



# **A Survey of Foster Carers' Views in Plymouth**

**Commissioned by the Plymouth Parent  
and Family Forum – February 2007**

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*A Survey of Foster Carers' Views in Plymouth*

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# Abstract

At the Plymouth Parent and Family Forum on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2006, foster carer representatives identified the need to look at foster caring in Plymouth. Due to feelings of isolation, they felt they didn't have a voice and they were unsure of their role in the development of services. At the request of the Forum, Parent Partnership Service developed a questionnaire and sent them to 198 foster carers in Plymouth. The responses indicated a number of key areas in which to improve the service foster carers receive. The overarching theme running through the findings is the inconsistent service foster carers receive. The results reflect the initial concerns raised by the foster care representatives at the Plymouth Parent and Family Forum, significantly in the areas of support, communication, advocating, feeling part of a team, service development, legislation, provision for care leavers, training and the impact on family life.

## ***A Survey of Foster Carers' Views in Plymouth***

*'SADNESS HAPPINESS FULFILMENT.'*

(A foster carers reply when asked what words / emotions they would use to describe being a foster carer in Plymouth).

### **Objective**

The purpose of this survey was to seek the views of foster carers and friend and family carers in Plymouth, regarding the development of services to better meet their needs as carers.

### **Background**

The foster carer representatives at the Plymouth Parent and Family Forum identified the need to look at foster caring in Plymouth at the forum meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2006. The representatives expressed concerns about:

- Foster carers' feelings of isolation.
- How they felt they didn't have a voice and were not being heard.
- Their role in the development of foster care services.

They highlighted areas in which they wanted to air their views. Those areas included -

- *Support for foster carers*
- *Advocating on behalf of their foster children*
- *Feeling part of a team*
- *Communication*
- *Service improvement / development*
- *Legislation*
- *Provision for care leavers*
- *Training for foster carers*
- *Impact of foster care on own family life*

These are important areas for development of foster carers' sense of professionalism and feeling supported.

### **Previous research about the themes.**

Foster carers in Plymouth are not alone in the views they expressed. The following headed sections outline other research with foster carers' that has been carried out around the themes identified.

### **Support**

Various pieces of research have investigated the effects of support on foster carers and placement outcomes. A literature review of support for foster carers concluded that good support and supervision leads to an increased feeling of satisfaction for foster carers and an increase in retaining them (Sellick, 2006).

Farmer & Moyers (2004) also found that support for foster carers has a positive impact and more successful placements were linked with greater support from 'family, social

networks and local professionals'. Farmer et al (2004) suggest this puts less strain on foster carers and leads to better parenting skills, which in turn also links to better placement outcomes.

McDonald, Burgess & Smith (2003) found that foster carers prefer the type of support they receive to be, 'team based and inter disciplinary interventions focussed upon them as equals'. They suggest this has psychological well-being implications for both the foster carer and the child in care.

The research highlights the importance and necessity of support for foster carers and for better placement outcomes. It suggests that support could be provided by a number of sources (Farmer et al, 2004) and also proposes the 'team-based and interdisciplinary' model of work is the way foster carers prefer (McDonald et al, 2003).

### Training

In an article by Children Now (2006), the importance of training for foster carers was highlighted due to the growing number of children with more complex needs that foster carers are being asked to care for. Whilst there is initial training for foster carers in most foster care services and local authorities there appears to be a shortage of higher level training. The effects of a lack of training were associated with more placement breakdowns, compared to those who had attended just a basic training course having fewer placement breakdowns (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987, as cited in Farmers & Moyers, 2004).

The research suggests that there is a greater need for higher levels of training and even basic training can make the difference between a successful placement and a placement breakdown.

### Provision for care leavers

Sinclair, Baker, Wilson and Gibbs (2004, as cited in Sinclair, 2005) found care leavers had some of the most negative experiences when leaving foster care and moving to independent living. Most of the care leavers experienced a number of difficulties including depression, arguing with family, debt, loneliness, and unskilled, low paid jobs. This study highlights care leavers as a particularly vulnerable group of people.

This suggests individual, tailored plans are necessary for care leavers moving into independent living and the input from foster carers could be very valuable as they may have a good insight into what will work and what may not work for them.

### Legislation

An extensive study of 32 authorities across Scotland found that their policies failed to meet some important areas that foster carers perceived as important, in particular that the policies don't address the 'inadequacies of the social work services offered to children' (Triseliotis, Walker & Hill, 2000, as cited in Sinclair, 2005).

This can be related to other research (Farmer & Moyers, 2004, Sellick, 2006) which suggests that listening to foster carers' views can be of huge benefit to them and for better placement outcomes.

### Feeling part of a team

British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) emphasise the importance of recognising foster carers as professionals to avoid a recruitment crisis (as cited in Children Now, 2005). BAAF development consultant Andrea Warman suggests, 'They should be treated as part of the team and be consulted more because they have good insight into the child's needs', (communitycare.co.uk, 2006). This was reflected in Farmer and Moyers (2004) study which highlighted the need for foster carers to feel part of a professional team and to have their views taken seriously.

### Impact on own family life

The impact of foster caring on the foster carers own family has been widely researched. A Swedish study into the effects of foster caring on the family looked at addressing the impact on sons and daughters of foster carers. It recognised the significant contribution sons and daughters make to foster caring and the need to acknowledge this (Höjer, 2006).

A large scale study conducted by Farmer, Moyers & Lispcombe (2004) found that 27% of the foster carers sought a great deal of support from their own children and 53% sought some support from them. Some placements had a negative outcome due to their own children struggling with sharing their parent's attention. Family life was viewed as being a determinant of whether a placement was successful or not.

Not only is there research into the impact of foster carers' families but there is also substantial research into family members taking on the role of carer for children related to them, family carers. Family carers are becoming an increasingly tapped into resource by social services with an estimated 18% of looked after children being placed with a family or friend carer in the UK (Richards & Tapsfield, 2003, as cited in Sellick, 2006). In some instances the outcomes of those children with family carers were better than those children with unrelated foster carers (Farmer & Moyers, 2004).

The research suggests that the family can have a significant impact on foster carers for varying reasons and recognising the significance of input from family members is of particular importance.

With the shortage of foster carers in England estimated at 8200 (Fostering Network, 2006) the need to address their needs and listen to their views in order to retain them and encourage recruitment is becoming more important. There appears to be a number of areas that can determine how successful a placement outcome is. This links in with the many areas in which the Plymouth foster carer forum representatives wanted to voice a view. The aim of this report is to give a voice to foster carers in Plymouth, to identify their needs, and to inform service development that might address those needs.

# Method

A questionnaire (see appendix A) was drawn up by Plymouth Parent Partnership Service and one of the Plymouth Parent and Family Forum Foster Carer Representatives.

So that the right type of questions were asked, the foster care representative met with other foster carers from around the city to discuss what sort of information *they* thought should be gathered.

The final version of the questionnaire was sent to the Social Services Ethics Committee and the manager of the Foster Carer Service for approval – both approved the questionnaire. PPS are grateful to Foster Carer Services for their continuing support of the project.

The questionnaire was sent to 198 foster carers who were registered in Plymouth at the time of distribution. A stamped – addressed envelope was included to aid a prompt reply and a higher response from the foster carers.

38 out of 198 (just under 20%) sent back the completed questionnaire. This can be seen to validly represent views as 10 – 20% is a typical response rate for postal surveys (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003).

The questionnaire consisted of 11 sets of questions. Some are open- ended questions; offering respondents the chance to write freely about any issue they wish in response to the question.

Other questions use Likert Scales, these allow respondents to show how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement on a scale of 1 to 5. (For a copy of the letter sent to foster carers and the reminder letter – see appendix B & C).

# Findings

Each of the questions are set out in this section with a diagram to show the distribution of responses and, where appropriate, examples of the kinds of responses made to open questions.

## Q1 - Do you feel part of a multi - agency team with Education, Health and Social Care staff?

Just under half of the foster carers felt that they were part of a multi-agency team with education, health and social care staff, whilst the other half of foster carers felt that they were not part of a multi-agency team.

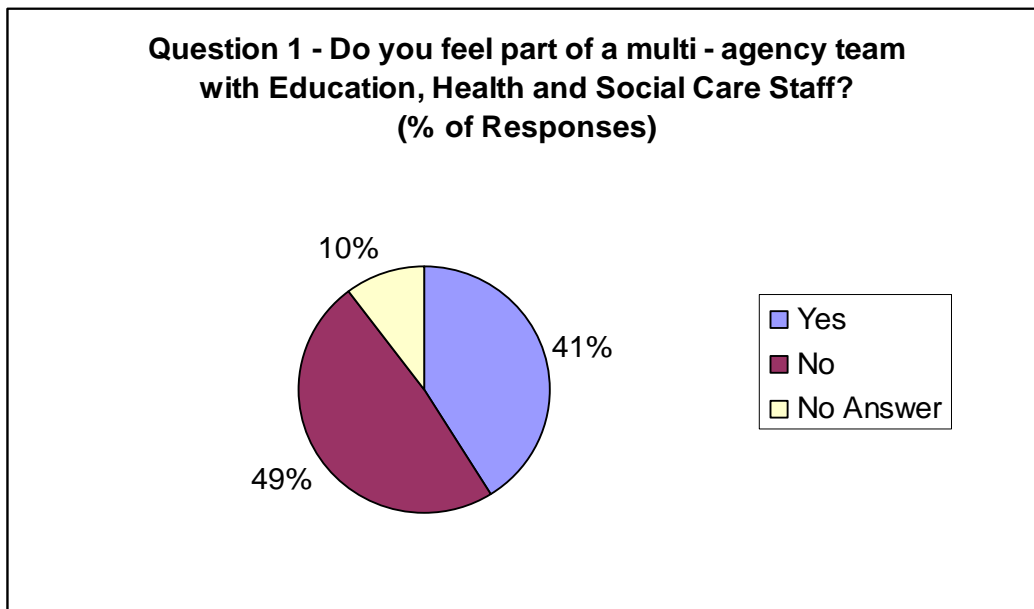


Figure 1 – Responses to Question 1

## Q2 - How well do you feel supported to act as an advocate on your foster child’s behalf?

Foster carers views were wide-ranging in response to this question, from no support to very well supported, with only 32% giving a positive response. The most common answer from foster carers was that the support they received when they were acting as an advocate on their foster child’s behalf varied.

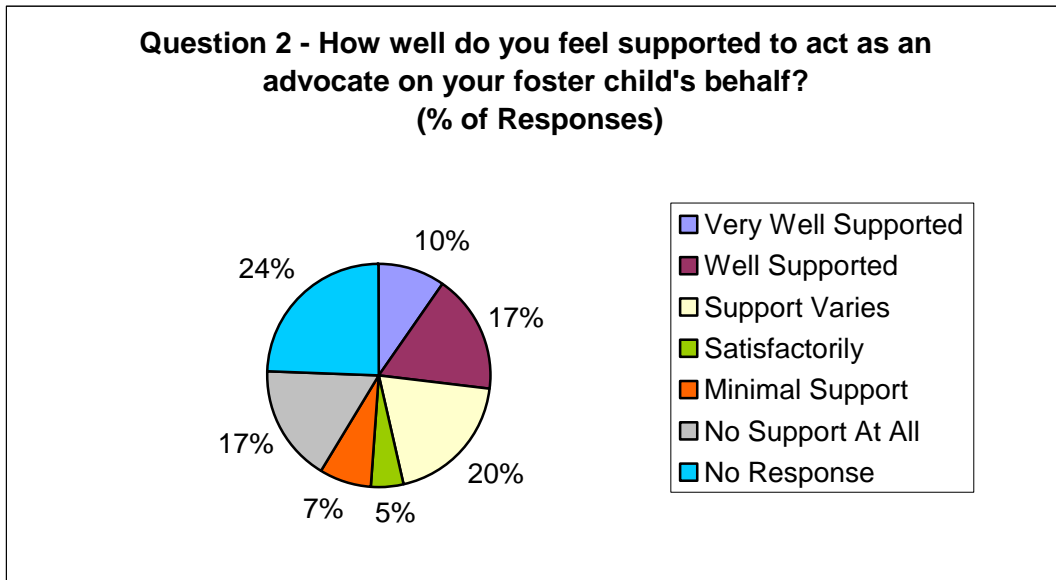


Figure 2 – Responses to Question 2

NB: The numbers illustrate the number of responses under each theme. Each foster carer submitted 1 – 3 responses per question.

### Example of responses to Question 2

'My link worker, with the fostering team, supports me in all that I do to advocate for my foster child'.

'There are at times where we feel that we are not supported in anyway, and even when we do say what the child wants or is feeling we are not beleived'.

'Have been well supported in recent past'.

'OK. BUT SUPPORT NOT ALWAYS AVAILABLE'.

'Id feel very confident about this, but know it would not be supported or received well by the local authority, the term "you are only a foster carer" is still very much around.'

'This often comes down to individuals rather than whole agencies. Some individuals from each of the agencies are very supportive and some are not. Sometimes the rhetoric sounds great until I actually try to act as advocate for a child, and then I feel as though I have over stepped some invisible line'.

'Advocacy is done with very little support unless you are fortunate enough to have a very pro active social worker'.

'As a foster carer my views + opinions are not listened to so how can you act as an advocate on any childs behalf'.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

### Question 3

#### I/ We receive effective support from other agencies.

Over a third (37%) of foster carers agreed with this statement at some level and felt they received effective support from other agencies. However, over a quarter (27%) still felt that they did not receive effective support from other agencies. There was also a high level of neutral responses.

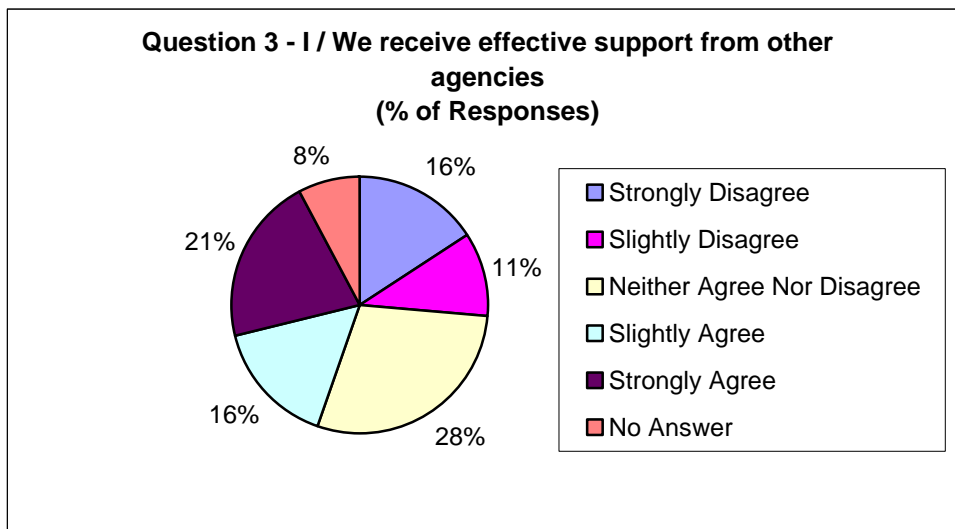


Figure 3 – Responses to Question 3 – Part 1

#### I/ We feel valued in my/ our role by the Foster Service.

Only 39% agreed with this statement whilst 16% remained neutral. Almost half of the foster carers responding to this statement disagreed at some level (42%).

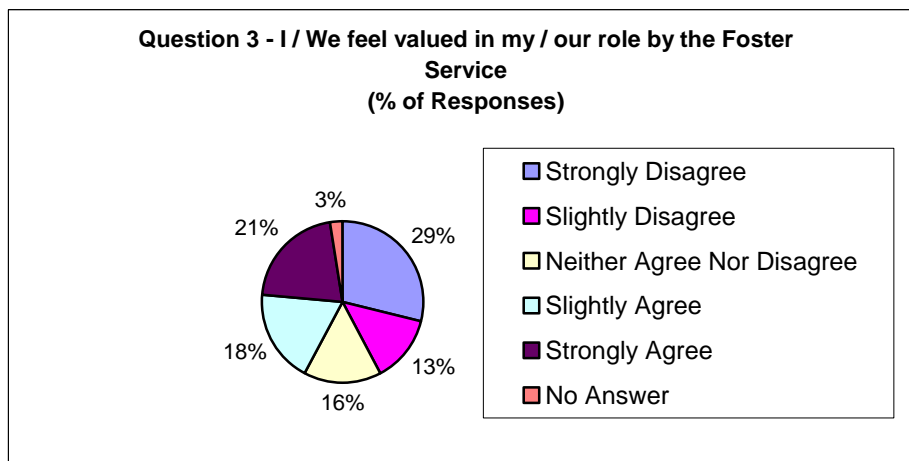


Figure 4 – Responses to Question 3 – Part 2

I/ We feel valued in my/ our role by other agencies.

42% of the foster carers agreed with this statement, whilst 37% did not feel that other agencies valued them in their role. 16% remained neutral.

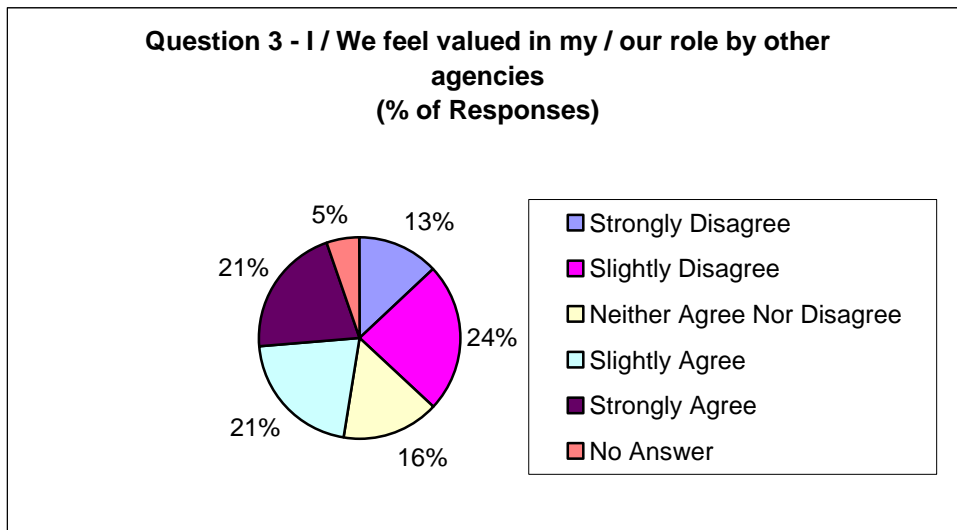


Figure 5 – Responses to Question 3 – Part 3

The second part of Question 3 sought to identify how foster carers felt the foster carer service could be improved.

Have you any specific suggestions for how the service could be improved?

The most common suggestion for how the service could be improved related to an improvement in communication between services (19%). This question had a high number of no responses (53%).

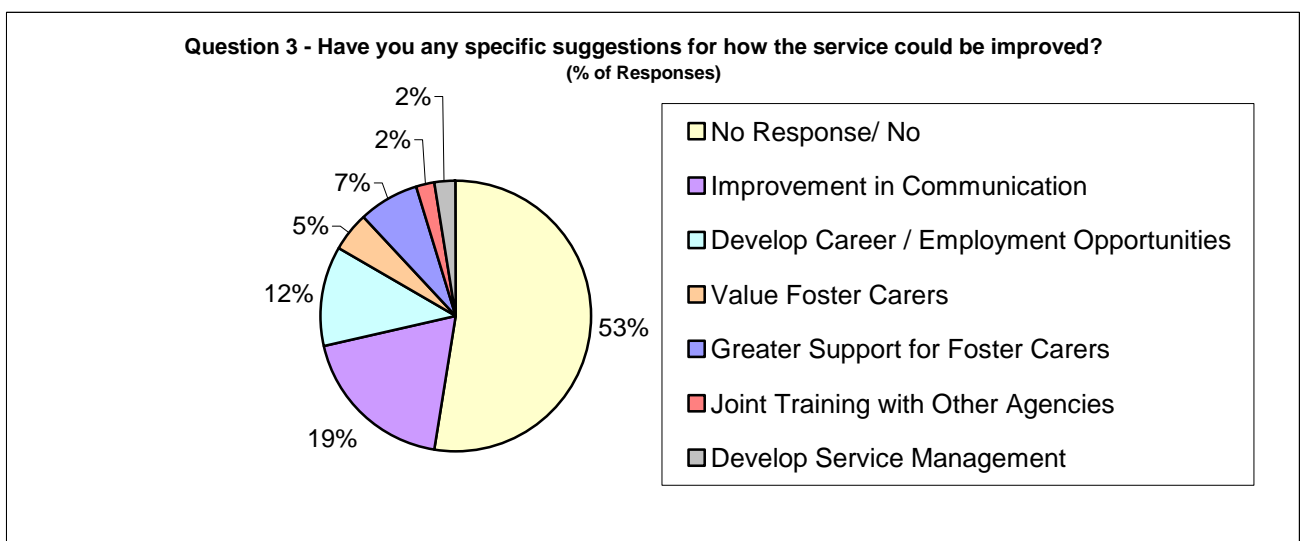


Figure 6 – Responses to Question 3 – Part 4

NB: The numbers illustrate the number of responses under each theme. Each foster carer submitted 1 – 3 responses per question.

**Example of responses to Question 3**

'Try listening to foster carers and HEARING what we say, instead of just going through the motions of listening and totally ignoring our comments anyway'.

'FASTER REACTION TO FOSTER-CARERS. A SLOW RESPONSE IMPLIES LACK OF INTEREST'.

'PROVIDING REALISTIC CAREER OPPURTUNITIES'.

'Social workers and other agency need to realise that we are professional people and should be treated in a more appropriate and equal way'.

'Perhaps if we were employed rather than self-employed conditions might improve for all parties'.

'I feel if Foster Carers were more valued, perhaps they would feel more secure and more able to voice concerns when they arise'.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

**Question 4**

**How effective is the two way communication and information exchange between: Foster Carers – Foster Carers?**

50% of foster carers felt that the two way communication and information exchange between themselves and other foster carers was effective on some level and only 8% found it to be ineffective.

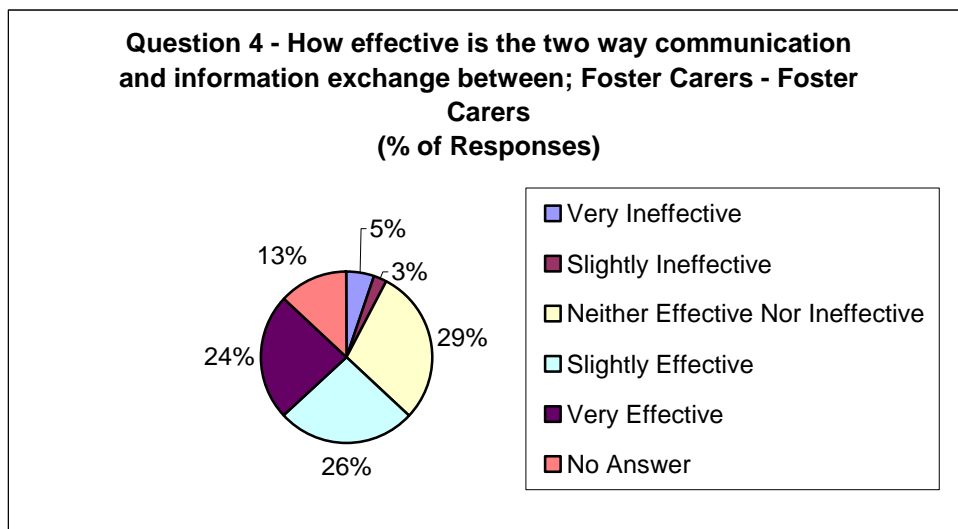


Figure 7 – Responses Question 4 – Part 1

How effective is the two way communication and information exchange between: Foster Carers – Social Care Services?

Only 26% of Foster Carers felt that the two way communication and information exchange between foster carers and social care services was effective compared to 35% finding it to be ineffective at some level. 36% remained neutral.

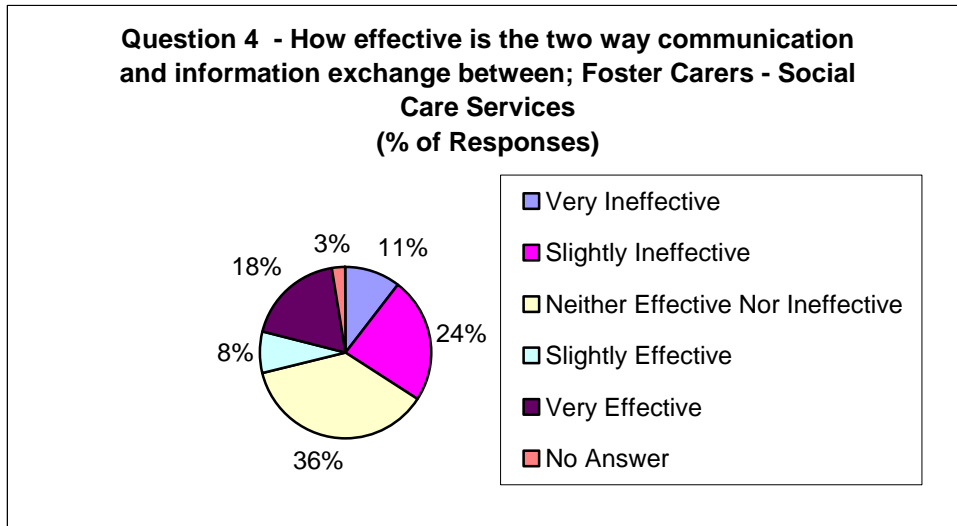


Figure 8 – Responses Question 4 – Part 2

How effective is the two way communication and information exchange between: Foster Carers – Health Services?

40% of Foster Carers indicated that the two way communication and information exchange between Foster Carers and Health Services was effective compared to 34% finding it to be ineffective. 21% remained neutral.

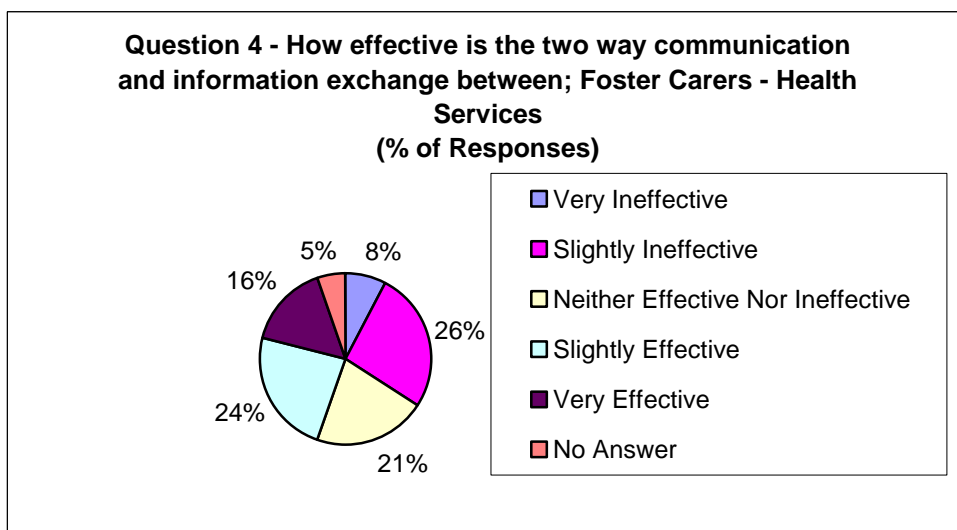


Figure 9 – Responses to Question 4 – Part 3

How effective is the two way communication and information exchange between: Foster Carers – Education Services?

Over half (52%) of the Foster Carers indicated that the two way information exchange between Foster Carers and Education Services was effective compared to 21% finding it to be ineffective. Just under a quarter (24%) remained neutral.

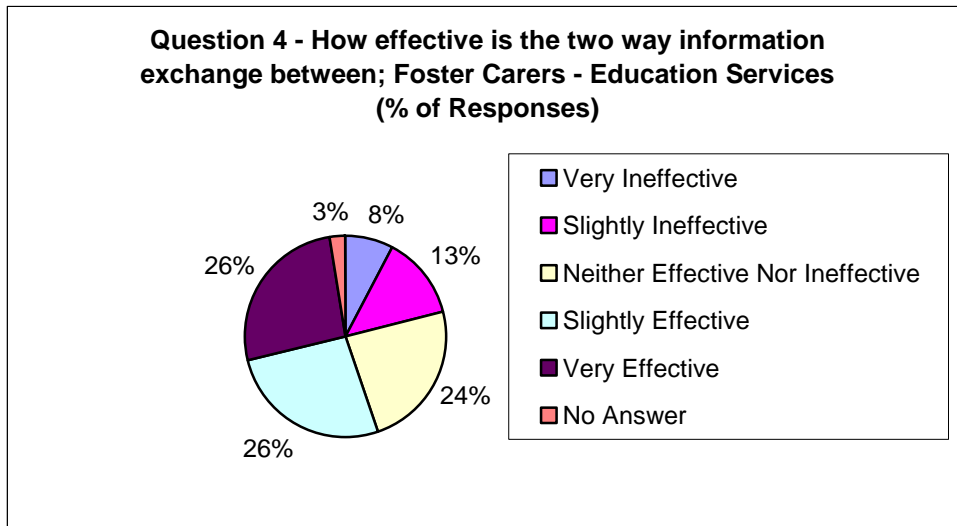


Figure 10 – Responses to Question 4 – Part 4

How effective is the two way communication and information exchange across all services?

Only 27% of Foster Carers found the two way communication and information exchange across all services was effective. 46% of responses felt it was ineffective.

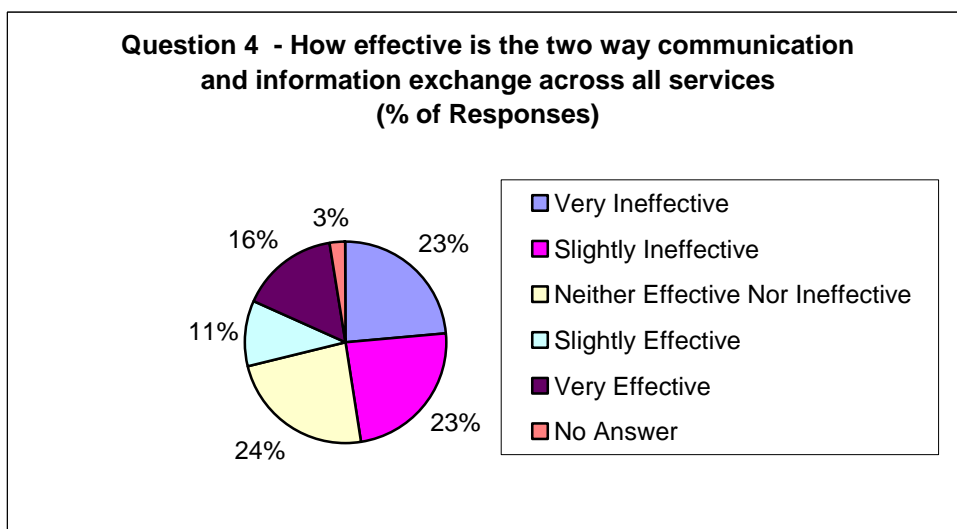


Figure 11 – Responses to Question 4 – Part 5

The second part of question 4 asked foster carers if they had any suggestions on improving the service.

Have you any specific suggestions for how the service could be improved?

The most frequent suggestions for service improvement was in relation to an improvement in communication. However, 79% did not respond to this question.

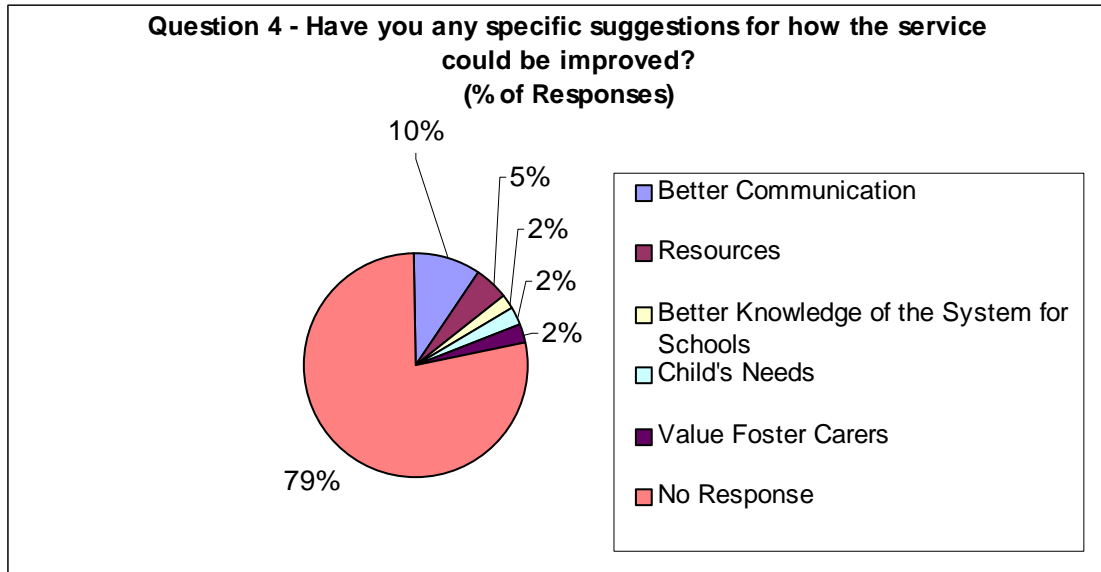


Figure 12 – Responses to Question 4 – Part 6

NB: The numbers illustrate the number of responses under each theme. Each foster carer submitted 1 – 3 responses per question.

Example of responses to Question 4

'By making sure the childs needs come first'.

'SUPERVISION OF S.W'S TO INCLUDE EFFECTIVE TRAINING ON COMMUNICATION'.

'LISTEN TO FOSTER CARERS'.

'Foster carers needed to be valued more (not just financially) as we do most of the work with the child'.

'EMPLOY MORE STAFF'.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

## Question 5

### How well does the legislation support the way you care for your foster children?

32% of Foster Carers indicated that the legislation did not support them well, however, 32% felt the legislation did support them well. 28% considered the legislation supported them adequately.

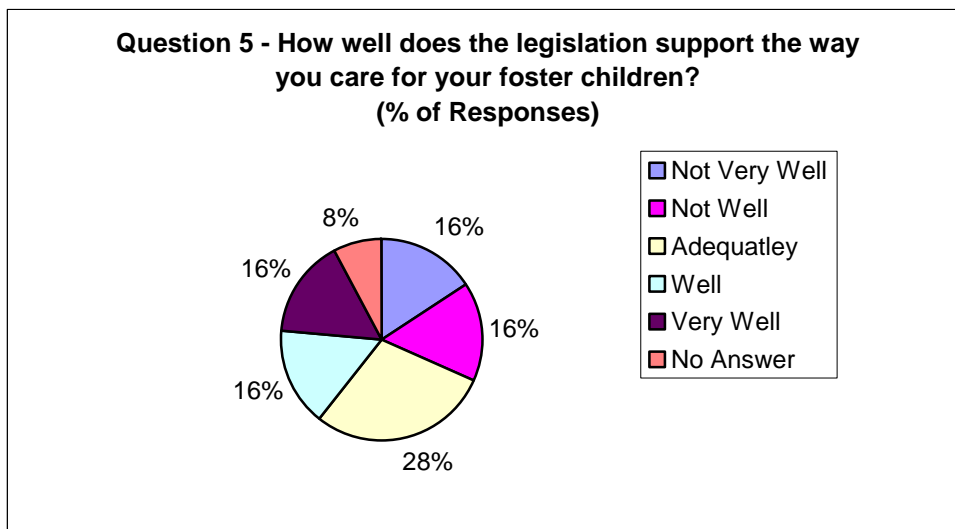


Figure 13 – Responses to Question 5 – Part 1

### How well do the Safe Carer Guidelines allow you to care safely for the child you look after whilst also protecting you from allegation?

73% of the foster carers felt that the Safe Carer Guidelines were sufficient to allow them to care safely for the child whilst also protecting them from allegation, but 16% indicated a concern.

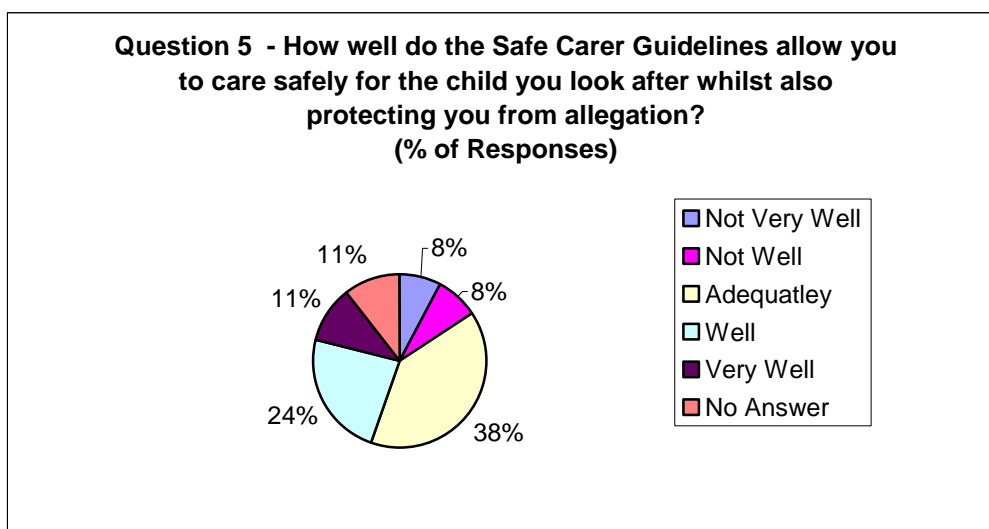


Figure 14 -Responses to Question 5 – Part 2

Q6 - How would you suggest legislation and its local implementation could be adapted to aid you in your role as a foster carer?

Foster carers responding to this question suggested that the legislation could be adapted to aid them in their role by allowing them to use their experience and expertise (10%). This was the most frequent suggestion from the foster carers. There was a high proportion of respondents that chose not to answer the question (58%).

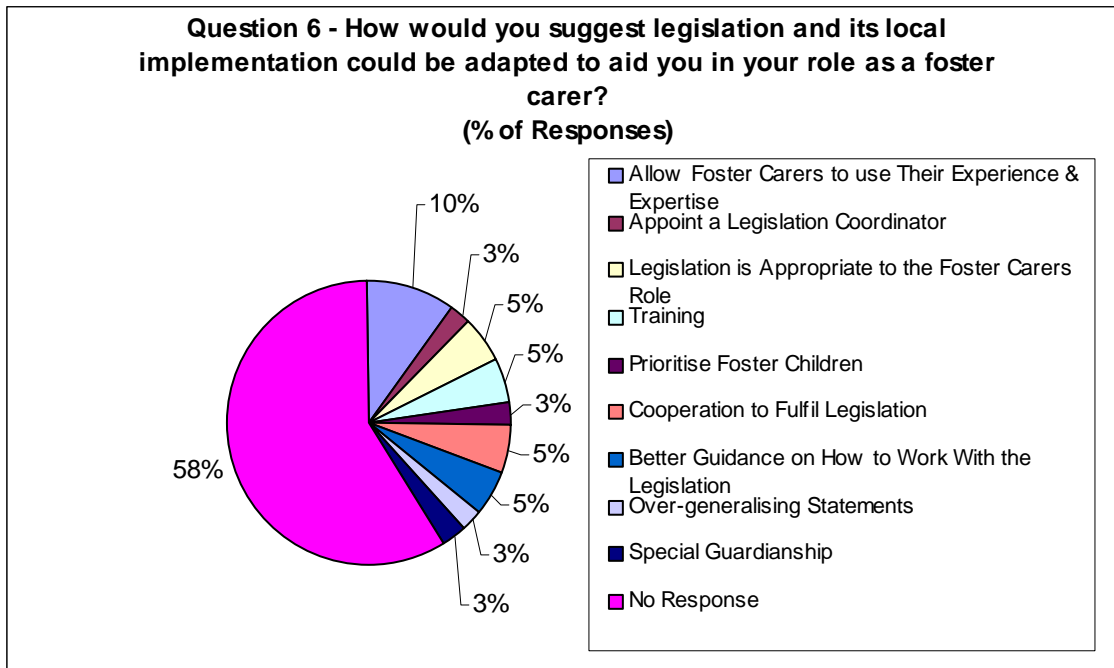


Figure 15 – Responses to Question 6

NB: The numbers illustrate the number of responses under each theme. Each foster carer submitted 1 – 3 responses per question.

Examples of responses

'Current legislation and guidance fulfill the role satisfactorily as an aid to carers'.

'Legislation co-ordinator be appointed to co-ordinate with social services and foster carer - in individual cases'.

'It would help if there was more training to explain the various legislation'.

'We feel credit should be given to foster parents with years of experience who have persevered with long term placements giving them the ability to use their own initiative and still work within the Guidelines'.

'TRAINING'.

'Legislation is suffocateing at present its like give me a little corner for fresh air. Its impossible to be a carer in full sense of word you are merely a foster person, a provider of service, no opinions, no feelings, none excistant'.

'Much of the legislation does not allow foster carers to use their experience and expertise. Blanket statements when put into practice simply reinforce how 'different' these children are'.

NB: Comments accurately reflect the foster carers written comments and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

Q7 - What services would you involve in supporting care leavers?

A wide range of services to support care leavers was recommended by the foster carers. 36% did not respond to this question. Below is the full list of the services they suggested.

**Table 1 – Services to support care leavers in descending order of the most frequent suggestions.  
(Those grouped together received the same number of responses.)**

Education Services
Housing Services
Health Services
Connexions/ Jobs and Careers Advice
Adult Team for Care Leavers
Social Worker
Advisory Services on Benefits
Everything
Counseling
Training in the Workplace
Jobs and Careers Advice
Services to Assist Those with Learning Difficulties
Mental Health Services
The Zone
Mentoring Service
Home Help
Advocacy Services
Citizens Advice Bureau

NB: Each foster carer submitted 1 – 9 responses per question.

Q8 - What training would you like to have available to assist you in your role?

Foster carers highlighted a number of training needs. The full range of responses to this question can be found in the table below. 28% did not respond to this question. Foster carers most frequently felt that any training would be useful or that they were already on appropriate training courses offered in the new training programme.

**Table 2– Training for foster carers in descending order of the most frequent suggestions. (Those grouped together received the same number of responses.)**

Any training would be useful
On new training courses already
Dealing With Behavioural Issues
Attachment
First Aid
Policies and Practices
Input from Other Service Providers
Mental Health
Resilience
Drug Awareness
Educational Issues
Autism
Child Welfare
Coping with Your Own Child's Emotions
Cultural Differences/ Ethnicity
Effects of Abuse
Working with Adolescents
Sign Language
Supporting foster Children with Their Own Family

NB: Each foster carer submitted 1 – 5 responses per question.

*Some of the responses included comments about the practicalities of training:*

'(Paid training for our time,) as a foster carer role is very time consuming 24-7 we cannot close the office door'.

'Consistant, ongoing reality training. ....Recognition that you have completed the training'.

'.....it would be good if training sessions could be arranged to fit in better with school times or after bed times. (I think some effort is being made to do this better in future). It would be good if training sessions, once offered, were not then withdrawn/ cancelled. It would be good if 'refresher' courses could run for those who have already done the core subjects, instead of us having to do the same training course again just to catch up on the latest developments'.

'.....these courses need to take place at sensible times + have child care available for those who foster under 4 yrs'.

'WE WOULD PREFER TRAINING TO BE IN THE EVENINGS AS WE THINK WE SHOULD BOTH BE ABLE TO ATTEND'.

'Don't mind going to training if they are constructive and informative and not being told what have been doing for years'.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

## Q9 - What words or emotions would you use to describe being a foster carer in Plymouth?

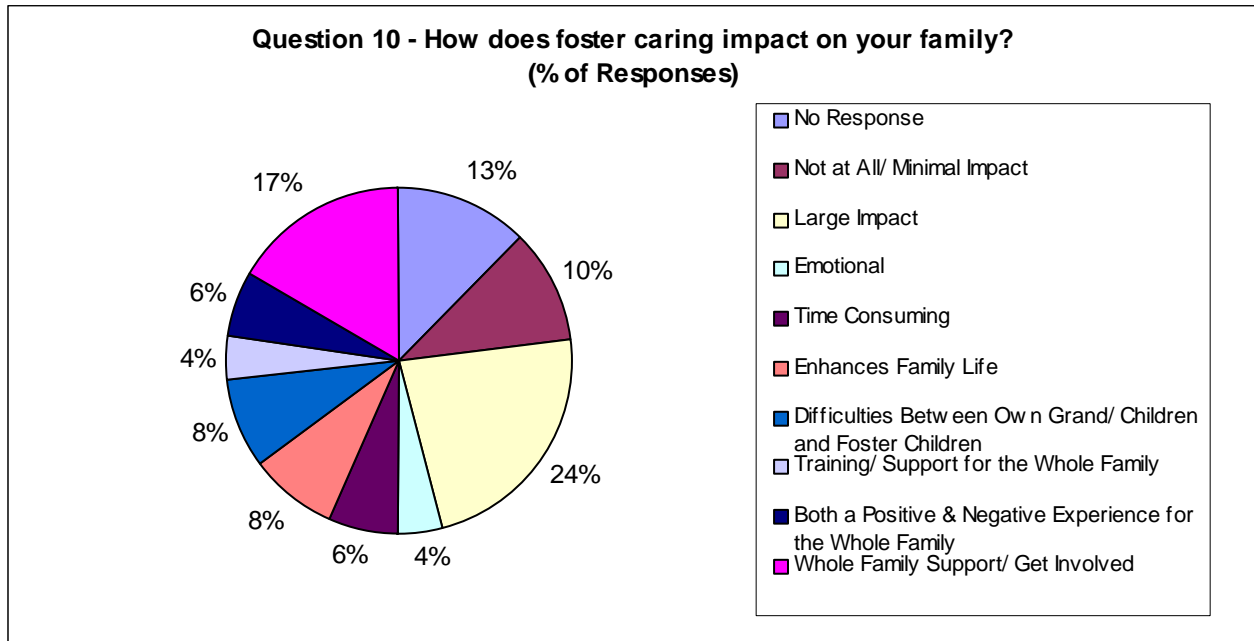
Positive Emotions	<u>Mixed Feelings</u>	Negative Emotions
<p>◆ I don't look at them as Foster children they are my Granchidren and I love them very much.</p> <p>◆ A caring and rewarding task being able to love and nurture children, teach them responsibilities, boundaries and encourage the individual to become independent whilst at the same time safe in the community. Help to improve self esteem.</p> <p>◆ TO GIVE T. L. C. TENDER LOVING CARE.</p> <p>◆ I LOVE BEING IN PLYMOUTH AND FEEL THE FOSTERING SYSTEM IS A TYPICAL HUMAN-RUN SYSTEM AND IS WHAT COULD BE EXPECTED IN THIS LIFE. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PARTICULARLY GOOD INDIVIDUALS IN THE SYSTEM, AND THEY MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. I BET PLYMOUTH IS AS GOOD AS ANYWHERE ELSE.</p> <p>◆ I care for my neice so it is quite easy for me, as I have known her since she has been born.</p> <p>◆ AFTER 29 YEARS OF FOSTERING WE HAVE SEEN A LOT OF CHANGES SO YOU HAVE TO BE UNDER STANDING AND LOVING TO FAMILIES.</p> <p>◆ Respite is very good. the breaks in between although you to recharge your batteries.</p> <p>◆ Love it!! Warm fluffy glow when it goes right.</p> <p>◆ REWARDING ENJOYABLE</p> <p>◆ REWARDING</p>	<p>◆ Frustrating. I love being a foster carer. Most of the professionals try hard to accomodate the needs of the children. However problems that are difficult to legislate against like constant changes of a social worker, new workers not reading files, lack of communication between agencies are commonplace.</p> <p>◆ Very mixed at the moment.</p> <p>◆ Frustrating, hard work, rewarding (sometimes). Empty, worthless. From child rewarding, achievement, laughter, enjoyment, togetherness.</p> <p>◆ Rewarding enlighting hard work (sometimes) happy sad (on a child's leaving.)</p> <p>◆ SADNESS HAPPINESS FULFILMENT.</p> <p>◆ UPS &amp; DOWNS.</p> <p>◆ Foster care is our life – we love it –luckily we are very experienced as we have been fostering for almost 17 yrs. Plymouths performance and their importance to foster cares has been diminished by lack of continuity and the introduction a grand <u>NEW PLAN</u> every two years, shortly followed by the departure of the instigator of that plan. Key workers and social workers that we have known for many years, whose experience is presumably valued as much as ours, seem to be giving up and leaving – we need them not another new plan.</p> <p>◆ You have to be able to juggle your personnal life with the responsibilities of caring for young people and try to make it balance.</p> <p>◆ Very mixed. At times it seems you are undervalued and undermined. And being took very much for granted. A lot is take, take, and majority of time nothing back. Then you see the innocent smile or gurgle of the younger end of the scale (baby and toddlers) and you just then have a glimmer of love untarnished by what the system can do to these children.</p> <p>◆ Brilliant. Deflating. Satisfaction. Sometimes feel on an emotional rollercoaster. Children's faces when its right. Frustrating.</p> <p>◆ With the agency – frustration, sad, cynical, why can't they learn from previous mistakes, why do they spend money on such things as recruitment when more staff are needed in the teams long term. With the children – Good, happy, proud, confident, endeavoring to support them in their lives, ongoing.</p> <p>◆ Frustrateing, Hard work, rewarding (sometimes) Always battleing with authorities for rights of child. empty, worthless. From child rewarding, achievement, laughter, enjoyment, togetherness.</p> <p>◆ With regard to my foste child – challenging, emotional, hard work, rewading, responsible. With regard to Plymouth Social Services – neglected, unimportant, undervalued, ignored, patronised, lack of communication, bare minimum, ticking boxes, severe lack of training.</p>	<p>◆ Frustration with minimal support &amp; lack of communication from 'the professionals'.</p> <p>◆ Unsatisfactory, unworthy, not listened to, belittled, ignored, un-heard, taken for granted, used and most of all looked down upon as not a professional person.</p> <p>◆ Frustrating at times. Made to feel like your on trial at times. Mixed messages. When you need answers you have to wait as staff are off you then do what you CAN and what you feel is right. Taken for granted. Provider.</p> <p>◆ Unvalued (generally)</p> <p>◆ Frustration, now sadly the feelings of frustration often outweigh the feelings of satisfaction.</p> <p>◆ Frustrated Tired! Joke! Unsupported Neglected</p> <p>◆ undervalued Frustrated Defeated, ignored.</p> <p>◆ FRUSTRATED!! WITH MOST ASPECTS – ESPECIALLY THE CHILDREN BEING CAUGHT UP IN APATHY.</p> <p>◆ Worthless, treated as a second class citizen, treated like a mushroom!</p> <p>◆ FRUSTRATED.</p> <p>◆ UNDERVALUED WASTED SKILLS ACHIEVING IN SPITE OF DEPT ON OCCASIONS</p>

**Please Note: Some information has been eliminated solely to protect anonymity.**

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling and grammar.

## Q10 - How does foster caring impact on your family?

The largest number of responses to this question mentioned how foster caring impacts significantly on their family life. Another point, which was mentioned frequently when answering this question, was that the foster carers own family support / get involved in caring for the foster child.



**Figure 16 – Responses to Question 10.**

NB: The numbers illustrate the number of responses under each theme. Each foster carer submitted 1 – 3 responses per question.

### Example of responses

'Our children have learnt that all families are different from us, and other children can be sad, hungry and in despair, which I feel have made us better and more tolerant and understanding people'.

'It means I have little or no time with my own family without the children'.

'OUR CHILDREN HAVE SUPPORTED US ALL THE YEARS WE HAVE BEEN FOSTERING. AND WE GET A LOT OF SUPPORT FROM THE REST OF THE FAMILY AND FRIENDS'.

'largely, can if you let it take over what with contact and transport. Emotionally, in everyway'.

'Fostering is a way of life. Everyone in the family is involved. Often if a child in your care has behavioural problems, your social-life becomes non-existent. I have spent whole school terms waiting for schools to telephone to ask me to pick up a child and take him home as the school cannot cope with the behaviour'.

'Full time, our life evolves around the children we care for. They have had troubled times and need all the input we can give them. Giving them time, and getting to know each + every one of them. Valuing them. This is what I think fostering is about'.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

## Q11 – Any further comments

Below are all the further comments included in the questionnaires. Some information has been omitted to protect anonymity.

- We feel that the social service departments need to realise that we as foster carers do not do this for the money, and that we wish for a more professional attitude be given to us all. After all it is us as carers that are offering you our services, time, professionalism, not you giving us your service, time. In ending there is more need to address how Social Worker perceive us as carers and our Role within the framework.
- I enjoy fostering children very much. Most of my complaints arise because the system is aimed at 'the general needs of a foster child' individual children who have problems outside the norm are often made to wait long periods of time for individual needs.
- TO LOOK INTO THE LENGTH OF TIME IN ACCESSING PEOPLE TO FOSTER. DUE TO THE BAD TIME WE HAD.
- Most people are 'doing their job', and control their daily work environment as much as possible. Their commitment to the people they are employed to help is secondary. To those who think of the job as secondary, but have a conscience / love towards the people they are paid to care for first and foremost, their priority is people, not themselves, and they go far beyond what most bother with. If life was full of these people, there would be no complaints, for everyone would be satisfied.
- Too much time is spent trying to get the 'run of the mill' things either paid for or reimbursed. This in turn causes resentment towards the agency. Taxis for example, WHY??? We only want the best for the children we care for we want them to have happy lives and be fulfilled this costs money which the dept. should cover. Our job should be caring not having to continually talk about Topics such as lack of communication, etc. A lot of Foster Carers are not in a secure financial situation but are very willing to share their homes + lives with young people this needs to be recognised and acknowledged in order to help the foster carer + the young people.
- Personally I would never foster with having young children of my own, having experienced it, fostering with its rules and legislation Know has changed beyond belief you can no longer care 100% without fear of allegations or being told of like school children somewhere along line. It has to change we need to give love & care children deserve and need.
- Do not underestimate the support and training needed by the foster family – assign us our own social worker, be pro active, don't just fire fight –badly. Consider boarding school for foster children. Stop putting financial consideration first, second and third, the foster child fourth and the foster family last. Have a transparent team structure for all to see. Assign appropriate foster social workers to children. Help to bring together foster families so that they can support each other.
- As a 'specialist' foster carer there is always the threat that social services want to 'do away' with the scheme – this is very unsettling – have the feeling of not being valued – also there is always threats about taking away any respite care. When working with some of these young people and especially as a lone foster carer, the respite is very important to enable us to continue with the work.
- Don't get me started! It's a good job the kids are so great – that's the only constant I can think of. Too many ill thought out changes. Too many P.C catch phrases. Too little honesty. Too little communication. The kids are still worth it!
- Nobody really understands what it is like to foster until they 'do it'. These children have the potential to physically and emotionally wreck your homes and your lives. The dept is not doing anywhere near enough to support our emotional needs or well-being. We are frequently left to support ourselves (particularly difficult after placement breakdown). Social workers and their practice varies widely and this can make or break a placement. You depend a great deal on your link worker and if they are not able to provide support (and several are not) there is only one course of action to take and that is to rely on other foster carers. We are all here to support the foster child, apparently, but in practice we are often on our own!

- We feel a little concerned that we have never met our link worker. Our last link worker left service in January 06 and only found out at our annual review that we have a link worker. I would like to develop in certain areas i.e. helping children to read and I have a particular interest in ADHD but how can my expertise be made good use of without contact with a link worker.
- CASE PLANNING and management still seems to be lacking consistency. After 7 years fostering the situation in Plymouth seems to have worsened rather than improved.
- My only other comment is, with social services it always seems to be finances first and children second.
- I feel that if I'm not consulted by some agency on what is happening when I am the one caring for the child and dealing with the problems on a day to day bases i.e. education.
- Although this seems all doom and gloom we just hope we can make the difference to these childrens lives. If we didn't do the job who would, with all that gets thrown at us, (yes we must be mad) but we care. And if one of these children goes out into the world a success, we feel it has been worth it. But feel very undervalued by dept. Don't always feel our thoughts and worries are listened to.

NB: Comments are given verbatim and have not been edited for spelling / grammar / punctuation.

# Conclusion

This research captured the views of foster carers and friend and family carers in Plymouth, about how services should be developed to better meet their needs. Our findings indicate key areas in which foster carers feel they need to see development. Extensive research has been conducted elsewhere into these areas, yet it appears recommendations from those pieces of research have not been addressed for foster carers in Plymouth. This includes significant pieces of research and literature reviews such as those conducted by Sinclair (2005), Farmer, Moyers and Lipscombe (2004) and recommendations from BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering) and The Fostering Network.

Key areas raised by the findings -

## Support

The range of responses given to these questions indicates clear inconsistencies in the provision of support for foster carers. When asked about the support available to act as an advocate on their foster child's behalf, 32% felt well supported compared to 24% feeling unsupported and 20% indicating that support varies, possible reasons for this are further illustrated in the comments made by the foster carers.

One foster carer said:

'This often comes down to individuals rather than whole agencies. Some individuals from each of the agencies are very supportive and some are not. Sometimes the rhetoric sounds great until I actually try to act as an advocate for a child, and I feel as though I have over stepped some invisible line'.

When asked about the support they receive from other agencies, inconsistencies in the provision were again apparent with only just over a third (37%) of foster carers receiving effective support. Without adequate support from all agencies involved, the already challenging role of foster carers is being made increasingly difficult.

This report highlights the need for greater quality support for foster carers in Plymouth. They stress the importance of not only listening to them but also believing them and acting on what they say. Advocating for a child is to ensure the child has a voice, and offering support to foster carers would allow them to put the child's views across effectively in order to be acted upon. Further research in Plymouth is needed to see how support networks could be developed to meet the needs of the foster carers and their families.

## Training

Foster Carers indicated a clear need for more training in many different areas of their role. Some of this has already been addressed by the implementation of a new training programme although anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the courses being offered are heavily over subscribed and therefore many Foster Carers are still not accessing the training they want and need.

Foster carers commented that when courses are arranged certain factors need to be taken into account, i.e. childcare, the time of day, whether they get paid to attend and whether it is pitched at the right level to ensure they are learning new things and not repeating things they have done before.

Training for newly recruited foster carers should remain an essential requirement, as research highlights the significance of training for both determining placement outcomes (Berridge & Cleaver, 1987, as cited in Farmer and Moyers, 2004) and to assist foster carers in being more prepared for the growing number of complex needs arising in looked after children (Children Now, 2006).

### Feeling part of a team

As with the majority of questions asked in this research, the responses show an inconsistent approach from the services involved with foster carers. In this case only 41% of respondents felt that they were part of a multi-agency team with Education, Health and Social Care Staff. Their wish to feel part of a professional team has been voiced as a suggestion for improvement from BAAF made by Andrea Warman (as cited in communitycare.co.uk, 2006), they need to be treated as part of the team as they have 'good insight into the children's needs'.

Engaging the foster carer in multi-agency team meetings and treating them as another professional with equal knowledge and expertise may go some way in the foster carers feeling part of a team.

### Family life

It is clear from the responses, that being a foster carer has a significant impact on family life, particularly on their own children. As noted in this research, their own children may have to deal with a number of issues including disclosures, stealing of property and sharing attention. Plus many offer support to the foster carer and assist with the care of the foster child.

One foster carer said:

'Most importantly the responsibility your own children take on from foster child maybe will tell them something, they then have to pass information on to an adult, they feel unsafe, stressed & insecure which one do they betray. Not enough support & training is given for own children'.

The time and commitment needed to be an effective foster carer can also have an impact on family life with foster carers saying; they don't have enough time with their own family, problems with respite make it difficult to visit grown up families who may not live in Plymouth, their children / grandchildren don't get on with the foster children, their own family frequently become involved in caring for the foster children.

All of these issues affect the whole family in many different ways and their support and training needs have to be addressed.

A support group for the children of foster carers could be set up by the foster care service to offer the chance for the children to get together with others in the same situation. This could also be used as an opportunity to offer training, advice and information to support those children.

### Legislation

Foster carers felt the legislation was adequate to support the way they care for foster children. However this does suggest there may be room for development. On further examination of the comments made around these questions, it is clear that many foster carers feel that current legislative frameworks do not sufficiently recognise their experience or expertise in caring for these children. Legislation is in place to protect both the foster carer and the child in their care and currently foster carers don't feel they have a great trust in the legislation. Some noted they felt trapped by the legislation and were not able to fulfil their role whilst others felt that it did not take into account the individual differences in a foster care situation.

A large majority of Foster carers (73%) were satisfied with the Safe Carer Guidelines being sufficient to allow them to care for the children they look after whilst also protecting themselves from false allegations. However, given the essential and extensive nature of these Guidelines, covering everything from second homes to race and religion, it is a significant concern that a quarter of respondents did not find them to be adequate.

It would be beneficial to involve foster carers in the policy making / legislation and use their experience and expertise to make informed decisions about what is the best way to create quality, useful and essential policies. Other suggestions made by the foster carers were to appoint a legislation coordinator and link with foster carers, health, education and social services to create the policies.

### Provision for care leavers

Foster carers felt there were a large number of services that could be available for care leavers to support their move into independent living and more support was needed for them to make this transition. They felt it would benefit the care leaver for themselves as foster carers to be involved in the planning stage. Foster carers also felt the care leaver plan would be better if it started earlier. They also noted that in some circumstances the foster carers may have significant insight into the child's needs and can have valuable input into the care leaver's plan.

Research suggests that care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group (Sinclair et al, 2004, as cited in Sinclair, 2005). This indicates that they may benefit from a structured, tailored approach in planning to leave the care system and involve the foster carer in the development of this plan.

### Communication

The most significant concerns raised by this report were around the two way communication and information exchange between foster carers and the agencies involved with them. No service has achieved consistently effective communication, but it is particularly worrying that Social Services, who oversee the foster care service, had the poorest response with only 26% of respondents finding communication to be effective. Education received the most positive response, but even so, it was seen to have only had effective communication with 52% of foster carers.

It should also be noted that when asked how the services could be improved, better communication was the most frequent suggestion. Foster carers indicated a clear need to be listened to and for agencies to respond and act on their requests.

One foster carer said:

*'Faster reaction to foster carers. A slow response implies a lack of interest'.*

Given that foster carers feel that they are not listened to, this may be a reason for the high number of item non-response when asked for suggestions in service development, they may feel that their suggestions won't be listened to anyway.

Existing good practice identified should be shared more widely. This in turn will create a more consistent approach in communication and information exchange from support services and enables the foster carers to feel they are listened to and part of a team.

### Feeling Valued

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the results of the questions above, almost half of the respondents did not feel valued by the foster care services.

Feeling valued relates directly to the service and recognition that foster Carers receive from the agencies they come into contact with. A slightly higher number of respondents felt valued by other agencies (42%) compared to Foster Services (39%). It would be expected that if all the agencies involved with foster carers addressed the issues raised in this report around Communication, Support and Training these results could be dramatically improved. It is important that existing good practice is built upon to improve their feelings of being valued. Further investigation to draw out the specific factors that influence whether they feel valued should allow all services to be improved.

### Emotional Stress / Impact

Foster Carers in Plymouth relayed in this report how foster caring has a significant emotional impact on their lives. They reveal how they love working with the children and find it a very rewarding and enjoyable task, albeit challenging and hard work. However they reflect on feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction regarding their dealings with the professional agencies, in particular Social care.

One foster carer said:

*'With the agency – frustration, sad, cynical, why can't they learn from previous mistakes, why do they spend money on such things as recruitment when more staff are needed in the team long term. With the children – Good, happy, proud, confident, endeavoring to support them in their lives, ongoing'.*

When asked to describe how it feels to be a foster carer in Plymouth, the words they most frequently used were: 'Frustration', 'Undervalued' and 'Unworthy'. These statements were generally in relation to their experiences with the foster care agency.

Further examples of this (which are detailed in full on page 18 of this report) include feelings of worthlessness, being used, belittled, ignored, and patronised. Given the current need to recruit more foster carers, it is of significant concern that those already within the service are feeling so undervalued.

Due to the challenging nature of the role, there is much scope for feelings of negativity to arise from foster caring and as such, it is of vital importance for them to have the necessary support networks to help deal with these emotions. The awareness of the emotional issues surrounding foster caring should be relayed to newly recruited foster carers to ensure they are prepared and that they know where they can gain support. However, this will have little benefit if that support is not forthcoming from the very agencies they seek to rely upon.

### Critical Reflections of the Research

A relatively small sample (just under 20%) replied to the questionnaire. However, research suggests that this is within the typical range of response for this kind of postal survey (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003). The stamped addressed envelopes were sent with the original letters to encourage a greater number to reply along with the chase-up letter a few weeks afterwards. There may be a bias in those people who decide to reply to the questionnaire (nonresponse bias), as these people may not be representative of the whole sample of people the survey is trying to reach (Gravetter & Forzano, 2003).

There was high number of item non - responses. Item non-response is when respondents don't complete a questionnaire item. This may indicate a question that was too difficult or they weren't familiar with what was being asked. A number of the questions were open questions which may have been too time-consuming to complete. One foster carer said, 'Loads to say but nearly Christmas and not too much time!! Sorry.' This may indicate that others feel the same about not having enough time but just resorted to not putting anything in response to the question. There is some debate as to whether allowing the respondent to remain anonymous affects their item non-response. As noted previously, item non-response in this report may have been due to foster carers feeling that their opinions and suggestions won't be listened to anyway, which is the general feeling throughout this report.

The qualitative method of analysis is researcher dependent, but the themes identified from the qualitative data (open questions) were cross – checked by another research assistant who was in agreement with the themes that were originally identified.

The survey also revealed that family and friend carers felt very differently from foster carers and did not feel that some of the questions were relevant to them. The fact that some were friends and family carers was only picked up through their answers and perhaps a separate question to distinguish this may be useful to note in future research.

(This report will be circulated to representatives on the Forum and posted on the Plymouth Parent Partnership Service website [www.plymouthparentpartnership.org.uk](http://www.plymouthparentpartnership.org.uk)).

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# Appendices

- Appendix A – Foster Carer Questionnaire
- Appendix B – Cover Letter
- Appendix C – Reminder Letter