

Summary

Knowledge review 4: Innovative, tried and tested

A review of good practice in fostering

social care
institute for excellence



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Introduction

This is a summary of a SCIE Knowledge Review, *Innovative, tried and tested: A review of good practice in fostering*. The authors of the Knowledge Review are Clive Sellick and Darren Howell, School of Social Work, University of East Anglia. The summary has been prepared by Mary Sainsbury, Practice Development Team, SCIE.

The review describes important initiatives in fostering practice, and innovative fostering schemes, and examines the ways in which these contribute to what we know about good and effective fostering practice, which achieves successful outcomes. The review contains many examples of creative and imaginative practice.

Key messages

- Many fostering agencies are using research evidence to be effective in recruiting – local recruitment schemes, for example, word of mouth and brief articles in the local press, achieve success.
- There is innovative training practice, consistent with research evidence about what carers say that they want: managing contact, dealing with children’s behaviour, and supporting children’s education.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is playing an increasingly important role in key areas: training, information, and user evaluation.
- Agencies are developing a wide range of retention schemes, for example, loyalty payments, ‘buddying’ arrangements, stress management and services for carers’ own children.
- Some agencies are providing carers with career choices within or connected to fostering. The benefits include retaining carers, using their skills flexibly, and increasing their job satisfaction.
- Partnership working and commissioning enables many agencies to improve the availability of both general and specialised placements.
- There is evidence of the growing development of specialist placements for children with complex and special needs, some of which have been researched and evaluated.
- Many agencies now offer additional services to help the children placed; foster carers themselves are satisfied when the children and young people they care for receive them.

- Fostered children and young people are consulted quite often; however, their opinions are rarely communicated to senior managers or elected members to inform policy.
- Foster carers participate in the evaluation of many aspects of fostering services.
- Parents and other relatives of fostered children are given few opportunities to participate in shaping fostering services.

SCIE asked researchers at the University of East Anglia to undertake a review of current good practice in key areas of fostering. SCIE wanted to find out how agencies are changing and re-shaping their services to take new ideas and information into account. SCIE places great value on the knowledge and experience that practice and practitioners possess, and wants to make this easily accessible and usable to all those working in and receiving fostering services.

The researchers looked for innovative fostering schemes, as well as schemes which had been operating for longer and were also rooted in good, imaginative practice. The review identifies many examples of good practice, both new and established.

It is important to note that only some practice examples are included in this summary. Full details of all the practice examples are available in the full text.

Aims of the review

The overall aim was to identify and collect as many examples of good practice in key areas of national interest as possible, from the statutory, voluntary and independent fostering agencies (IFAs), and to make them available for use to all those who plan, organise, deliver and use fostering services.

Many agencies, in line with the current research, and from the evaluation and experience gained from knowledge of their own services, have developed the organisation, structure and delivery of their fostering services. SCIE's purpose was to collect this knowledge and to make it easily accessible for all fostering agencies to learn from and adapt for use in their own agencies.

SCIE has a key role in collecting and sharing knowledge from practice in order to benefit all those who work in, and those who use, fostering services. In this way, SCIE aims to develop what they know about what works in fostering.

Key areas

Six, often overlapping, key areas of national interest in fostering were identified:

1. Recruiting and training foster carers
2. Retaining carers and creating job satisfaction by career choice
3. Creating placement choice by using partnership working and commissioning
4. Fostering children with complex and special needs
5. Providing additional services to the children and young people placed
6. Evaluating fostering services through user participation.

Structure of the review

The practice examples are placed in the context of the major research studies, and the review findings, in these six key areas. All the practice examples are described in this context. The research studies are listed at the end of this summary.

Methods used

The objective of this review was to find as many examples as possible of good and innovative fostering practice. The researchers, therefore, did not narrowly define the word 'innovative' and were just as interested in learning about fostering methods that are established, tried and tested.

The researchers' experience of the field enabled them to make targeted contact with 26 agencies known for their good practice. Fostering Network recommended contact with 19 other fostering agencies and SCIE suggested one other. Requests for other examples were sent to all the appropriate national and local organisations. A list of these is given at the end of the summary.

There was a limited time scale, from January to March 2003, in which to undertake the work, so the search, although extensive, was not exhaustive, and agencies chose to respond. Many fostering staff were keen to share their good practice and volunteered information about their schemes.

The information obtained was selective, in the sense that agency staff who wanted to share their good practice volunteered it. The researchers filtered the practice examples in two ways: first they assessed their relevance in respect of the six key areas listed above, second, in respect of the research evidence about what is known to be effective.

The researchers used their knowledge and experience to judge whether or not to include the examples in the final selection, but they were not asked to undertake a systematic evaluation.

Scrutiny of agency documentation took place with approximately 75 fostering agencies and telephone interviews with agency staff took place with 50 of these.

Key area 1: Recruiting and training foster carers

Recruitment

Findings from research

There is a great deal of information from research about effective recruitment practice. One very clear message is that success is often related to local recruitment schemes, and word of mouth and brief articles in the local press, for example, can be very effective.

Triseliotis and his colleagues found that the low profile of fostering within many Scottish local authorities adversely affected the whole of service development, including recruitment. A majority of foster carers were attracted to fostering because they had spoken to existing foster carers, seen a description about fostering in the local media, or both.

Foster carers in the study thought that if they played a more central role in recruitment they could address commonly held public fears and stereotypes about fostering, thus increasing its profile. Sellick has evidence of 'dormant' foster carers being recruited by IFAs.

Triseliotis et al (1995) and Sellick and Thoburn (2002) show that fostering agencies must respond in an efficient and business-like manner to sustain the interest of potential carers.

Findings from this review

Many fostering agencies are responding in line with much of what we know about effective recruitment practice.

Practice examples: recruitment

Increasing the local profile

Birmingham has opened a foster carer recruitment centre near the city centre. It handles visitors and telephone enquiries from the general public. It opens during normal commercial hours, including late opening on Thursdays and Saturday mornings. This initiative, while not new (Greenwich, for example, has used a similar approach) gives high public visibility to Birmingham's fostering service and its need for more carers.

Encouraging word of mouth

- Southampton pays foster carers £20 for introducing a potential foster carer and a further £200 once they have been approved, and a child placed.
- Chrysalis Care pays foster carers £150 for each new approved carer they have introduced to the agency.

Training

Findings from research

The training of foster carers has become an established part of fostering services. Preparation training is now universal, and nearly all fostering agencies provide the S/NVQ training. Many have developed training to enable foster carers to become mentors and assessors for other carers.

Several research studies have emphasised the importance of training foster carers in three key areas:

- managing contact between fostered children and members of their birth families;
- dealing with the challenge of some children's behaviour;
- supporting children's education and liaising with schools.

Findings from this review

There is evidence of innovative practice in several agencies, consistent with research findings.

ICT is playing an increasingly important role in training carers; for example, some agencies are developing its use for distance learning.

Practice examples: training

- Warwickshire is one of many local authorities to provide the NVQ Award 'Caring for Children and Young People' Level 3. It has established a specialist NVQ Training Centre and distance learning opportunities, using ICT.
- An IFA, Kindercare Fostering, is developing two additional qualifications: the Certificate in Professional Competence and the Diploma in Fostering, because Kindercare's analysis of their own foster carers found that around one third of them had received further education.

Key area 2: Retaining carers and creating job satisfaction by career choice

Retaining carers

Findings from research

There is now research evidence of a majority of fostering agencies providing foster carers with the support which research recognises as key: guaranteed respite, out of hours help lines, realistic, well-managed payment systems, access to specialist help, good working relationships with social workers, and close collaboration with other carers.

Finding from this review

This review found examples of the support that many agencies now provide.

There is now a good variety of retention schemes, for example, loyalty payments, 'buddying', stress management and services for carers' own children.

Practice examples: retention

- Southampton and Leeds provides carers with loyalty payments and certificates
- 'Our Place' in Bristol is one example of a carers' centre, many of which have been established in the local authority and independent sectors. It provides a therapeutic environment, and encourages foster and adoptive families to support one another.

Creating job satisfaction by career choice

Research findings

There is less research evidence in this relatively new area. Many practice initiatives are recent and generally have not been independently scrutinised by researchers. Aldgate and Bradley's study (1999) found that many carers are developing careers in child care, including childminding, work in family centres, as well as fostering, and that they are generally satisfied in managing their careers in this way.

Findings from this review

The review found several examples of agencies beginning to provide their carers with career choices within or connected to fostering. There is increasing emphasis on developing ways in which foster carers' skills can be developed both in order to maximise their job satisfaction, and to create

opportunities for fostering agencies to use their skills flexibly. Developments in this area may also have the effect of helping recruitment and retention.

Practice examples: creating job satisfaction

- Kingston upon Hull has developed the role of carers by encouraging them to be family group conference organisers, and advocates and 'buddies' for fostered children.
- Redbridge enables foster carers to support other carers by providing respite. Two carers staff an evening help and recruitment line.

Key area 3: Creating placement choice by using partnership working and commissioning

Findings from research

The research shows that many agencies have difficulties in recruiting and retaining the range of foster carers needed to provide placement choice. For example, only 20% of the English authorities in Waterhouse (1997) reported that they could always offer a choice of placement for children under 10 years, and only 3% for children and young people over that age.

Findings from this review

Many IFAs and local authorities have recognised that they need to pool resources both inter and intra-agency: agencies are now developing specialist schemes within their own agencies, and creating partnership and service agreements with other agencies. Some are extensive, involving large numbers of agencies, where costs, services and standards are agreed and monitored. Children and young people who need emotional and physical support, who have disabilities, who are in sibling groups, who need long-term foster carers, and young offenders, can be more appropriately matched in this way.

Another way of creating placement choice, the greatly increased use of foster placements with relatives and friends, is beyond the scope of this review.

Practice example: creating placement choice by using partnership and commissioning

- Derby City, Derbyshire, Leicester City, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottingham City, and Nottinghamshire commissioned Barnardo's to help them recruit foster carers in the region. The consortium also constructed service level agreements with a small number of IFAs.

Key area 4: Fostering children with complex and special needs

Findings from research

This category is clearly related to the one above, since local authorities have reported particular difficulties in placing children and young people who have special needs. Research tells us that children in mainstream fostering placements present their carers with very troubled and troublesome behaviour and others have significant health needs.

Findings from this review

There is evidence of the growing development of specialist placements, and some schemes have been researched and evaluated.

Practice example: fostering children with complex and special needs

- Norfolk has a specialist fostering scheme, which places children between the ages of 5-15. Foster carers and social workers from the specialist fostering scheme work closely alongside the staff of a local residential therapeutic unit. Carers' support packages and fees, and the services for placed children, are similar to those of nearby IFAs.

Key area 5: Providing additional services to the children and young people placed

Findings from research

Examples from research studies include Farmer et al (2001), who point to the importance of counselling for the young people placed, most of who were in local authority placements. Sellick and Connolly (2002) describe an IFA where the children had regular therapy and their educational needs championed by an educational liaison officer.

Findings from this review

This review found that substantial developments have now taken place in many fostering agencies, building on earlier developments. Foster carers themselves report satisfaction when the children and young people they care for receive additional services.

Practice examples: providing additional services to the children and young people placed

- Hampshire has appointed a lead officer for the education of children in public care, which includes a dedicated group of teachers and a community therapist.
- The Rosta Project in Liverpool is a therapeutic fostering service "with intensive, multi-disciplinary wrap around support for young people with complex needs". Evaluation has found significant success in increasing placement stability and reintegrating young people to education and increasing their attainment.
- Southwark has a team of mental health workers delivering assessment and therapy, and an education project to deal with non-school attendance, which it found to be associated with placement breakdown.

Key area 6: Evaluating fostering services through user participation

Findings from research

Padbury and Frost's (2002) study of fostered children and young people found that while they were encouraged to participate in decisions, their views were rarely communicated to senior managers or elected members.

Foster carers are encouraged to participate in many aspects of the fostering services and they are major respondents and witnesses in many research studies.

In the area of parental participation, Harwin and Owen found that 50% of care plans where children were long-term fostered did not specify the parents' role in decision making, and in 75% of cases, say how disagreements should be resolved.

Findings from this review

If service users are to be offered the service they want, their participation in evaluation is essential. This review divides the users of fostering services into three groups:

- children and young people;
- foster carers and their families;
- birth parents and other relatives.

There appear to be marked differences between how carers, children, parents and other relatives participate in fostering agencies' evaluation systems.

The review found that fostered children and young people are increasingly being consulted. However, their opinions are very rarely communicated to senior managers or elected members in order to influence policy, although some examples were found where imaginative methods bring young people's views to the attention of managers and members.

Foster carers are encouraged to participate in many aspects of the fostering services affecting both themselves and the children for whom they care.

This review found almost no evidence of the parents and other relatives of fostered children being brought into the participation and evaluation systems. This is consistent with those of other researchers.

It is important to note that ICT is playing a major and developing role in the development of user participation and evaluation.

Practice examples: evaluating fostering services through user participation

By fostered children and young people

- Norfolk County Council has a 'Kids in Care Together' group of fostered young people, with an innovative web site.
- Cambridgeshire has a 'Just Us Group' of fostered children meeting monthly and operating in three localities.

By foster carers and their children

- By spending periods alongside foster carers and social workers, senior managers in Cambridgeshire go back to the shop floor.
- Westminster has made a video of its foster carers in conversation, which is used to train all levels of staff. This authority has also undertaken a questionnaire with foster carers seeking their views on what support they need.

By parents and other relatives

This review found extremely little evidence of parents and other birth relatives of fostered children within participation and evaluation systems, and this is clearly an area where development is needed:

- Cheshire included an evaluation exercise for those with parental responsibility, as well as separate exercises with fostered children and foster carers, as a part of its service review.
- Kingston includes parents' contributions in their foster carers' annual review.

The role of ICT

- The Tunnel Light Project set up in April 2001 by Lincolnshire Social Services, uses the Internet to strengthen communication, feedback and support between social services staff, carers, adoptive parents, foster parents, fostered children and the general public. The creation of a website has been the centrepiece of the project and the way in which communication has been maintained.

Conclusion

SCIE's aim has been to collect and disseminate examples of good and innovative fostering practice to all those who plan, organise, deliver and use fostering services, and to make this information accessible, so that all staff can learn from it and adapt it to use in their own agencies. Many staff in fostering agencies were keen to tell the researchers about what they do well, and the review identified many examples of good and innovative practice in the six key areas.

The review found that there is extensive knowledge about what works well in foster care, and that many fostering services are built on examples of sound practice, informed by research.

More practice examples were found in some key areas than in others. For example, while many examples of good recruitment and retention practice were identified, there were far fewer examples of creating carers' job satisfaction by career choice. Children and young people, and foster carers, participate much more than birth parents and other relatives in the key area of service evaluation. The review therefore shows particular areas where fostering services need further development.

The growing use of ICT is shaping fostering services, and some examples identified in the review were online training, e-mail communication and support, and the development of special websites for information sharing and user evaluation.

The review also notes the continued development of additional services to fostered children and young people, and specialist fostering schemes both in local authorities and IFAs. These initiatives are providing extensive support to foster families and a range of direct therapeutic and educational services to children and young people whose experiences, needs and behaviour present significant challenges. The research evidence is that foster carers are generally more satisfied when the children they are looking after receive these services.

The review also found that many IFAs and local authorities are forging new partnerships and service agreements in order to increase the number and suitability of placements for the range of children that need them.

Invitations for examples of good practice were sent to:

Members of the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) in England and Wales, the Choice Protects Review, Research in Practice, NCH, Barnardo's, Fostering Network, including the three IFAs who are members in Wales, the British Association of Adoption and Fostering, including the 22 Welsh members, and the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Trusts. Targeted invitations were also made to a range of fostering agencies known for their good practice.

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