with people. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Managing applications

How applications were managed varied across the services in the study. One approach is to allow anyone to submit an application whilst another is to invite only some enquirers to apply who are deemed suitable and eligible. Services who employ the latter strategy explained the benefits of ensuring that no one's time is wasted on an application that they

know is not suitable from the start, while also encouraging people to reapply when their circumstances change making them more eligible or suitable to be a foster carer. In deciding which applications should be progressed for assessment and approval, services either filter and select which are suitable, or choose not to reject any applications allowing them all to progress to assessment. Where the decision is made to allow all applications to progress to assessment the aim is to thoroughly explore any concerns for suitability at the very start of the assessment process after application. This last approach was cited as being most fair and transparent as applicants then have a legal recourse to challenge a rejection.

The assessment and approval process

As with applications, while largely consistent, the approach to assessment and approval had some variance amongst services. The assessment process includes two official stages, defined in regulations. Stage 1 focuses on practical information about a prospective foster carer's circumstances, and stage 2 involves asking for more detailed and personal information about the prospective foster carer and their family. Stages 1 and 2 can be run separately, but participants generally tended to say they were run concurrently to make the process quicker and more efficient. However, there are also occasions when it is beneficial to run them in succession, such as if there are concerns over an application that require further investigation before proceeding with the full assessment. Participants said that ideally the medical and criminal checks, as well as the references, would commence right at the start of the application process as they can take a long time, especially if overseas checks are needed. Once stages 1 and 2 of the assessment process are complete, the application progresses to the panel stage.

Alongside the assessment process, foster carers take part in training provided by the services. Many choose to use Skills to Foster, a training package developed by the Fostering Network. Additional approaches services can take in supporting prospective foster carers during this time include suggesting supplementary training courses, having an emphasis on therapeutic and trauma-informed approaches to training, offering mentoring or buddy support, or providing sessions with former foster carers or young people who have been in foster care.

What works well

Responding quickly

Responding to enquiries quickly is a crucial element of the recruitment process. Prospective foster carers can feel like the enquiry to application process can be slow, and if enquiries are not followed up promptly, they may go to another service.

Progressing swiftly with an assessment once an application has been submitted was also deemed important. Having a team dedicated specifically to the assessment process

helps ensure assessments are progressed and completed quickly. If instead the staff who work on assessments also work with existing foster carers, then emergencies with foster placements inevitably take precedent and can cause severe delays to the assessment process.

Equip, support, and empower applicants

Participants acknowledged that the initial enquiry process can feel quite full on and invasive for prospective foster carers, particularly the home visit. This was seen in one way as beneficial as it helps to prepare them for the assessment process, however, this invasive nature can put some prospective foster carers off. Participants also spoke about trying to shift away from a sole focus on gathering information, and towards an equal focus on empowering foster carers to ask for the information that they need. This includes ensuring a focus is placed on prospective foster carers evaluating whether the service is a good fit for them, creating the space to explore and discuss what prospective foster carers want from the experience and empowering them to make the decision themselves about whether to apply or not. Within this, transparency and gauging the timing of when and how much information to give is important.

Providing support to prospective foster carers through the application stage is also important. This can include giving the application form out during a home visit to allow a face-to-face discussion and a chance to ask questions about it. This is followed by a phone call if the application form is not submitted to see if any help is needed or if they can answer any questions.

Participants noted that there is a need for a more balanced process during the assessment stage. They mentioned wanting a process that is less focused on assessing prospective foster carers' suitability for the role, and more focused on providing them with learning and development opportunities to make the process more positive and empowering. Taking part in the training as early as possible, carrying out mid-assessment reviews, and ongoing communication were all seen as integral to this.

> It would be better if they could be a kind of apprentice to the actual work that they're [going to be] doing. There's a need to shift the focus from assessing your past to preparing you for what you're about to do in this new role. The assessment process would almost become a training and development process. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

A relational and strength-based approach

Participants highlighted the importance of taking a relational and strength-based approach, where the aim would be to encourage independence, resilience, decision making and wellbeing. Interviewees emphasised the value of building rapport, forming genuine relationships, and placing the needs of prospective foster carers at the centre of the process. The human touch was deemed vital, described as putting a 'face to the

name' of any fostering staff member they are interacting with by staff attending face-to-face events or home visits where possible. In contrast to this, participants felt that some fostering services can exhibit unwelcoming and judgemental attitudes, be discriminatory, use intimidating language, and take on a deficit approach which puts off prospective foster carers.

Consistency and interacting with the same person or people throughout the process was also noted to be helpful. Strong collaborative relationships between prospective foster carers and the staff supporting them was said to help create a sense of teamwork, as opposed to a more formal dynamic of assessor and applicant. This was deemed particularly helpful during the assessment stage. Other key enablers included providing ongoing training and peer networking opportunities with a focus on helping foster carers feel engaged, supported, and motivated.

Prioritising building good relationships from the initial enquiry onward has the added benefit that those who are not yet ready to progress to application or assessment, are more likely to keep the organisation in mind and choose to come back to it when they are ready.

Where services decide that prospective foster carers are not at a stage in their life where they are ready to move forward, participants talked about feeling they still have a duty of care to them and that it is important to support them in a trauma-informed way. This includes informing prospective carers why they were not invited to apply or why their application was rejected with honesty and sensitivity while leaving channels of communication open.

Flexibility

It was felt that a one size fits all approach will not meet the needs and preferences of prospective foster carers. One part of this is offering a wide range of options for making an enquiry and for ongoing correspondence following an enquiry, such as through live chat, an online call, calling them or sending an email. Having flexibility about when staff are available to contact can also help, such as some evening and weekend hours.

The application process can also be more flexible to suit prospective foster carers' needs and preferences. For instance, they could have the option to apply online or on paper, to choose between in-person or over the phone support or have access to services where applications can be picked up instead of needing to post or drop them off. During the assessment stage, this could mean progressing at the pace that prospective foster carers are comfortable with.

Participants also argued that it was not realistic to expect the current demand for foster carers to be met. The sector needs to be reimagined, with more flexible and creative ideas about how prospective foster carers can be utilised. This is especially important for those who may be interested in being a foster carer, but who are not able to meet the

eligibility criteria or commit to foster care long term. In these cases, individuals could take on a wide variety of roles including, respite and emergency placement roles[13], or mentoring[14] roles. This would allow for their skills to be utilised when they are not able to commit to a long-term fostering role.

Hearing from those with lived experiences

Participants noted that hearing from those with lived experience of fostering is beneficial for prospective foster carers, including existing foster carers, former foster carers or those who have been fostered. This can happen through directly putting prospective foster carers in touch with them, inviting them to attend events together or including those with lived experience in the training received during the assessment process. Another example captured by the paper exercise, is having dedicated web pages where stories from existing foster carers are shared. Involving existing foster carers allows first-hand experiences to be shared with those interested in fostering, with existing foster carers likely to know what prospective foster carers want to know about but are not comfortable asking. Participants noted that prospective foster carers tended to find those with lived experience to be more compelling, more trusted sources of information, and easier to ask any questions to. Some services have a mentoring scheme, by existing or former foster carers, which is offered to prospective carers for 6 months. Mentors may attend the panel interview and provide support throughout the recruitment process.

> Mentors are really good. So, they can approach them with simple questions and have that emotional support and friendship. They don't have to take it up, but it is offered, ideally before they come to panel, although it doesn't always work like that. The mentor can come to panel and support with building a rapport and explain what to expect. Sometimes it is good to speak to somebody who knows what that direct experience is like. – *Local Authority*

A streamlined and informative process

Participants described that it is good practice to lay out the application and assessment process of prospective carers at the start and keep them thoroughly informed throughout the process. This includes explanations of what happens at each stage and who they will speak to so that prospective foster carers know what to expect and feel more empowered and equipped.

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[13] Respite foster carers provide short-term foster placement where the child or children are placed with a foster family to provide a breather to their current family. Emergency foster carers provide short term care for children and young people where there is a need for them to be in a safe and secure environment at very short notice.

[14] Mentoring programmes "typically recruit and train adult volunteers and match them with young people who are deemed to benefit from a relationship with a non-parental adult" in Mentoring for young people in care and leaving care: Theory, policy and practice. (apa.org)

Participants also discussed the importance of not repeatedly asking for the same information from prospective foster carers at various stages throughout the enquiry and assessment process. For example, organisations spoke about how the same information could be requested in an enquiry form, a home visit, an application form and during the assessment stage. Implementing a process where information gathered at one stage is shared to other colleagues throughout the recruitment process ensures prospective foster carers feel heard and seen rather than feel as though their time is being wasted.

Reducing anxiety about the panel process

The panel was cited as a part of the process that can feel intimidating for prospective foster carers, though participants said that many people feedback afterwards that it was not as bad as they had expected. Thoroughly informing prospective foster carers on what to expect from the panel process can help to reduce anxiety, including outlining who will be present at the panel with photos of each person. In addition, having someone they have built up a relationship with through the enquiry and application process present during the panel makes it less intimidating. Meeting the needs of prospective foster carers at the panel stage can also help, such as simplifying phrasing for those who speak English as a second language.

Challenges

Lack of staff resources

Quality recruitment is resource intensive. Prospective foster carers require detailed and tailored ongoing correspondence that is time consuming and can require specialised sensitivity. Fostering services said that they need the resources to hire more staff to provide a quality service. This includes dedicated administrative staff that are essential for a smooth-running process.

Enquirers disengaging or withdrawing

A key challenge cited by participants during the enquiry process was prospective foster carers disengaging. This was through an inability to contact or engage with some prospective foster carers who provide their contact details, especially when provided through social media platforms. Many never return an initial call or provide a reason for why they have decided to not take their enquiry any further. Sometimes services will not hear back from prospective foster carers who seemed interested and engaged, and participants felt this was most likely because they had decided to apply with another agency.

A key reason given by services for a prospective foster carer withdrawing during the assessment process is that their situation can change, meaning they are no longer able to foster. This includes a vast array of reasons such as health issues, the loss of a loved

one, needing to care for a loved one, losing their job, and to meet the needs of their birth children. These kinds of withdrawal are viewed more favourably as it is not a negative reflection of the assessment process. Participants also felt it important to note that this may happen more often for less affluent foster carers as the current economic context means more instability and dependence on income, this affects local authority areas that tend to have less affluent populations.

Lack of understanding of the foster carer role

Participants felt that a key reason enquiries do not progress to application or prospective foster carers withdraw during the assessment stage, is that prospective foster carers do not fully understand the services' eligibility requirements or the responsibilities that are necessary to be a foster carer. Examples given included being unaware of the needs of foster children, not having suitable accommodation in their home, being unable to balance their work schedule with fostering duties, or feeling fostering differs from their initial expectations. Many decide that it is not the right time for them to become a foster carer, due to their family, career, or economic situation. Participants referenced that the cohort of children and young people needing foster placements had increasingly complex needs, requiring in some cases foster carers with specific expertise and training (for example, youth workers). In some cases, services will deter prospective foster carers from applying or completing the assessment stage because they do not have the appropriate level of expertise or training.

> When you're caring for our vulnerable children who experience significant trauma… that can set off triggers in that person [the foster carer]. It's our duty of care to our foster family as well as our children… to ensure that our prospective carers are at a good place within themselves, and as a family, to proceed with being a foster carer… Sometimes [the issue is the] needs of their own children… We will not compromise the needs of your children to meet the needs of our children. – *Local Authority*

Additionally, some participants highlighted that prospective foster carers may be put off by how the system works. An example given was that whilst foster carers are given a lot of responsibility, some feel that they do not receive the corresponding level of authority and discretion. This can make the role feel disempowering and undermine their ability to do the job effectively. Some participants also mentioned a power imbalance between foster carers and social workers. Foster carers can feel micro-managed, continually watched, and assessed, and a lack agency to challenge decisions made by others within the system.

The process for managing allegations that are made against foster carers can also scare off prospective foster carers as it is lengthy and foster carers are only paid for the first 10 days of an investigation. Participants said that existing foster carers talk about feeling

unsupported and the experience negatively affecting their roles. Prospective foster carers will most commonly hear about some of these challenges through social media channels.

Strict eligibility checks

Participants referenced certain eligibility checks that automatically eliminate individuals who would have otherwise been approved as foster carers. The prime example of this is the indefinite leave to remain requirement required by some services. However, indefinite leave to remain is not a legal requirement to foster, anyone with a type of visa that allows them to take up self-employed work can foster. As an extension of this, overseas checks can slow down and possibly stop an assessment process if a prospective foster carer's history cannot be traced in countries in which they have previously resided.

> What we really struggle with is that there are people who could be foster carers, but some of the checks that need to be done to get them over the line-- impossible. They go on for years and years, and it rules so many people out, and they are mainly overseas checks. If I go out to see somebody, and they've lived in Jamaica… it's like trying to climb a mountain. And they're really great people with loads of skills, but we just cannot verify their existence in a country like Jamaica. – Independent Fostering Agency

It was felt that a more nuanced approach to how eligibility criteria are communicated to prospective foster carers would be useful. For example, prospective foster carers are often told they cannot combine fostering responsibilities with other work commitments, however there can be flexibility around this. They are also too often turned away due to not being eligible to foster at that point in time without acknowledging that they may be eligible in the future if circumstances change. It would help to take a longer-term approach and keep lines of communication open with the option to foster further down the line.

Furthermore, eligibility criteria are not always universally understood and applied. For example, many services said they would discount prospective foster carers who already have very young children as the requirement to foster on top would be seen as too much to balance. However, for some services having young children or several children actually allows prospective carers to demonstrate how they are able to balance lots of responsibilities and have the qualities needed for foster care.

Lengthy approval process

The process from application to approval can take a long time and can be frustrating. This can be further exacerbated by delays in allocating an assessor. The long periods of waiting can compromise the motivation and morale of prospective foster carers. Participants felt that services did not have much control over this. Eligibility checks can be a slow process, including the medical and Disclosure and Barring service (DBS)

checks needed. Participants noted that GP practices do not prioritise conducting medical checks on foster carers as this is outside the remit of their paid role. This is likely exacerbated by pressures within the NHS.

Invasive assessment process

Participants referred to the invasive nature of the recruitment process as a challenge, and in particular the panel assessment. Requirements which are mandated to assess someone's suitability include speaking to ex-partners or discussing a prospective foster carer's physical and mental health which some people find distressing. Some questions were described as hard-hitting and can make prospective foster carers feel like the amount of personal information that is being requested from them is "unjustified".

Panel process

It was felt that the highly detailed panel process does not always lead to a more fully informed decision about a foster carer's suitability. The process was described as overly repetitive, formal, and antiquated. The significant time commitment that comes with serving on a panel can also make it difficult to recruit panel assessors.

> I ask this question more and more often: why do we have panels? I'm struggling to get a decent answer to that. I mean, we have an entire industry of oversight in children's social care. How many people need to look at something, how often until we're assured it's safe? – *Stakeholder Workshop*

The stakeholder workshop also discussed that panels can lack independence and do not always make consistent or appropriate decisions leading to biased and conflicting decisions across the country. For example, one panel may view not being able to have children as a positive in prospective foster carers, whilst another might view it as a red flag. Some prospective foster carers have been known to have been turned down due to having pets or because of having non-conforming lifestyles. The rules and standards that panels use can therefore not seem legitimate at times. Some stakeholders argued that there is a need for standardised tools in England that would be used by panels and fostering services to inform approval decision making, this would include a shared understanding of what makes a good foster carer and clear criteria of what is expected of foster carers.

Nonetheless, other participants noted how much the panel experience had changed for the better over the last decade, becoming more conversational, relational, sensitive and people focused whilst also fulfilling its independent role. For example, some panels included a young person with experience of care.

Suggestions for improvement

These suggestions were proposed by participants.

Diversify the foster carer population

As having a wide range of foster carers from various backgrounds is ideal, it would be helpful to be proactive at the service level about being more open minded about who the ideal foster carer is. This means moving away from focusing on average profiles to help diversify the foster carer population.

Develop opportunities that bring services together at the national and regional level that focus on how to actively target a more diverse group of people and how to tailor marketing communications about fostering in ways that resonate with a more diverse audience.

The government could fund a campaign that includes key messaging that people from all lifestyles have the potential to be a foster carer.

Explore shifting the national culture of assessment

Furthermore, it is worth exploring shifting the national culture of assessment to improve the application to approval process. This is from what at times feels like an intrusive examination into someone's past to one which prioritises learning, development, and preparation for the role of being a foster carer.

Explore other roles for prospective foster carers

It would be beneficial to think innovatively about roles that prospective foster carers could take on beyond the role of a foster carer to utilise the willingness and skills of those who may not be suitable to foster. Examples given include a wider variety of respite and emergency placement roles, or mentoring roles. However, this is a difficult ask of individual services as social workers are struggling to cope with workload, therefore it may sit better at a national level. This could include funding pilots to explore different models.

4. Data collection and use

This section explores some of the themes discussed by fostering services about their own data collection, including what data they do and do not gather throughout the recruitment process and how they use it. Chapter 5 will cover Ofsted conversion rates.

Defining enquiries

How participants define and measure enquiries varies greatly. Participants reported that an enquiry can be understood as the number of prospective foster carers who have engaged in any way, such as visiting the website or taking a leaflet, the number of those who have got in touch, via email or phone, the number who have provided basic contact details, or alternatively it could only include those that have had an initial conversation with a member of staff.

Despite the published Ofsted guidance accompanying their data collection[15], participants highlighted that the definitions were open to interpretation. One approach mentioned by participants to manage the discrepancy in the way enquiries are understood and measured is to have clearer definition for all services to ascribe to. Furthermore, participants spoke about the value in making a distinction between two separate categories of enquiries: soft enquiries and hard enquiries. A soft enquiry might consist of clicks online, taking a leaflet at an event stand or asking for more information about fostering via an online form or email. A hard enquiry might be when the organisation speaks to that person with the prospect of progression, when a home visit is made, or when an application is downloaded. The numbers of soft enquiries tend to be much higher than hard enquiries. Agreeing on an exact definition will be challenging and participants noted that there was much disagreement not just across services, but also within services.

> We've been trying to decide what an enquiry is for 14 years. I've worked with quite a number of managers in that time, and people come from different places. They say, 'well, this is what an enquiry is to me'... and that's not [at all what] we would count as an enquiry. So, we have to revisit it again. – *Local Authority*

Data collected at each stage of recruitment

Participants reflected that the extent and depth of data collected varies at each stage of recruitment and between services, with much more information being collected as someone progresses through the process. There tends to be less demographic and personal data gathered in the initial enquiry stage, with participants often stating that only names and contact details are collected. The paper exercise carried out with participants

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[15] Ofsted annual fostering data collection - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

for this research did capture some additional information collected on an enquiry form, such as reason for enquiring, eligibility criteria, relevant experience, whether prospective foster carers have approached other services, and whether they have applied or fostered before. However, the only examples of demographic data asked at this stage was age, relationship status and whether English was a second language.

The reasons for collecting less data during the enquiry stage is firstly to adhere to GDPR requirements, and secondly to not seem intrusive and deter people from submitting their enquiry by asking for personal information like ethnicity and age so early in the process.

> [We want to make it] as easy as possible for people to engage... so it's basic information to begin with: name, phone number, email, and that's it. We're always trying to think, how would we experience it?... How do we feel when somebody says, 'what is your ethnicity; do you have a disability, and where do you live?' Quite often, you're thinking, 'actually I don't want to provide that information, and I'm going to leave now.' – *Independent Fostering Agency*

Some participants also noted that services did not always want to collect data about ethnicity during the enquiry stage to ensure a fairer process. This practice was questioned by participants during the interviews as it limited services' ability to use data to reach particular communities. The lack of demographic and personal data results in there being less data to analyse when looking to understand what deters people from progressing past the initial enquiry stage.

> It would be useful to have that [demographic] data, but there's simply no point. You're just going to start turning people off. So, you have to be very aware of balancing the need for the data against the impact it has negatively [on] people coming forward." – *Local Authority*

During the home visit and assessment process more in-depth data is gathered, including past experiences and motivations for becoming foster carers. Participants found the data collected at these stages is more useful for thinking about how to improve their recruitment strategies and to better support prospective foster carers.

Qualitative data

Participants reported collecting largely quantitative data about recruitment, with a focus on demographic data and numbers of enquiries, applications, withdrawals, and approvals. Much less qualitative data is collected. A desire was expressed to collect more qualitative data, in particular around foster carer perspectives on recruitment, reasons for not progressing beyond an enquiry, and withdrawals following an application. A lack of qualitative data can make it hard to understand the 'why questions', such as

why a prospective foster carer chooses not to progress after making an enquiry and build a more nuanced understanding of what is behind the numbers.

Examples were given of how qualitative feedback can be gathered on prospective foster carers experience of recruitment. Firstly, finding strategic moments to check in with them during the recruitment process. This could be by phoning those who do not progress to the application stage to ask about the reasons why and if there was anything the service could have done to make their experience more positive. Secondly, by conducting a review midway through the approval process to obtain feedback about what is working well and less well and consider ways to improve experiences.

Some key challenges were identified in trying to collect this level of qualitative feedback. Ideally this would need resource outside of the recruitment team so that people feel comfortable giving honest and constructive criticisms about their experience. Participants described some of the feedback received from those who drop out of the process as vague or disingenuous. Furthermore, staff feel they do not have the capacity to seek qualitative feedback and input it into their databases.

Another example of how foster carers' feedback was gathered is through surveys. Either sending out a survey following the panel or asking for feedback on the recruitment process in an annual survey sent out to existing foster carers. Participants noted that surveys, however, normally include multiple choice or scale answers that do not result in in-depth or nuanced information. And whilst they may include open questions inviting respondents to explain their answers, these are rarely completed.

Participants noted that some of this qualitative data, feedback on reasons for withdrawal or the overall recruitment process experience, occurs anecdotally in conversations between them and prospective foster carers. This data, however, can often be buried in case notes, recorded separately from the main database, or is not recorded at all. Participants spoke about the need to gather and record this kind of feedback in a less resource intensive way that is easily accessible by the whole team. This information could then be shared across the team and feed into strategic reviews or discussions about the recruitment process.

> Perhaps in this recruitment phase, we need the capacity and the resources to be able to collect the qualitative alongside the quantitative. We need to know the reasons behind [the numbers], and the numbers don't give you the reasons behind [them]…'we're all doing a million and one other things as well, so again, that's a challenge around the resources that we have. – *Local Authority*

Databases and systems

Participants spoke about how the databases and systems they use to capture and collate data can have an impact on the data being collected. This is because different systems

and databases have different abilities and limitations that affect the way data can be collated and analysed. The paper exercise, carried out as part of this research, identified a range of different systems and databases that are used.

One limitation is the type and depth of information that can be captured. This includes being unable to capture in-depth qualitative data such as motivations to foster, the support needs of prospective foster carers, or past experiences that have impacted decisions to foster. It also does not allow services to track each stage of the journey and the length of time between different stages of recruitment. Another limitation was that not all databases were able to link to other data sources and documents or produce analytical reports. These limitations can lead to services having multiple databases to store separate pieces of data, which in turn makes it difficult to compare and analyse data.

How data is used

Participants reported a main use of the data was for internal budgeting purposes. This was to advocate for an increased marketing and advertisement budget as the data can help demonstrate how time-consuming and resource intensive the recruitment process is.

Another use for recruitment data that was discussed was to evaluate their own recruitment processes and to feed into reflective discussions on what works well and what works less well. For instance, the production of monthly or quarterly reports feed directly into strategic meetings and lead to the review of processes. Data can also be used in a less formal process, where significant changes in recruitment data and conversion rates prompt conversations about factors that might be driving these changes and what improvements could be made.

Data usage is not always optimised. Participants highlighted that there can be a lack of engagement with data from other members of the organisation, particularly strategic leaders. This can lead to a disconnect between senior management, where senior managers do not have a clear understanding of recruitment gaps as they have not engaged with the data.

> Trying to get other people to see the importance of data is an uphill battle… When a challenge comes from senior management, [for example] 'why haven't we got enough Muslim foster carers', I'll go 'well actually, let's look at the demographics of the district, the children in care, the foster carers.' I have that data, but I don't report that to anybody because nobody ever asks me for it. But I use that data in my targeting, and I know that we have enough Muslim foster carers to look after the children in care. – *Local Authority*

Furthermore, there is not always the necessary resource available to analyse substantial amounts of data. Participants described how it can be easy to collect too much data that will not be analysed due to lack of resources.

Suggestions for improvement

These suggestions were proposed by participants.

Sharing good practice on qualitative data collection at a regional level

A recurring theme around data collection among services was the need for more qualitative data throughout the recruitment process, however many challenges were also shared around their ability to do this effectively. It may be helpful for services to come together at a regional level to share good practice and ideas around how to collect qualitative feedback on the recruitment process and how to use that feedback effectively. This could explore areas such as anonymous feedback options to encourage honesty or survey ideas that make qualitative question answers easier to submit (for example, voice notes).

Ensure effective data collection

It would be useful to evaluate the effectiveness of systems, databases, and processes for collecting, analysing, and using data that are in place across different services. Ideally, services would not need to use several databases to collect and record recruitment data. Streamlined data collection would improve quality and accessibility. If updating the system is too costly, it would be worth thinking about how to ensure effective read across the different databases.

5. Ofsted conversion rates

This section discusses the reflections participants shared on Ofsted data, in particular conversion rates from both enquiry to application and application to approval.

Data accuracy

Whilst guidance has been published[16] by Ofsted around what to include in data collections, participants reflected that it is not always clear what data Ofsted are asking them to send through in their annual return. The perception was that current definitions can lead to open interpretation and, therefore services send datasets which have all been collected, interpreted, and analysed differently. Participants also indicated that conversion rates were easy to manipulate by including or excluding certain data. There was a perception amongst some participants that it was common practice for services to discount certain enquiries or applications before sending the data to Ofsted to give the appearance of more positive conversion rates.

Participants highlighted that some Ofsted data points around recruitment could be misleading, and several key examples were given to demonstrate this. Firstly, requesting and measuring data within the financial year. Enquiries do not necessarily progress through to approval within 12 months or within the same calendar year and this can mean the numbers of enquiries, applications and approvals within each financial year do not correlate with each other. Secondly, under current regulations only the applicant themselves can withdraw an application during stage 2 of the assessment process. Participants described often running stages 1 and 2 of the assessment process concurrently. In this context, they cannot reject an application themselves, and can only recommend that an applicant should withdraw. Participants noted that consequently a much higher percentage of applications are withdrawn, with only a very small percentage being rejected each year. Ofsted does not acknowledge this caveat when asking for data on applications withdrawn by the applicant or the service, and no data is collected to explain why they were withdrawn which would help contextualise these figures. However, including such data would increase burden on services.

As discussed earlier in this report, digital marketing seems to have led to higher numbers of enquiries but many of those are from people who are just curious and not wanting to progress to an application. It was felt that this may skew conversion rates when comparing between services depending on the marketing strategies they use. For example, there was a perception amongst participants that IFAs use more digital marketing than LAs and would therefore have higher numbers of 'soft' enquiries leading to a lower conversion rate. The paper exercise included a review of relevant websites and noted great variation in the level of detail provided on the websites between services. However, those differences appeared across services and there was no clear distinction

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[16] Ofsted annual fostering data collection - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

between LA and IFA websites from the review. It is also worth noting that this research was with a small number of services and used qualitative methods so inferences across all services cannot be certain.

Conversion rates may also appear low as people may enquire at multiple services at once, for example enquiring with their local authority as well as several independent fostering agencies in their area. The conversion rate counts them each time, although only one of those enquiries would progress to application, meaning that one person generates multiple enquiries. Therefore, the number of enquiries across services are not representative of the number of prospective foster carers.

Participants indicated that a low conversion rate is perceived negatively when it is not necessarily a bad thing. Many people who enquire are simply looking to obtain more information and perhaps are only beginning their interest in fostering, with no immediate intent or readiness to apply. Participants reported that, for some, the time between enquiring and fostering can be 2 to 5 years long.

> Conversion is a necessary metric, but it's a very dangerous metric, because it doesn't actually mean anything. Because the only way you could get a realistic conversion rate would be to follow every enquiry through to its very end and then evaluate it, and for some people that might be 8 years later. It could be 10 years later. The conversations we have won't come to any fruition, but they may inform someone to make this decision 10 years down the line. So, at what point down there do you measure whether that's a success, a conversion or not?
> – *Local Authority*

Utility and relevance

The enquiry to application conversion rate

Despite concerns over this conversion rate (summarised in the chapter on data accuracy), participants felt that the measure was more useful than a simple number of enquiries metric as it links enquiries to the application and approval stages. More accurate data would enhance its relevance and usefulness. For example, a clearer set of nationally agreed definitions and distinguishing between soft and hard enquiries.

The application to approval conversion rate

Participants expressed less concerns about the application to approval rate. However, two key concerns were raised. Firstly, it was felt that there are differences amongst services as to how the application process and the assessment to approval stage is run, which can impact conversion rates. For example, some organisations invite people to apply only after carrying out an initial home visit, assessing their eligibility and being fairly

certain that they will be approved and so their conversion rate from application to approval tends to be quite high, while others follow a different process and let anyone apply and consequently have a lower application to approval rate.

The second concern is that, as with the enquiry to application conversion rate, participants noted that a low application to approval rate is often viewed negatively by some in the sector. Instead, a low conversion rate can be seen to demonstrate an effective process which is screening out unsuitable prospective foster carers. Participants argued that the focus should not be about generating a high conversion rate, but about finding the right foster carers who are more likely to stay in the role.

> That's us as practitioners doing our jobs well if we have a high dropout rate, because it means the people who are getting through are safe to practice and have the skills, abilities, and competence to be effective foster carers. – *Independent Fostering Agency*

As discussed earlier in the report, a change in circumstances is a common reason for prospective foster carers withdrawing an application during the assessment stage. In relation to this, participants noted that deprivation and poverty rates could impact on the conversion rate from application to approval. They argued that this could be because prospective foster carers living in more deprived areas might be more likely to face economic instability in the context of rising living costs, and therefore be more at risk to changes in circumstances that would cause them to withdraw from the recruitment process.

Overall reflections on conversion rates

Conversion rates have many limitations as outlined. Participants highlighted that relying on conversion rates can spark the wrong conversations amongst strategic leaders. Without an understanding of the context there can be a tendency to focus on the negative interpretations of the measures. For example, a lower conversion rate might have resulted from an increased marketing budget leading to more online enquiries that do not progress to the application stage but may instead cause leaders to feel unjustifiably worried that their conversion rate has decreased due to poor recruitment practices.

Although participants noted the drawbacks and challenges of using conversion rates to measure success, they felt it was difficult to provide an alternative metric as a suitable replacement. It was also noted that conversion rates can be useful, but that it was important to be mindful of their limitations and should therefore not be used by anyone in the sector on their own to try to analyse and understand recruitment.

> These questions [asked for the purpose of Ofsted conversion rates data] don't inform you of a picture of fostering recruitment at all... it

doesn't tell you anything about the process because you don't know the reasons why... it could have been a change in policy; it could have been a change in our environment. It's so vague; I don't think it's of any use to be honest. – *Local Authority*

Participants also noted that retention and utilisation rates are more useful because they better reflect successful recruitment of suitable foster carers. They measure whether approved foster carers go on to take placements, whether they stay within those placements and how long they remain in the role of a foster carer. Furthermore, a focus on improving retention rates and supporting foster carers to remain in the role will lead to an improvement in the experience of existing foster carers, which in turn will support recruitment methods and ensure that word-of-mouth continues to be a reliable facilitator.

There was an overall sense from participants that ultimately conversion rates about recruitment alone will not help identify the key challenges in recruiting foster carers, nor reveal the full picture of how successful or unsuccessful a recruitment process is. The measures are "blunt tools," lacking the nuance which is necessary for meaningful learning, for solving current challenges, or for influencing future strategy.

Suggestions for improvement

These suggestions were proposed by participants.

Increase awareness of Ofsted's definitions for enquiries to improve accuracy

Participants were not always aware of Ofsted's set definitions for each data point, enquiries in particular, or felt that the definitions still allow some choice at a service level for how to define enquiries and the figures they submit. Ensuring that all services are made aware and reminded of these definitions when submitting data, and gathering their feedback on where they feel the definitions could be clarified further, would mean the data collected could be used to make more reliable comparisons across fostering services.

Breaking down the conversion rate into a set of measures

Breaking down the conversion rate into a set of measures that together will provide a more nuanced picture of the enquiry to approval journey would provide more useful and relevant information. For instance, the enquiry to application conversion rate could be broken down into different conversion rates depending on the recruitment channel (for example, digital enquiries or word-of-mouth) or the enquiry type (for example, soft or hard enquiry).

Participants felt that there is still a need to have an overarching conversion rate across the whole recruitment journey, from enquiry through to approval. This overall conversion rate can tell a useful and complete story as it indicates whether the service was targeting the right people and whether their enquiries were of high quality.

Capturing the journey of prospective foster carers

Current data only provides snapshots of enquiries and applications at a point in time collected from the LA and IFA perspective. To gain a better understanding of the process, it would be useful if the data captured the journey of prospective foster carers. For example, have an identification number that would capture multiple applications and their outcomes.

Add more granularity to the data

One suggestion was to use the number of times a prospective foster carer enquires as a metric to demonstrate increasing readiness along the long decision-making journey. This would mitigate the important weight marketing strategies play in conversion rates. A clearer understanding of which recruitment methods generate most enquiries leading to applications could inform future strategies.

Another suggestion was the development of a formula that would incorporate local data to provide services with a more contextualised and informed understanding of recruitment needs. For example, the number and type of foster carers required to meet the needs of the children and young people needing foster placements. They would then evaluate their recruitment success against this information.

A shift in the narratives around conversion rates required at a national level

There is a strong focus on conversion rates despite their limitations. Low conversion rates can be indicative of an effective recruitment process that ensures the right people progress and are approved. Furthermore, they cannot tell the whole recruitment story on their own and must be used in conjunction with other data (both quantitative and qualitative). Finally, it is worth emphasising the importance of retention rates as they have an impact on conversion rates.

6. Conclusions

This chapter starts by providing a summary of key findings, including an overview of suggestions offered by participants in each section. It then offers some higher-level recommendations and identifies next steps for future research.

Key findings

Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies

Whilst the distinction between LAs and IFAs may initially appear useful, contextual factors (size, geography, demographics, local needs, housing stock, and data collection practice) are stronger explanatory factors to explain differences in conversion rates than the type of fostering service. For example, IFAs may have a higher number of enquiries than LAs, but this may be due to better data collection or the fact that prospective foster carers are likely to apply to several IFAs when they will only apply to their local LA. Participants also noted that using this distinction to understand conversion rates was not particularly helpful, could exacerbate existing tensions, and prevent collaboration and the sharing of learning between LAs and IFAs going forward. Additionally, the sample for this research was very small and did not therefore allow for reliable generalisations about LAs and IFAs. Consequently, we have refrained from making comparisons unless they added value to this research.

Marketing and advertising

Services use a variety of marketing channels, including digital, media, physical and in-person methods. Participants noted the value of using a mix of different marketing channels. The significant shift toward digital marketing generated higher numbers of initial enquiries, however word-of-mouth remains a successful means to recruit prospective foster carers and seems to lead to higher quality enquiries. Some participants, however, argued it became a less effective recruitment strategy as the complexity of needs of children coming into care has increased and the experiences of foster carers has become more challenging. Therefore, the experiences shared may come across as negative or off-putting to prospective foster carers.

Prospective foster carers can often have a limited understanding of fostering when they make an initial enquiry. Participants highlighted the need for marketing and advertising materials to provide a more honest, balanced, and transparent account of fostering.

Key enablers identified by participants included creating engaging online content, using payments and initiatives, highlighting the organisation's unique selling point, and marketing to underrepresented groups. Participants also highlighted several challenges, including aspects of fostering being hard to market, competition amongst services, the impact of negative press, and the current economic and political context. Suggested

improvements included the DfE raising the profile of fostering, centralising advertising, and creating a national fostering package where fees and benefits are consistent across services.

A more collaborative approach between services was also seen as essential to improve recruitment practices and allow fostering services to prioritise the needs of children and young people needing placements. For example, this might include the regional pooling of funding and data to develop smarter recruitment strategies, and referring prospective foster carers to neighbouring services where they might be better placed to meet the specific needs of children and young.

The recruitment process

Recruitment has been impacted by a lot of external contextual issues that participants feel individual services have little control over, such as the cost of living crisis, long term impacts from the pandemic, the use of social media by existing foster carers, the social work workforce crisis which has reduced the number of social workers available to support foster carers, funding constraints for services, and challenging fostering conditions (for example, no pension contribution and no allowance between placements).

The average profile of prospective and existing foster carers varied between services and regions. However, commonly, they were female, middle-aged, couples in their 40s to 60s with children that had left home, people at the end of their career or transitioning to part-time work, and high earners with a stay-at-home parent. Though it is worth noting we had a small number of case studies for this research, and this is therefore not necessarily representative. Participants spoke about a significant shift towards being more open to profiles and an urgent need for more proactive initiatives to reach more diverse audiences, such as those with very young children at home that they would have turned away in the past. A more diverse pool of foster carers will better meet the diverse needs of children and young people needing foster placements. Cultural awareness and a tailored recruitment process are essential to this.

Fostering services have varied approaches in how they manage recruitment. Common themes were having a designated team to respond to enquiries, usually via the phone, and following up with home visits before progressing to an application form. The assessment process involves two stages of data collection often run concurrently to gather practical and personal information, as well as a panel process, with support and training for applicants alongside this.

Participants highlighted several challenges to recruitment including a lack of staff resources, enquirers disengaging or withdrawing, and strict eligibility checks. Participants also noted that some fostering services can exhibit unwelcoming and judgemental attitudes, be discriminatory, use intimidating language, and take on a deficit approach. Common reasons for dropouts included a lack of understanding of the foster carer role,

eligibility checks turning people away, a lengthy assessment process that can feel invasive, and applicants experiencing unexpected changes in circumstances.

Enablers to the recruitment process included prompt responses to enquiries, being flexible, having one point of contact within the fostering service, using a relational approach with a chance to hear from those with lived experiences, reducing anxiety about the panel process, and a streamlined process aiming to support applicants. A resounding message was that the recruitment process should take on a strength-based approach that focuses on ruling people in where possible, not ruling people out. Similarly, the need to rebalance the focus of the assessment stage was highlighted, with more attention being paid to training applicants, rather than interrogating their past.

Suggestions for improvement were diversifying the foster carer population and exploring a shift to the national culture of assessment, from what is at times an intrusive examination into someone's past to one which prioritises learning, development, and preparation for the role of being a foster carer. When the eligibility criteria is an issue, services could explore other roles that prospective foster carers could take on (for example, respite and emergency placements), and keep lines of communications open with the option to foster further down the line.

Data collection and use

Different data is collected at each stage in recruitment, with much less captured during enquiries and much more by the time an applicant has reached the assessment stage. Whilst this was often viewed as being appropriate and ensured prospective foster carers are not deterred, it also means that data is not necessarily available to analyse who enquires but does not progress and the reasons for this.

Participants noted that the majority of data collected is quantitative data. Qualitative data would be beneficial as it would allow services to explore the story behind the numbers, and better understand why people do not progress through various stages of the recruitment process. Qualitative data is also more helpful to inform a strategy to improve the recruitment process. However, services noted that it was challenging to encourage prospective foster carers, particularly those who do not progress past the enquiry stage, to provide honest and constructive feedback.

There is no consensus around the definition of enquiry. Enquiries are measured and interpreted differently both amongst and within services. Some services use multiple databases and systems to collect relevant data. The variety of functionality available can also make the collection, analysis, and use of data easier or more complex.

Suggestions for improvement were to find resource efficient ways to collect qualitative data, share good practice at a regional level and ensure effective data collection.

Ofsted conversion rates

Participants indicated that they did not always find the data request from Ofsted clear or were not always aware of the guidance that Ofsted published, leaving space for interpretation. Consequently, services send datasets which have all been collected, interpreted, and analysed differently.

Overall, participants felt that data collected by Ofsted on conversion rates is not accurate and does not provide a measure that is reliably comparable between services. Issues raised with the data included:

- participants felt there was not a set definition for an enquiry, seemingly unaware of the definition Ofsted has published or feeling this published definition is open to interpretation, meaning the enquiry to application conversion rate is measured differently across services. This does not allow for meaningful or reliable comparisons.

- digital marketing generating a high number of soft enquiries making marketing strategies an important predictor of conversion rates[17].

- applications counted as withdrawals rather than rejections due to rigid regulation that does not reflect practice. For example, only the applicant themselves can withdraw during stage 2 of the assessment process and stage 1 and 2 are often ran concurrently.

- its time limitation as enquiries do not necessarily progress to approval within 12 months (i.e., enquiries can lead to application 2 to 5 years later).

- its all-encompassing nature and inability to distinguish between channels of marketing (for example, online or word-of-mouth) generating the enquiry, or the type of enquiry (for example, soft or hard).

- different practice across services, especially when it comes to the application process which ranges from being open to anyone to only accessible to those invited after a home visit and eligibility assessment.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that low conversion rates are often perceived negatively. However, participants raised several reasons why low conversion rates may not be negative, such as reflecting that someone may take a long time after initial enquiry to then apply for fostering and it seems like they have not converted from enquiry to application, that prospective foster carers sometimes submit multiple applications affecting the enquiry to application rate, or because it indicates a thorough application process is successfully screening out unsuitable candidates affecting the application to conversion rate. Participants also noted that a common reason for application withdrawal

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[17] It is worth noting that Ofsted does not request data on soft enquiries. However, this research suggests that soft enquiries may be included in the data they receive.

was a change in personal circumstances, which is beyond the control of the service. Overall, participants felt that conversion rates alone are a 'blunt tool' lacking the nuance necessary to provide an accurate assessment and meaningful learning that would help address current recruitment challenges and influence future strategy. However, participants argued that conversion rates should not be discarded and could be amended in order to become more reliable and useful, as long as they were used in conjunction with other data and contextual information.

Suggested improvements included for Ofsted to refine and sharpen their definitions for enquiries as well as amend the enquiry to approval conversion rate to improve data accuracy. This could involve breaking down the conversion rate into a set of measures that together will provide a more nuanced picture of the enquiry to approval journey (see 'Suggestions for improvement' on page 42 for more detail). Importantly, participants noted the need to shift narratives around conversion rates at a national level, as low conversion rates are not necessarily an issue.

Overall recommendations

This report includes a number of specific suggestions made by participants. They are included in each chapter and summarised in the 'Conclusions' chapter. Here we outline further recommendations based on this research.

Establish a centralised recruitment service – National or regional recruitment services that can pool resources from across multiple LAs or IFAs (or both) and hire dedicated staff with expertise in digital marketing and advertisement. This would encourage collaboration and foster a culture where the key objective was to increase the foster carer pool, be more responsive to children's needs, and avoid competition. A centralised service would also have the benefit of capturing foster carers journey (for example, multiple enquiries leading to one application) and its outcome. If not via an external service, LAs and IFAs should nonetheless attempt to pool their resources and knowledge together to devise regional approaches to recruitment, create budgetary efficiencies, and gather better data to develop evidence-led strategies. This will benefit services, prospective foster carers, and ultimately children in care.

Social media requires a distinctive strategy – Social media offers opportunities to target a more diverse range of prospective foster carers to diversify the foster carer pool. However, it is clear that any online content that does not reflect the reality of the role will create unnecessary traffic during the enquiry to application process. LAs and IFAs need to create realistic and honest adverts. Social media platforms have also created new challenges, such as the services' limited ability to moderate narratives online as they can rapidly become dominated by negative comments that are not a representative depiction of the fostering experience. LAs and IFAs need marketing strategies with a detailed plan for social media to ensure they make the most of the opportunities this medium offers. Resources need to be invested to ensure that fostering services can influence the

narratives around fostering on social media platforms, as they can rapidly become a forum to voice frustration about a role that can often be challenging. This requires creating content that is fun, engaging and captures the attention of the public.

Better utilise existing foster carers in the recruitment process – Fostering services could consider offering foster carers more opportunities for skills development during the recruitment process. For example, this could include paid mentoring roles or training existing foster carers to carry out follow up calls with all prospective foster carers who have been assessed to gather information about their experiences. This would be beneficial for providing ongoing learning and development opportunities to prospective foster carers, current foster carers, and foster carers between placements. Overall, it may improve conversion and retention rates.

Include qualitative data – Current data does not provide sufficient depth to inform future strategy. Beyond suggestions made to improve the Ofsted conversion rates data, services should collect more qualitative data, particularly from prospective foster carers about why they did not progress their application or withdrew an application they submitted. This requires resources and approaches that do not feel invasive and encourage honest responses and constructive feedback. Ideally, services should be able to capture the point in time the prospective foster carer dropped out of the process and reasons why.

Sharing learning and good practice around effective data collection and use – In particular, it would be useful to share good practice around gathering qualitative feedback from prospective foster carers about the recruitment process in the least resource intensive way possible. Using common tools throughout the recruitment process would harmonise data collection and support better analysis. For instance, the Coram assessment form is currently being amended to address some of the known challenges. Furthermore, sharing learning about the effectiveness of systems, databases, and processes for collecting, analysing, and using data that are in place across different services would be useful. It would be important to secure consent from prospective foster carers to use and share their anonymised data for research and improvement purposes.

Always include a focus on retention – Addressing retention will be an effective way to address recruitment challenges. The loss of and reported poor experiences of existing foster carers has a negative impact on recruitment. Improving the experiences of existing foster carers and the support they receive to ensure they remain foster carers will reduce pressure on recruitment. It will also more likely contribute to new applications as word-of-mouth remains a more reliable and successful recruitment method.

Dissemination of information and sharing of learning around eligibility criteria – Participants mentioned that eligibility requirements around indefinite leave to remain and spare rooms often acted as barriers to recruiting prospective foster carers who would otherwise make excellent candidates. However, indefinite leave to remain is not a legal requirement to foster, anyone with a type of visa that allows them to take up self-

employed work can foster, and the national guidance provides some flexibility around spare rooms. It could be worthwhile disseminating information about this at the national level to all fostering services, as well as encouraging services to share examples with one another of how they have been flexible in relation to these two criteria and what has worked well.

Next steps

This research gathered the views and experiences of stakeholders working for LAs, IFAs and other relevant associations, including those representing foster carers. It would nonetheless be important for any future research to engage with prospective foster carers themselves. Gaining a better understanding of their motivation to make an enquiry, their recruitment experiences, and reasons for dropping out where relevant, would be highly beneficial. This is particularly important as social media is generating higher number of enquiries that are often not followed to the application stage. Future research could focus on initial enquiries generated by social media or investigating prospective foster carers motivations and expectations. A greater understanding of soft enquiries could inform better marketing and communication strategies. It may also identify a pool of prospective foster carers who would be suitable but disengage from the process rapidly. Identifying barriers from prospective foster carers perspectives would be incredibly useful for fostering services.

The DfE funded fostering recruitment and retention programme in the North East signals an important step in moving towards a regional model of delivering fostering services. Many of the recommendations made in this report focus on collaboration at a regional level, and therefore resonate with this type of model. The findings from an evaluation of this programme will therefore be incredibly important and eagerly anticipated by some fostering services across the country.

Appendix 1: Case studies sampling

Table 1. Main criteria used for sampling local authorities and independent fostering agencies for case studies.

Type of fostering service	Number in sample
Local Authorities	5
Independent Fostering Agencies	5
Geography (2 services worked across multiple regions)	**Number in sample**
London	1
North East	1
North West	2
Yorkshire and the Humber	2
East Midlands	0
West Midlands	2
South East	1
East of England	2
South West	1
Rural or Urban	**Number in sample**
Rural	3
Urban	8
Ofsted rating	**Number in sample**
Outstanding	3
Good	5
Requires improvement	1
Inadequate	1
Enquiries to applications conversion rate compared with the national average (12% for LAs, 4% for IFAs)	**Number in sample**
Lower	4
Average	3
Higher	2
Much higher	1
Application to approval conversion rate compared with the national average of 28%	**Number in sample**
Lower	2
Average	2
Higher	2
Much higher	4

Base: All case studies (10)

Appendix 2: Topic guide for stakeholder workshop

1. **Introduction (10 mins)**

2. **Warm up (5 mins)**

   Introductory conversation:
   - Everyone to introduce themselves and their role, explaining their experience on this particular topic.

3. **Perspectives on low conversion rates (1 hour 5 mins)**

   What do you think are the key reasons behind the current conversion rates between enquiries and applications? [30 mins]
   - Probes:
     - Marketing / advertising / promotion.
     - Response / follow up times.
     - Form of follow up (for example, phone call versus email).
     - Approach taken by agencies in initial conversations (for example, welcoming / encouragement versus focusing on eligibility).
     - Available options for further communication with fostering agency.
     - Website appearance / user experience / accessibility.
     - Quality / type of information provided.
     - Application process.
     - Information provided not matching expectations.
     - Applicants making enquiries to multiple agencies.
   - Any significant differences between LAs and IFAs?
   - Challenges faced by fostering services in addressing any of these issues.
   - Strategies used to improve conversion rates.
   - What can act as facilitators for increasing conversion rates from enquiries to applications?

   What do you think are the key reasons behind conversion rates between applications and approvals [20 mins]
   - Probes:
     - Applicants dropping out due to changes in personal circumstances.
     - Applicants dropping out due to inefficient process.
     - Applicants dropping out due to no longer wanting to foster.
     - Issues with eligibility of applicants.
     - Resource issues.
   - Any significant differences between LAs and IFAs?
   - Challenges faced by fostering services in addressing any of these issues.
   - Strategies used to improve conversion rates.

- What can act as facilitators for increasing conversion rates from applications to approvals?

Understanding of participant's views on foster carer experiences of recruitment process [15 mins]

- Perspectives on foster carers experiences of the enquiry and application process.
  - In your opinion, what can help improve the experience for potential foster carers?
  - In your opinion, are there any significant differences in experience of recruitment process between LAs and IFAs?
  - Can you share any examples of how foster carer feedback is collected and how that information is used?
  - Can you share any examples of how feedback is collected from prospective foster carers and how it is used?

Perspectives on data collection [10 mins]

- What kind of data tends to be collected around recruitment and conversion rates from enquiry to application to approval?
  - Why is this data being collected?
  - Is the data collected fit for purpose? How is it being used?
  - Key gaps in data collection? (For example, who is enquiring, who is dropping out, when and why, foster carers experiences/views).
  - Challenges in collecting data?
  - Any significant differences between LAs and IFAs?
  - What are the limitations of the Ofsted data on conversion rates?
- Could data be used more effectively to improve conversion rates? If so, how?

4. Recommendations and wrap up (5 mins)

- Ideas and recommendations on recruitment of LAs and IFAs for case studies.
- Recommendations on how to collect foster carers views for future research projects.

THANK AND CLOSE.

Appendix 3: Topic guide for interviews with Local Authority and Independent Fostering Agency staff

Introduction (5 mins)

Their role (5 mins)

To begin with we would like to find out more about you and your role:

1. To start, can you provide an overview of your current role?

    Probes:
    1. Key responsibilities in relation to recruitment.
    2. Length of time in role.
    3. Has the role and responsibilities changed over time?
    4. Similar roles beforehand.

Understanding enquiries (15 mins)

Remind the participant that this interview is complemented by a focus group and possibly other interviews, so will not have to cover all the questions that we would like to ask.

NB: The aim is to use the interview to collect information prior to the focus group, where opinions will be further explored.

Now we would like to discuss enquiries from prospective foster carers:

2. How do prospective foster carers find out about you, before enquiring or applying?
    a. What is your marketing approach?
    b. Who is your marketing aimed at?
    c. Where do you advertise?
    d. Who decides on the content of the adverts?
    e. What type of information is made available to prospective carers?

3. How does your organisation define an enquiry?
    a. How does someone make an enquiry? (For example, filling in a short form, making a call, emailing the service, speaking to someone at an event).
    b. Are there cases where someone will contact you, but this would not count as an enquiry? Could you give an example?
    c. What is the response / follow up time like?
    d. How long do you leave an enquiry open (for example, when do you consider that an enquiry did not lead to an application?).
    e. What types of enquiries are recorded? And how are they recorded? (For example, if someone enquires multiple times, does each count as a new enquiry?).

4. What happens after someone makes an enquiry, but before they have made an application?
    a. Are enquiries followed up on?

- How?
- By whom?
- Is there a set timescale to follow up?
- What happens in any follow up / what information is discussed?
    b. Is the focus on welcoming or on eligibility?
    c. How are these interactions recorded?

Enquiry to application rates (5 mins)

The next few questions focus in on the conversion of enquiries to applications:

5. Are those who decide not to apply followed up to find out why? If so, how?
6. What do you think are the main reasons for not following up?
7. What information is collected about enquiries that do not progress to application?
8. Typically, how many of the applications received are appropriate?

Understanding applications and approvals (10 mins)

Now, we would like to ask a couple of questions about applications:

9. What is the process for someone making an application?

    a. How are applications made?
    b. How are applications matched against enquiries?
    c. What are your eligibility criteria?

10. What happens once someone has made an application?

11. How are applications followed up on?
    a. What happens in any follow up / what information is discussed?
    b. How is this recorded?

12. How does the approval process work?
    a. How long does the approval process normally take?
    b. What are the key stages / milestones of the process? Identifying where possible any obstacles / barriers.
    c. Any feedback from foster carers about the approval process?

13. What specific support and / or training do you offer applicants during this process?

Data (10 minutes)

14. What kind of data do you collect about who tends to enquire, apply, or is approved to become a foster carer?
    a. Contact details, location, ethnicity, age, anything relating to suitability for fostering?
    b. Is different data collected at different stages?
    c. How do you record this data? (For example, excel document, software)

    d. How do you use this data?

15. Is the conversion rate, as calculated by Ofsted, an appropriate measure?
    a. Would alternative measures provide a more accurate picture?

16. How are enquiries / number of enquiries recorded?
17. How are applications / number of applications recorded?
18. What data do you collect about who is dropping out of the recruitment process, when and why?
    a. Do you collect data around the reasons for when applications are withdrawn?

Wrap up (3 mins)

We are now on to the last couple of questions before we finish the interview. We will be discussing reasons behind the conversion rates, alongside enablers, challenges, and opportunities with recruitment.

19. Is there anything we have not discussed already which you think may be helpful for us to know?

20. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for speaking with me today.

Appendix 4: Topic guide for focus groups

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Introductory conversation:

- Everyone to introduce themselves and their role.
- What are your expectations or hopes for today's discussion.

2. Perspectives on recruitment (1 hour 25 mins)

Marketing / communications (5 minutes)

- How do prospective foster carers find out about you?
  - How do you advertise?
  - How successful is your marketing / advertising in attracting eligible foster carers?
  - How do you track / evaluate success (for example, number of 'hits', 'likes', enquiries, applications etc.,)?
  - What are the benefits of marketing / advertising?
  - What tend to be the common pitfalls?
  - Any particular challenges your organisation faces in relation to marketing / advertising?
  - In your opinion what is the best way to advertise to prospective carers (for example, best mode of comms, most appropriate content).
  - How would you improve current practice?

Enquiries (15 minutes)

- Who responds to queries (social worker, marketing person)?
  - And how do they respond?
  - Do you set timeframes to reply? Any challenges in this area?
- What is the average profile of prospective foster parents?
  - Are there common trends as to who goes forward with an application and who does not?
- What do you think are the key reasons for enquiries that do not progress into applications? Are any factors specific to your local context?
- What works well about this part of the recruitment process?
- What does not work so well?
- What might help address any challenges?
- What would you improve about this part of the process?

Applications (15 minutes)

- What resources do you have to manage this process?

- What happens if an application is rejected?
    - Is there any follow up or support provided?
- What happens if an application is withdrawn?
    - Is there any follow up or support provided?
- Considering the application process, what works well / key enablers?
- What are the key challenges for your LA / IFA?
- What strategies can you use to address these?
- Opportunities to improve this part of the recruitment process?

Approvals (15 minutes)

- What resources are required to manage this process efficiently and in a timely manner?
    - How does this compare to your local context?
    - [If appropriate] How do limited resources affect the recruitment process?

- How does the panel process work?
    - What are the benefits of this approach?
    - What are its limitations?
    - How do you think applicants experience this process?
    - How could it be improved?

- What type of support and services are available to prospective foster carers?
    - How do you cater for the needs of different communities / cultures / ethnicities?
    - Do existing foster carer have a role in the process?
    - Any further support you think would be helpful to have in place? Barriers to implementing this support?

- What are the key reasons for applications being withdrawn?
    - Does this happen before or after the panel? Is it worth making this distinction?

- What are the key reasons for applications being rejected?
    - Does this happen before or after the panel? Is it worth making this distinction?

- What are the key barriers in potential foster carers going from application to approval?
- What are the key enablers?
- How would you improve this part of the recruitment process?

Strategies to improve conversion rates (10 minutes)

Ask these questions for both conversion rates: from enquiry to application and from application to approval.

- What is your current conversion rate like?
- How does this compare to previous years?

- To what extent is the conversion rate driven by current demand and offer? (For example, is it higher when more children are waiting to be fostered, can the panel afford to be pickier when there is a high number of applicants).
- Do you think your conversion rates are high / low / about right? Why?
- Are you trying to improve the conversion rates? If so, what are your key strategies?
- Can you give me an example of a strategy that worked well?
- Can you give me an example of a strategy that did not work?
- Other ideas to improve conversion rates?

Prospective foster carers' experience (10 minutes)

- In your opinion, what about the current process can make the recruitment experience more difficult for potential foster carers?
- In your opinion, what about the current process can make the recruitment experience easier for potential foster carers?
- What could your organisation do to improve the recruitment experience for potential foster carers?
- Can you share any examples of how feedback is collected from prospective foster carers or current foster carers about the recruitment process and how it is used?
    - Just at exit interviews?
    - Other opportunities to gather feedback?
    - What sort of feedback have you received? (Probe about making enquiries, the application and approval process).

Data collection (15 minutes)

Summarise what we know about the data they collect around recruitment and conversion rates.

- How do you use the data you collect about prospective foster carers?
- To what extent could your data inform better recruitment strategies and conversion rates?
    - If data is inappropriate: what type of data is needed?

- What do you see as being the key gaps in the data you collect around recruitment? (For example, who is enquiring, foster carers experiences / views).
- What are the overall key challenges in collecting / recording data?

- Ofsted data: Ofsted uses the following data (present in slide)
    - ✓ Number of initial enquiries from new prospective households.
    - ✓ Total number of applications received from prospective fostering households between 1 April and 31 March.
    - ✓ Number of applications approved.
    - ✓ Number of applications withdrawn by applicants.
    - ✓ Number of applications withdrawn by services.
    - ✓ Number of applications rejected after being presented to panel.
    - ✓ Number of applications which remained in progress on 31 March.
    - ✓ Total number of households approved in year.

- For each of these categories, can you tell me how easy or difficult it is to collect and provide the data?
- Is there sufficient granularity / does the data capture what needs to be captured?
- Is the conversion rate, as calculated by Ofsted, an appropriate measure?
- Would alternative measures provide a more accurate picture?
- Should conversion rates take into consideration any other information or factors?
- Do you think your organisation could be using data more effectively to improve conversion rates? If so, how, and what would be needed to make this happen?

3. Recommendations and wrap up (5 mins)

- Any overall reflections and recommendations on how to improve the recruitment process of foster carers?
- Recommendations on how to collect foster carers views for future research projects.

THANK AND CLOSE.