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Fostering Potential: supplementary evaluation

August 2020

Funded by the British & Foreign School Society and the Sir John Cass Foundation

About this report

This report contains a supplementary evaluation of The Fostering Network’s Fostering Potential programme, which aims to support the educational outcomes of looked after children who are placed in foster care.

The programme period ran from May 2018 until April 2020. An initial evaluation report covered the first phase of the programme. This report covers local project activity from September 2019 until April 2020 and also reports on the information strand of the programme.

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Authors

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Additional reporting narrative and information about the programme delivery process was provided by Susan Soar, the project manager of Fostering Potential.

Participating local authorities

The participating authorities during 2018-2020 were:

- The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- The Royal Borough of Greenwich
- The London Borough of Islington
- Kent County Council
- Nottingham City Council
- Suffolk County Council
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Thank you to the individuals who participated in this research.

Introduction and background

This report provides additional evaluation of the Fostering Potential programme, delivered by The Fostering Network and funded by the British and Foreign School Society and the Sir John Cass Foundation.

The Fostering Potential programme aimed to support the educational outcomes of looked after children who are placed in foster care. The programme had two aspects: **project delivery work** in partnership with local authority fostering services and an **information dissemination strand**.

The project delivery work created an educational peer support network in each participating local area, delivered by experienced foster carers in the role of Education Champions. The information dissemination strand aimed to share information about research evidence, best practice and practical approaches to support the education of looked after children and young people. This aspect of the programme was aimed at foster carers, fostering services, education professionals and anyone with an interest in the education of looked after children.

The programme funding period ran from May 2018 until the end of April 2020.¹ An initial evaluation report was published in November 2019. This report covered:

- the background to the programme
- evidence base
- programme design and implementation process
- activity data
- analysis of challenging and enabling factors
- impact on children, foster carers, Education Champions and local authorities
- recommendations for future work.

The aims of the supplementary evaluation are to report on:

- how the project is being embedded in local authorities, including challenging and enabling factors to taking the work forward
- the information strand of the programme.

The supplementary report should be read alongside the initial evaluation report, which is available on The Fostering Network's website².

¹ The project period was then extended for a further month due to the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020

² *Championing Education: Initial Evaluation of the Fostering Potential Programme* at

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/fostering-potential>

Embedding the approach

The initial evaluation report covered the first phase of programme delivery up to July 2019. The project authorities were then encouraged to carry forward and embed the approach within their services, adapting it where needed. This section reports on the period from September 2019 to April 2020, with a focus on following up how the programme is being further embedded in local authorities along with identifying challenging and enabling factors to taking the work forward. The initial evaluation reported in depth on the impact of the work on stakeholders, but any additional findings on impact have also been incorporated into this report.

Evaluation method

The supplementary evaluation took place at a service level, so the individuals involved in the fieldwork were local authority fostering service and virtual school staff. The evaluation fieldwork was carried out approximately six months after the initial evaluation of the programme.

The coronavirus lockdown period commenced on 23 March 2020, with significant impact on activities within fostering services. Those who took part in the evaluation were therefore asked to focus on their activity and plans prior to the lockdown.

Telephone interviews

The initial evaluation plan was to interview two local authority representatives during the follow-up fieldwork. Questions were based on:

- project involvement on an individual level
- local authority input and involvement
- impacts and outcomes for project stakeholders
- collaborative working across local authorities.

However, due to external circumstances including the coronavirus outbreak of March 2020, it was only possible to speak with one local authority representative. A telephone interview with the Fostering Potential lead from Suffolk County Council took place in March 2020.

Survey

Due to the difficulty in carrying out interviews it was decided to also distribute a short qualitative questionnaire using online survey software. This was distributed to members of staff involved in the project across the seven project authorities. The survey questions were open-ended and aligned to the interview questions, asking about:

- project progress to date
- the future of Fostering Potential in their local authority
- impacts and outcomes of the project
- other experiences of the project.

The survey was started by 11 respondents but there were only three complete responses.

Respondents

The survey responses plus the telephone interview gave supplementary findings from four local authorities.

- The **interview** was carried out with a local authority representative from **Suffolk County Council**. They are employed as a supervising social worker in the local authority fostering service. This authority initially focused their Fostering Potential project work on children transitioning between key phases of education: for example Year 6 (Primary) to Year 7 (Secondary) and Year 11(Secondary) to Post-16 provision.

The complete responses to the **survey** came from representatives of the local authority fostering and adoption service in the following areas:

- **London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.** This authority initially focused their project work on the foster carers of children in the primary age range (5–11 years).
- **The Royal Borough of Greenwich.** This authority initially focused their project work on the foster carers of children transitioning between key phases of education: Year 6, Year 10, Year 11 and children changing school at other points.
- **London Borough of Tower Hamlets.** This authority initially focused their project work on the foster carers of children in the primary age range (5–11 years).

Findings

Impacts on stakeholders

The initial evaluation reported in depth on the impact of the work on stakeholders, but the follow-up evaluation also gave participants the opportunity to share their views on the impact of the work. Survey respondents were asked generally about outcomes and impacts of Fostering Potential. The local authority representative was asked more specifically about the impacts upon different stakeholders.

As in the initial evaluation, the findings reflected a general feeling among stakeholders that the project brought an **increased awareness and focus on education for all involved in the fostering process.**

Foster carers

All respondents made reference to positive impacts and outcomes for foster carers.

- Foster carers' increased confidence was a key impact mentioned across all local authority survey responses. In Tower Hamlets this was specifically the case for foster carers with English as a second language as well as particularly in relation to PEP meetings (across all foster carers).
- In Greenwich there was found to be a range of benefits for foster carers: support for approaches to meet the specific needs of individual children; increased skills and confidence relating to processes, roles and responsibilities; and a general feeling of empowerment.
- In Suffolk the interviewee explained that, with support from the Fostering Potential programme, foster carers had been able to resolve issues relating to the education of their fostered children. Where Education Champions were unable to help, foster carers were supported by the virtual school.

Children and young people

Some respondents referred to direct, observable impacts of Fostering Potential upon looked after children in foster care.

- Staff in Tower Hamlets have reported that young people have grown in confidence *'in making valuable contributions at meetings'* (such as PEP meetings).
- In Greenwich, children have become more engaged in extracurricular activities, and working more with foster carers in terms of reading, completing homework together and enjoying learning more as a *'fun and engaging process'*.
- In Suffolk, fostered children were described as having had specific issues resolved, but it was explained that the programme will *'continue to deal mainly with foster carers'*.

However, there were also reports of indirect impact on children and young people via Education Champions' work with foster carers. For instance both Barking and Dagenham and Greenwich

representatives mentioned the increased confidence of foster carers in *'advocating for education support and achievement of looked after children'*. The resulting impact upon fostered children was acknowledged across all respondents:

'The project enabled self-reflection on how the foster carers' approach to learning and having high ambitions and aspirations for the children in their care, can positively influence the children's learning and their overall life outcomes.'

Royal Borough of Greenwich

Education Champions

As in the initial evaluation, the impacts and outcomes on Education Champions were reported positively:

'They have a lot to give and feel rewarded for the work done so far.'

It was also explained that the project training had been of real benefit to those in the Education Champion role.

Project progress and any changes to date

One-to-one peer support

All respondents discussed the delivery of one-to-one support from Education Champions to foster carers, including challenges and changes to this mode of delivery.

In Tower Hamlets, there had been some delay due to a change in project lead, but one-to-one work had continued despite changes due to placement movements. In Greenwich and Suffolk, it was explained that there had been some resistance to the individual peer-support model. The representative from Greenwich explained that *'this aspect of the project remained low and it will require more time...'* in order to embed this into the wider package of support that had been implemented.

In Suffolk, the local authority had previously run a similar pilot project, after research was published showing the importance of this type of support. The interviewee explained that this was a *'service that was very much needed'* but that the local authority had faced issues in running the pilot project due to poor uptake. When they were then contacted about Fostering Potential, the local authority was keen to revisit a project of this type, with the wider support from The Fostering Network.

Suffolk County Council had initially targeted foster carers of children who were experiencing a phase transition in their education, for example from primary to secondary school. This had resulted in some resistance from foster carers and did not give the local authority the *'response [we] wanted.'* Some Education Champions had been disappointed because the role had not worked as expected: *'They've not had the engagement or activity they'd have liked.'* As a result of monitoring progress, as well as the initial evaluation report published by The Fostering Network in October 2019, the local authority made a decision to move towards referrals from foster carers, social workers and virtual schools. The referrals would apply to foster carers who require more general support across education issues, not only those seeking support related to phase transitions. The local authority is hopeful that the peer-support element will increase. Similarly, in Barking & Dagenham, self-referrals from foster carers are offered via the fostering service online platform.

Group support and presentations

Respondents also suggested that group support approaches via drop-ins, training and workshops led by Education Champions have had most engagement from foster carers. Specifically, in Greenwich, Education Champions have been involved in delivering presentations and workshops to the wider fostering cohort, focusing on a range of education support. Related to this, Greenwich Education Champions have also created specific leaflets such as 'Top Tips for good PEPs'. While the focus of the research was prior to the coronavirus lockdown, the respondent from Greenwich explained that they are planning to offer virtual education support during the current restrictions. In Suffolk, Education Champions have been working closely with the virtual school in terms of designing and delivering training, as well as attending support groups themselves. Other events have also played a pivotal role, such as an upcoming 'Aspirations day' at a local university.

Allocation of Education Champions

Respondents explained that they have made progress in strategic allocation of their Education Champions, for example aligning Education Champions to key areas, groupings or alongside other programmes. For instance, in Suffolk, there are Education Champions based in each geographical hub. In Greenwich and Barking and Dagenham, there has been integration between Fostering Potential and the Mockingbird programme³, with Education Champions assigned to each constellation of fostering families. Tower Hamlets explained that one Education Champion had played a key role in supporting other children in their constellation and therefore this integration may be considered further. In addition to integration with the Mockingbird programme, Greenwich reported merging the Fostering Potential approach with their generic mentoring scheme, meaning that foster carers can receive general fostering support as well as support on specific education matters.

Enablers and challenges

The fieldwork also explored the enablers and challenges to ongoing Fostering Potential project work in local authorities. The following findings are mainly based on the interview responses from Suffolk County Council. The survey did not ask specifically about enablers and challenges, but any relevant responses have been integrated here.

The enablers and challenges described by respondents were broadly similar to the findings of the initial evaluation.

Enablers

Education Champions were perceived to be key to the success of Fostering Potential. They were seen as dedicated individuals with teaching and education backgrounds, and their '*commitment and enthusiasm*' enabled the continuation of the project work. One participating authority has recruited a new Education Champion who has experience of working with children with SEND, which will be valuable in the continuing progress of the project. In Tower Hamlets the prior experiences of Education Champions were identified as a key enabler in providing specific support to young people:

³ The Fostering Network's [Mockingbird programme](#) is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model. The model centres on a constellation where one foster home acts as a hub, offering planned and emergency sleepovers and short breaks, advice, training and support, to six to 10 satellite households. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

‘Three of our champions have an education background and are willing to contribute in this area by transferring their experience in supporting young people who have lost confidence in pursuing university education and other vocations...’

Another factor perceived as a key enabler across the participating local authorities was **working collaboratively with virtual schools**. In Suffolk the start of Fostering Potential had coincided with the virtual school’s own priority to expand their services to foster carers. The virtual school had worked closely with Education Champions, who provided useful input such as reviewing guidance. The Suffolk project lead and virtual school had also developed training and events collaboratively, such as the upcoming university ‘Aspirations Day.’ The important role of virtual schools was also mentioned in some survey responses. For instance, in Tower Hamlets the virtual school has reviewed some resources and also *‘remain a good resource for carers regarding activities provided for looked after children.’*

An additional enabling factor identified was the ongoing **support provided by the project lead** at The Fostering Network, specifically showing flexibility in the format of training to take into account the geographical spread in this local authority. The local authority representative from Suffolk explained that another enabler was their experience of a **similar project** conducted previously in the same local authority. This meant that there was local experience, accompanied by ideas about how to take the project forwards.

In addition, when asked about the impacts of **collaborative working across local authorities**, it was explained that it has been useful to learn from others and share resources:

‘It was a pleasure...learning from each other. Thank you for this opportunity.’

‘Has been lovely to see the successes of the London boroughs...Tower Hamlets has been inspiring...but frustrating at the same time as we missed some of the things they were doing which we could have learned from.’

That said, respondents also described it as *‘reassuring’* when other local authorities were struggling, as there had been common themes across many of the participating local authorities.

Challenges

Firstly, **difficulty in engaging foster carers** was a recurring challenge to the work. One local authority reported that:

‘One of our biggest challenges was in relation to foster carers engaging with and utilising the one to one support available to them via the Education Champions.’

Suffolk reported that they also struggled with foster carer engagement in the project, particularly from foster carers who were contacted directly due to their fostered child falling into one of the transition stages, for example Year 6 or Year 11. Foster carers were reported as saying that they did not need help and showing fear of possible criticism. The local authority found that when they adapted their approach to receive referrals, the engagement increased, particularly when referrals came from social workers or self-referrals.

‘This is a more useful way of working.’

Linked to this, another key challenge in Suffolk related to the **attrition of Education Champions**. Initially, there were nine Education Champions, but, as of March 2020, there were four. While drop-out occurred for a range of reasons (such as health issues, the need to focus on their own fostering

family or retirement) the local authority representative explained that project-related reasons also influenced the reduction in numbers. For instance, the Education Champions were initially recruited for four hours a week, but the lack of engagement from foster carers resulted in them *'not being provided as much work'* as initially planned.

Finally, **geographical issues** in Suffolk meant that Education Champions were unable to meet together frequently and so received individual supervision. As shown in the initial evaluation report, collaborative working across Education Champions was an important part of the role. Geographical issues also arose in the peer-support Education Champions were offering foster carers.

'Some foster carers are up to two hours away.'

The local authority representative explained that *'if we had our time again, we would only focus on one geographical area.'*

Future plans for Fostering Potential

All respondents were asked about the future plans of Fostering Potential in their local authority. Across the different local authorities, the respondents mostly referred to the **project continuing in its current format in the short term**.

Short term planning

In Suffolk, the local authority representative explained that the project will continue in its current format until at least September 2020. The Education Champions receive an hourly rate plus expenses and there *'is no end point for these to continue to be claimed'*⁴. Another recruitment drive for Education Champions is also planned before September. They were previously recruited via a newsletter job advert, followed by an informal conversation with the project lead.

'Support is there from management...the support is there from virtual schools who want it to continue...funding for my post is here until September...everything needed to continue to September is in place.'

While Fostering Potential is not specifically named in the Suffolk fostering service strategic plan, it does include all children achieving educational goals, post-16 support and improving levels of achievement in areas such as maths. Fostering Potential can therefore be seen to tie into and support these aspects of the strategic plan.

Survey respondents similarly reported an intention to continue in the short term:

- In Greenwich, they explained that they will *'continue to embed the learning and skills gained from our collaboration with Fostering Potential into [our] day to day practice,'* in order to continue supporting the education of children. Education Champions will also continue setting high aspirations for children and young people by supporting foster carers via the Mockingbird hubs and by presenting and attending events to support foster carers.
- In Barking & Dagenham the respondent reported that they will *'continue with [our] model as it works for Barking & Dagenham'.*
- While most plans in Tower Hamlets were longer term, due to the project lead leaving the local authority in August 2019, the survey respondent did explain that there are plans to review the current matching of Education Champions to foster carers, as well as recruit more Education Champions.

⁴ Education Champions in this local authority are paid £10 per hour plus expenses

Longer-term planning

Longer-term planning for continuing with Fostering Potential is in place across some of the local authorities, with **some adaptation to the approach or integration with other programmes considered in the longer term.**

When the Suffolk county council representative was asked about the future of the project and role it was explained that the current arrangements are in place until September 2020, but that it will then be reviewed. This also applies to the project lead's role:

'Now we are in the post-project phase...we are looking at what we are offering and seeing how this will be managed...it may be that it becomes part of a statutory role ...supervising social workers all have a responsibility for a support group so maybe it will be this instead.'

When the Suffolk representative was asked about integration with the Mockingbird constellations she explained that these are still running as two separate programmes, but as one of the Education Champions is also the lead for the Mockingbird Programme in their area there is scope for more joint working. It was also mentioned that Fostering Potential in Suffolk would benefit from more collaborative working with the fostered children's social workers and therefore this may be considered in the longer-term planning. That said, wider changes in Suffolk may result in changes to the programme. The local authority representative explained that there is perhaps now *'less need for Fostering Potential in its current form since virtual schools have now started up so many groups'*.

Survey respondents similarly reported intentions to continue in the longer term:

- Joint working within children's social care teams was a recurring theme. In Tower Hamlets, there are plans to offer a more holistic approach to children's social care services by working with representatives from each team.
- In Tower Hamlets, the main project lead left the project in August 2019, and therefore, while they continued with the one to one support, plans for the project have been longer term. There have been discussions around widening the programme to include children in long-term placements who were not part of the pilot. They explained that the next phase would be with the younger age group, followed by children undergoing key phase transitions. There are also plans to involve more Mockingbird hubs.
- The respondent from Greenwich explained that they will continue to utilise the skills and learning from the programme, however this would obviously depend on the ever-evolving wider context:

'In the words of Heraclitus "there is nothing permanent except change" ...'

- In Barking & Dagenham, the respondent explained that they are considering allocating an Education Champion to every newly appointed foster carer.
- Finally, one local authority commented that any support from The Fostering Network in moving forward from this stage would be welcome.

The information strand

A secondary aspect of the Fostering Potential programme was to support the project work via information dissemination activity. This section reports on the implementation and impact of the information strand of the programme.

The aims of the information strand of the programme were to:

- draw upon the expertise of leading individuals and organisations in the field
- share information on research and best practice around the education of looked after children
- provide opportunities for foster carers to share practical tips and mutual support
- provide education staff with an opportunity to gain a better understanding of foster carers' roles and the specific issues around the education of looked after children.

The activities actually carried out were webinars, a learning event, project meetings, a conference presentation and the development of online resources.

Online versus face-to-face dissemination

It is important to note that the original project proposal allowed only for online and virtual means of dissemination, namely a national virtual network, webinars, online resources and mostly telephone/email support to project authorities. The original rationale was to use virtual methods to disseminate information across the membership of The Fostering Network at low cost. However, this plan had to be adapted once the project was underway: while webinar activity took place online, other activities were converted into face-to-face equivalents. Factors in this decision included technological problems at key points in the project, barriers to foster-carer participation in online activity and a pressing need to engage with and enable face-to-face sharing of ideas between project authorities. Face-to-face activity was therefore used more than originally anticipated.

Evaluation method

The information strand of the programme was evaluated by the following methods:

- Online and paper survey questionnaires for participants.
- Attendance data for webinar sessions and events.
- Project records and narrative provided by the project manager.

Webinars

Six webinars were delivered by the following speakers between April and the end of June 2019:

- 'Introduction to Fostering Potential' by Susan Soar, The Fostering Network
- 'What do we know about what helps children in care to get better education outcomes?' by Professor Judy Sebba, The University of Oxford
- 'Barriers to achievement and possible solutions' by Laura Stagg, Achievement for All
- 'Maths, myths and mindsets' by Ben Perkins, National Numeracy
- 'Life as a medical student' by Michelle Sebele, a medical student and care leaver
- 'Supporting care-experienced students to and through higher education' by Sam Turner, Become.

Each webinar was promoted by email to the seven participating local authorities, who then sent the information on to their fostering cohort. The Fostering Network member database was also used to email information to fostering households in postcodes within the project areas. The webinars were promoted via social media and via partner organisations, such as Achievement for All and the Sutton Trust. A live webinar link, background material and a technical help sheet were provided with each

mailing. The Fostering Network implemented new software, Microsoft TEAMS, in order to deliver this aspect of the programme.

Format and timing

Each webinar was hosted by the project manager from the offices of The Fostering Network, with a guest speaker giving a live presentation and then taking questions either verbally or via the text chat function. Webinar sessions were held mid-morning (to align with speaker availability and with the school day) and lasted around 45- 50 minutes. Session engagement was high, with several questions being asked at the end of each session. An online survey link was provided on-screen at the end of each webinar.

Participants

A total of 49 people took part across the six webinars.

Of the survey participants, 20 out of 24 described themselves as foster carers with the remaining four participants describing themselves as working for a fostering and adoption service or a virtual school.

Feedback

A total of 24 survey responses were gathered from participants across the six webinars. Respondents were asked for their overall rating of the webinar and which aspects they had found helpful. Responses were generally very positive, with 22 respondents rating the webinar as either 'Very helpful' or 'Extremely helpful'. The on-screen chat function also provided an opportunity for participants to provide informal feedback on their experiences of the webinars, with a number of positive comments received at the end of each session.

Table 1. What was your overall rating of the webinar?

Rating	Number of respondents
Extremely Helpful	7
Very Helpful	15
Somewhat helpful	2
Not so helpful	0
Not at all helpful	0

Table 2. Which aspects of the webinar did you find helpful?

Aspect description	Number of respondents
Suggestions for where to find resources or further information	16
Practical tips on how to support children and young people	15
Information about best practice	12
Research evidence	12
The opportunity to ask the speaker a question	4

(The responses > 22 as respondents were able to choose more than one response to this question.)

The responses showed that participants generally placed a high value on the information-based and practical aspects of the speakers' presentations, over and above the ability to interact with the

speaker. This was despite a high level of engagement in the question and answer sections of the webinars.

Qualitative evaluation

Foster carers, Education Champions and fostering service representatives were asked about the webinars as part of the qualitative fieldwork during the initial evaluation in 2019, although this aspect of the programme was not reported upon in the initial evaluation report. While many thought that the webinars could be useful and '*a brilliant resource*', the findings also identified a number of practical barriers to being able to make use of this support. Those barriers included:

- lack of confidence to use the technology
- clashing with other training
- clashing with other commitments such as work
- needing support to logon to the webinars.

This suggests that while the webinars were found to be helpful by those who were able to participate, there were still barriers to accessing this form of information and support.

Wider benefits of the webinar programme

Additional beneficial impacts of the webinar programme included:

- The opportunity to upload speakers' presentations online, which were made available on The Fostering Network website.
- Audio recordings were also made available online.
- The installation of Microsoft TEAMS to facilitate the Fostering Potential programme had immediate wider benefits for The Fostering Network in facilitating cross-organisation working.

In the longer term, the use of webinars during the Fostering Potential programme had unexpected benefits during the coronavirus outbreak of March 2020, when teams across the organisation were able to build on the learning from Fostering Potential to rapidly deliver online support sessions for foster carers.

Learning event

Service representatives from the different project areas expressed a wish for Education Champions and foster carers to get together and share learning. With this in mind, a learning event was held in London on 4 March 2020 (prior to the coronavirus lockdown). The programme included:

- An update on the Fostering Potential programme including the findings of the initial evaluation
- The implementation of the programme in one of the local authority project areas, namely Suffolk County Council
- Professor Judy Sebba speaking about research findings around the education of looked after children
- Laura Stagg speaking about practical ways that schools and foster carers can resolve barriers to achievement.

A member of staff from King's College London was due to speak about support for care experienced students in higher education, but was unable to attend due to illness.

Attendees

The event was open to foster carers, staff from fostering services, virtual schools and anyone with an interest in the education of looked after children. Careful consideration was given to transport routes

from the project areas and the timing of the event was intentionally designed to fall within the school day, in order to make it as easy as possible for foster carers to attend.

Promotional mailings were circulated to participants from the seven project areas, who were given a priority registration period. The event was then promoted to members of The Fostering Network within the greater London area and also sent to the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH). Fostering services and virtual schools within easy reach of the venue were sent a personal invitation to attend. The event was oversubscribed and there were 57 attendees on the day of the event.

Table 3. Event attendees by role

Role	Number of attendees
Foster carer ⁵	30
Fostering Service staff	14
Virtual school staff	4
The Fostering Network Staff	5
Other organisations (including speakers)	4
Total	57

Feedback

Event participants were offered the opportunity to complete paper feedback forms and also received an online survey form shortly after the event ended. A reminder was sent in the week after the event. Paper feedback forms were manually added to the electronic responses so that the different types of response were collated together. There were 22 responses.

Feedback ratings were as follows:

Table 4. What was your overall rating of the event?

Rating	Number of respondents
Extremely Helpful	13
Very Helpful	9
Somewhat helpful	0
Not so helpful	0
Not at all helpful	0
Total	22

Respondents were also asked about which aspect of the event they found most helpful. Twenty-two people responded to this question, with their responses again suggesting that participants placed a high value on the information-based and practical aspects of the speakers' presentations.

⁵ The foster carers in attendance at the event included eight who were Education Champions in the project areas.

Table 5. Which aspects of the event did you find helpful?

Aspect description	Number of respondents rating as 'Extremely helpful'
Suggestions for where to find resources or further information	13
Practical tips on how to support children and young people	12
Information about best practice	11
Research evidence	10
Question and answer sessions	9
The opportunity to meet and talk to other delegates	9

There were 19 comments responding to the question 'Do you have any other comments about the Fostering Potential event on 4th March?' of which 16 were positive comments about the event. Comment themes included *'informative'* or references to *'useful information'* (eight comments), that the event was generally *'great'*, *'excellent'* or *'helpful'* (eight comments), *'practical'* (two comments) and *'interesting'* (two comments). Other positive comments included the venue and catering, the location in London and the timing of the event.

'Very interesting, informative and positive experience'

'The training was very informative and helpful in understanding some of the projects develop to support children looked after in education.'

'Initially I thought I timeframe would be too short but on the contrary, concise and key information clearly articulated'

'Excellent'

'Great event, learnt so much, met lovely people and yummy lunch :)'

'Brilliant event. I learnt a lot of information'

The three neutral or negative comments included a wish for more time for question and answer sessions and the need for speakers to pitch content to foster carers and professionals alike.

'Some of the speakers needed to think about the audience as not all were foster carers.'

National virtual network

The original project proposal specified a national virtual network to support the programme and the intention had been to use the members' only forum area of The Fostering Network website.

Unfortunately this phase of the project delivery coincided with major problems in the IT infrastructure of The Fostering Network. The project manager therefore re-purposed this aspect of the work into a series of face-to-face project meetings for the participating local authorities, hosted by The Fostering Network. Three project meetings took place in the spring, summer and autumn periods, with the aim of offering local authority officers the opportunity to share learning about the project implementation process. Local authorities shared feedback about this aspect of the work as part of the initial

evaluation. Coordinators felt that sharing resources and collaborating across authorities had been useful and that the project meetings had helped to encourage and motivate the project work. For instance, one local authority coordinator explained that another coordinator had given a presentation about Fostering Potential in their local authority and that this had ‘inspired’ them.⁶

Member conference

The project manager presented at The Fostering Network’s member conference in Durham, during September 2019. The member conference was attended by 38 people. The presentation included an overview of the evidence and rationale for the programme and shared early findings from the initial evaluation.

Published resources

Planned activity in the final few months of the programme included the development of written educational resources to support foster carers. The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent school closure gave a new impetus to this work. This included the development of webpages for early years, primary and secondary learners and the publication of educational blogs tailored to supporting foster carers during the coronavirus outbreak.

⁶ *Championing Education: Initial Evaluation of the Fostering Potential Programme*, p27

Conclusion

The findings from the follow-up evaluation broadly reflected the initial evaluation as follows:

- Respondents reported positive impacts of Fostering Potential on stakeholders, particularly on foster carers' confidence in supporting the education of fostered children.
- All respondents identified positive impacts for children and young people, both direct and indirect.
- Key enablers to the implementation of Fostering Potential included: dedicated and experienced Education Champions; collaborative working with virtual schools and ongoing support from The Fostering Network and Fostering Potential project manager.
- Difficulties in engaging foster carers to participate in the support offered were raised as a key challenge to project progression. The attrition of Education Champions and geographical issues were also identified as challenging factors, especially in rural areas.
- Other support provided by Education Champions included leading presentations and workshops, as well as developing local resources for foster carers.
- Local authority representatives had enjoyed learning collaboratively from other areas participating in the programme.

Additional learning points from this evaluation included:

Project work

- Fostering Potential is a programme approach that continues to offer beneficial possibilities to services well beyond the initial funded and supported delivery phase. This is recognised by local authorities, who are keen to continue with the approach.
- The initial evaluation identified ongoing challenges around the willingness of foster carers to take part in one-to-one support. A finding of the initial evaluation was that actively identifying foster carers to take part in the programme led to higher levels of engagement than self-referral. However, the findings of the follow up evaluation showed a return to self-referral amongst participating services. The varying findings on this point suggest that further consideration is needed around the best way to engage foster carers in future programmes and that the optimum approach may vary from area to area depending on the local context.
- In the short term, the participating local authorities are planning to continue with the project in its current format. However, local authorities are also considering longer term plans for the future including:
 - Appointing an Education Champion to every foster carer;
 - Broadening the cohort of foster carers and children involved in Fostering Potential;
 - Further integration with the Mockingbird or other local support programmes including general mentoring;
 - Greater local collaborative working with children's social care teams.

Information strand

- The webinar programme in summer 2019 was well received with a high proportion of attendees who gave feedback finding the sessions 'very helpful', particularly in relation to the information-based and practical aspects of the speakers' presentations. However, a number of barriers to attendance were highlighted by stakeholders during qualitative fieldwork.
- The Fostering Potential programme was adapted from the original plan of only providing remote support to the delivery of both face-to-face and virtual events. A face-to-face learning event in early 2020 was well attended and very positive feedback was received. Once again, the information-based and practical aspects of the speakers' presentations were positively highlighted in the participant feedback.

- These findings suggest that, while webinars are potentially a very helpful way to share information with foster carers, they should not be relied upon as the sole means of disseminating information. Face-to-face events remain a valued and important opportunity for sharing learning.
- The coronavirus outbreak occurred towards the end of the programme period, with lockdown beginning on 23 March 2020. Learning from the Fostering Potential webinar programme was helpful in enabling The Fostering Network to continue supporting carers remotely during this period.
- It may also be the case that foster carers' experiences of remote sessions during the coronavirus lockdown period will increase the uptake of webinars in future programmes.

Next steps

The local authorities that took part in the supplementary evaluation will be continuing Fostering Potential at a local level, either in its original form or through adaptation and integration with other approaches. The ongoing use of the approach also suggests that there is scope to enable Fostering Potential to be delivered elsewhere. The Fostering Network will be making the approach available via a commissioned training programme for fostering services and may also incorporate education peer support into other funded project work.

Further information

For further information about the Fostering Potential programme please contact Susan Soar, Project Manager on susan.soar@fostering.net

The programme webpage is available on The Fostering Network website at thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/fostering-potential