

# Lessons from the North East Pathfinder - Q&A document

What has been the North East Pathfinder's progress in setting up your fostering recruitment hub, and can you share any early successes?

Our regional recruitment hub, *Foster with North East*, launched at the end of September on time and within budget, despite the challenging timescales. The recruitment hub has garnered interest from prospective foster carers, while also securing positive media coverage, including prominent features on ITV and BBC Look North.

In its first 4 weeks, the newly launched support hub:

- Received 97 contacts across all 12 LAs in our region
- Passed on 43 successful enquiries to the region's individual LAs
- Delivered 2 days of training for the region's prospective carers
- Launched the website and bespoke case management system
- Supported the foster carer Buddy Scheme roll out
- Started to meet with individual LA fostering teams to develop relationships, answer questions and improve collaboration across the region

What were the biggest challenges or obstacles you encountered during the implementation process, and how did you overcome them?

**First, timescales were tight.** This meant we had to have really robust project plans and deadlines, and ensure the right people were engaged at the right points. We also fast-tracked recruitment to ensure we could employ hub staff ahead of go live.

**Second, shifting mindsets in the regions from competition to collaboration.** This is still a work in progress, but we knew it was important to commit to doing things differently. As a region, we have signed up to recruiting foster carers for the North East, so we had to try and shift local authorities away from thinking about 'losing' carers to other local authorities in the region, to thinking about recruiting more foster carers for the North East as a whole region.

**Finally, defining the staffing structure for our regional recruitment hub was a challenge.** We reviewed data of previous recruitment figures to estimate an appropriate staffing structure. We decided we needed experienced social workers within the hub to support our offer of pre-approval training to prospective foster carers. Despite the fact this is a time limited project, we made the decision to recruit social workers into permanent posts opposed to temporary contracts to ensure we attracted the most experienced and skilled social workers.

What is your staffing structure?

We are a team of six – we have one Service Manager, one Fostering Assistant, a Data Support Officer and three experienced social workers.

How have you engaged with the potential foster carers and prospective foster carers throughout the process?

**Implementation:** We consulted with foster carers from early on and on a wide range of decisions, including the call to action, our logo, the case management and the staffing structure to name just a few. We also engaged both experienced and newly approved foster carers to understand different perspectives and experiences of what it is like to be a foster carer regionally.

**Recruitment Hub:** Foster carers will play a key role in the recruitment hub ongoing. A key example is our foster carer buddy scheme for prospective foster carers. Local authority buddy schemes often start once approved, but our buddy scheme links prospective foster carers to a buddy at the point of enquiry. Experienced foster carers will also support with exit interviews, so we can understand why foster carers drop out of the process and where we can improve. Foster carers are also working with us to deliver The Skills to Foster training.

What is the North East Pathfinder's approach to allocating foster carers to local authorities where they don't express a preference of where they want to foster?

This is a tricky issue, and not one we've perfected yet – we have an approach that the region is currently signed up to but we are still learning and prepared to review this.

We allocate a foster carer to their home local authority (i.e. where they pay their council tax to), unless they express a preference to go to another local authority. We are keeping this policy under review, reporting where foster carers are being allocated into the monthly project board.

At four weeks in, the majority of the prospective foster carers enquiring didn't identify a specific local authority that they wanted to foster with, so the approach is working well so far.

Is all recruitment managed through the hub or do local authorities continue their own recruitment activities?

All enquiries from prospective foster carers in the North East are directed to and managed by the recruitment hub. Local authorities must send enquiries and potential foster carers to the hub. Whilst LAs can continue to run their local recruitment campaigns, such as in-person events, their materials must show the Foster with North East website and phone number.

Will training be centralised?

We are centralising our Skills to Foster training, operating a cycle location of training across the region to help foster carers attend. Some LAs in the North East will offer additional training on top of this.

### Does the North East Pathfinder harmonise fees and financial benefits across the region?

We don't have fee harmonisation in the North East yet. We recognise that being a foster carer is a paid role and that this is a question that applicants may ask. We've agreed that within the hub we're not giving examples of what you're paid in each local authority. Those conversations will need to happen directly between the local authority and prospective carer.

Harmonisation is something that we want to explore as a region, but is not at the forefront of our conversations yet. We need to embed the work we are doing first and embed a culture of 'collaboration not competition' to move towards this in the longer term. This is also a conversation that will need to happen at a strategic level by DCSs.

### How did you choose your case management system?

In hindsight, we would have thought about this much earlier in the implementation process as choosing a case management system was a real challenge in 8 weeks. We had three different options:

1. Use Together for Children's existing system which is liquid logic. However, we felt uncomfortable holding data for the hub in the same system as data for Together for Children.
2. Use word documents and spreadsheets, but this would be too manual and raise risks related to data protection.
3. Create a bespoke case management system from scratch, web systems partners GOSS Interactive.

We made a pragmatic decision given the tight timescales to work with our existing web systems partners Goss Interactive to go with option 3 and create a bespoke system. Our advice is to think about this very early!

### What are the operating hours of your hub?

We operate normal office hours for incoming calls, but offer to schedule evening call backs, operating a staff rota to accommodate this.

### Is there any collaboration with Independent Fostering Agencies?

Whilst there have been conversations about collaborating IFAs, this is not something that Foster with North East currently does.

### Do you have agreed success measures for the hub?

We have agreed some basic targets with DfE, including:

- Increased number of foster carer approvals
- Improved conversion rate
- Time taken from enquiry to application and approval.

We have also explored other success measures based on benefits that the hub will bring to the region, including financial benefits and quality of child placement. However, we haven't put numbers against these additional success measures as it was hard to identify accurate baseline data as they are difficult to measure.

### If you were to offer one crucial piece of advice to local authority clusters as they commence their journey to implement fostering recruitment hubs, what would that advice be?

**Leadership:** Have the right people supporting you. We had a strong leader in the North East, in our lead DCS, Jill Colbert. Jill played a crucial role in keeping local authorities engaged and bought-in to the programme and ensuring they understood key requirements they had to sign-up to.

**Utilise your existing networks and relationships:** All local authorities will have relationships regionally already, and these are crucial during implementation. Check-in with people regularly and try and do this face to face where possible.