WIDENING THE POOL OF FOSTER CARERS
INTRODUCTION

This short guide has been written to help councils increase the diversity of their foster carers.

It focuses on engaging people who have not considered fostering but already have skills or experience which could make them outstanding foster carers.

We present new insight about what these people really think about fostering and we also explain some approaches used by marketing, public relations and recruitment specialists to target them.

The guide builds on the great work already being done by many councils as well as highlighting new ideas to improve foster carer recruitment.

We hope you find it useful.
IT’S NOT JUST A NUMBERS GAME

For some years local authorities have been unable to recruit enough foster carers with the experience required to meet their needs. As a result, they are often forced to rely on the services of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). A shortage of suitable foster carers can also mean that children who could be looked after in a family setting are placed in a residential home. Or it can force siblings to be placed with different families.

Research has shown that foster carers who have worked as nurses, teachers, paramedics or in similar ‘helping’ jobs are more likely to foster children with the most challenging needs. However, local authorities find it difficult to recruit people with these kind of backgrounds. If councils can encourage more of these people to become foster carers it will be worth the effort. It will save money, increase placement stability and improve the chances of a child having foster carers who can meet their needs.

WHY THINK DIFFERENTLY?

Local authority foster carer recruitment often targets people who already have high levels of motivation to foster. Encouraging them to pick up the phone through emotion-driven marketing campaigns is a proven way of recruiting new foster carers.

Using foster carers to reach out to their friends and families also works well.

Techniques like these do increase the numbers of foster carers but they fail to improve the diversity of applications. They may also create barriers that prevent some people from applying because they risk reinforcing stereotypes about who makes a good foster carer.

Carers with more resources and those in the helping professions may be most willing to foster children with emotional/behavioural problems.

Source - The Recruitment of Foster Carers: Key messages from the research literature, University of Bedfordshire
RAISE AWARENESS

WHAT PEOPLE REALLY THINK

The Pollen Shop has been trying to find out more about what people who have professional skills really think about fostering.

Our survey of people who are not foster carers but who have relevant experience or skills found

- High awareness that fostering can be emotionally challenging
- Low awareness that fostering can be intellectually challenging
- Low awareness that different children who require a foster placement have very different needs
- Low awareness that children with very complex needs are often adolescents rather than younger children

The general population is often aware of the broad concept of foster care without really understanding what is involved. This includes people who have skills and experience that might make them outstanding foster carers.

Most people think foster carers are good people. They know foster caring is emotionally challenging. But their understanding stops there.

To engage people who have lower awareness of what foster care actually involves councils need to make sure any marketing also promotes aspects of fostering that go beyond care giving.

One simple way of engaging people involved in the helping professions is to highlight how their skills and experience will be beneficial when supporting children with complex needs.

The use of media to emphasise the professional aspects of becoming a foster carer should be supported by a coherent and well-resourced recruitment strategy

The Recruitment of Foster Carers: Key messages from the research literature,
University of Bedfordshire
As part of our research we also interviewed some people with relevant skills and experience. These people could make outstanding foster carers but had not actively considered fostering. John and Clare are two people we talked to who were thinking about opportunities to make a difference and were willing to make major life changing decisions. They were aware that there was a need for foster carers and they had noticed foster carer recruitment advertising. Neither was motivated to find out more about fostering.

**CASE STUDY 1 - CLARE**

Clare is an experienced primary school teacher in her early 30s who loves her job but has decided that she would like a career break. She has recently inherited some money and is considering what to do next. Clare has always wanted to volunteer for a NGO overseas but she now feels a back condition would make this difficult.

Clare is looking for something life enhancing to do. She describes herself as bookish, caring and kind.

**CASE STUDY 2 - JOHN**

John is currently a serving police officer but is thinking about what to do in retirement.

He has three adult children, two grandchildren and a partner who works in the NHS. They live in a large house with two spare bedrooms.

John wants a challenge and to contribute to his community. He is currently volunteering with a local charity supporting vulnerable people. He describes himself as resilient, supportive and outward going.

Clare and John have valuable skills and experience. They both understand the need for foster carers and both have a deep motivation to improve the lives of others. If councils are going to widen the pool of foster carers they are going to have to do much more to engage with people like Clare and John.
ENGAGING CLARE AND JOHN

How can we engage people who have not actively considered fostering but have skills or experience that may make them outstanding foster carers?

Here are some ideas. They work across all marketing strategies.

**EXPLAIN** that councils need foster carers with a range of skills and experience. Make it explicitly clear this includes people with clinical, educational and therapeutic skills.

**HIGHLIGHT** that fostering provides a great opportunity to build on existing skills as well as learn new ones.

**PROMOTE** the fact foster carers make a positive difference to children and communities. This is a major motivating force for some people who are thinking of making a significant life change.

**REASSURE** potential foster carers that they will get support. Spell out what the support is. Avoid jargon like ‘Respite’.

**CLARIFY** the total financial package you are offering. Remember that people who work in professional jobs think of income in annual and not weekly amounts.

**SELL** the fact that fostering directly with a council saves the public sector valuable resources.

When it comes to the communication methods you use to reach people like Clare and John there is no magic bullet. Print, broadcast, direct-marketing, on-line, social-media and outdoor advertising can all work.

Make sure any communication methods you use are relevant and visible to people working in the caring professions, emergency services or the education sector. If possible also target dedicated resources at reaching people with existing skills and experience. Social media is an effective and inexpensive way of engaging people who do a specific job.
FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

RING RING, RING RING

When someone finally calls a council to find out about becoming a foster carer there will be lots of things running through their mind. Even if they have visited the council website, read leaflets, or completed an on-line registration form, the first time they speak to someone is a big moment.

Remember they will probably have a list of organisations they will be calling. This might include other councils and will almost certainly include Independent Fostering Agencies.

If they have a background in the caring professions, emergency services or the education sector they may ask some difficult questions. But don’t assume they understand what happens next.

Make the initial phone call better than the competition by having the warmest welcome and by being ready for difficult questions.

The more effort you can put into the first time you speak to someone the better.
GREAT RESEARCH TO LOOK AT

ACADEMIC RESEARCH

The Recruitment of Foster Carers: Key messages from the research literature
University of Bedfordshire

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The Demographic Characteristics of Foster Carers in the UK
Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, UCL Institute of Education, Loughborough University and University of Kent

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OTHER RESEARCH

Why foster carers care: how understanding values can transform relationships and improve services
The Fostering Network

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Understanding attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering
Anastasia Scott & Chris Duncan, Kindred
March 2013

The Pollen Shop works across health, social care and financial services
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