



## Communications and Marketing Strategy for the Recruitment of Foster Carers

February 2015

### 1.0 Introduction

Currently there are around 900 children looked after within Northamptonshire. The numbers have risen each year for the last four years, increasing by over 60% from the 2008 figure of 555.

If the number of looked after children continues to increase at its current rate it is expected to reach the 1,000 mark by 2016.

This increase in the number of looked after children means that the demand for foster carers has never been higher.

In order to meet this demand the council needs to recruit and retain an increased number of foster carers. However, the number of enquiries from people interested in becoming foster carers has significantly changed over the past two years with enquiries at an all time low.

This is a pattern reflected across the country and all indicators point towards a national problem. Our work with other local authorities within the East Midlands region reflects this, with all of the nearby councils reporting similar issues in the recruitment of new foster carers.

This strategy outlines our approach to tackling this challenge including:

- An analysis of the looked after population, identifying key areas of demand
- Research into the motivations of foster carers to enable a targeted recruitment approach
- Key communications messages that will appeal to the motivations of the target group
- The communications mix of recommended channels to reach our target market
- And the approach to evaluating the success of communications/recruitment activities

This strategy has been put together based on the knowledge available at the time. The following pieces of research have been used to inform this strategy and are quoted throughout:

- Northamptonshire County Council, Business Intelligence Reporting Team; A Case Study of the Care System for Children in Northamptonshire, October 2014
- Northamptonshire County Council, Sufficiency Duty 2013-2016; Placement Commissioning Strategy for Looked After Children, Young People and those on the 'Edge of Care' and Custody, Updated January 2014
- The Campaign Company, Workshop Follow up, Key Insights, recommendations and action planning

## **2.0 Analysis of looked after population**

A Case Study of the Care System for Children in Northamptonshire highlights that there are currently around 900 children looked after within Northamptonshire. The numbers have risen each year for the last four years, increasing by over 60% from the 2008 figure of 555.

If the number of looked after children continues to increase at its current rate it is expected to reach the 1,000 mark by 2016.

In the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 almost 8 out of 10 children looked after were under the age of 5 or over 11.

The analysis of the looked after children population can be broken down into the following groups:

### **2.1 Early year age young entrants (aged 5 and under)**

The majority of this group were placed with in house foster carers (55%). An increase in the adoption of Under 5s would have a detectable impact on the numbers in care, preventing some children from spending a large proportion of their childhood in the care system.

Overall 42% of children who were in care at the end of the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, entered before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. Securing stable and permanent options for under 5s who enter care would have a considerable impact on our looked after children population now and in the future.

### **2.2 Primary school age young entrants (aged 6 to 10)**

These children are most likely to be placed with in house foster carers (40%) although the Case Study of the Care System identifies that a noticeably high proportion were also placed with agency foster carers (36%).

According to the statistics, these children are likely to be beyond the age to be considered for adoption.

Interestingly, the goal for a fifth of this group was long term foster placement until independence, meaning the plan for these children was to spend over ten years in care.

### **2.3 Adolescent entrants (those first looked after aged 11 and over)**

The Case Study identifies that these children had the least family difficulties and the most individual (or behavioural) difficulties. This group were least likely to be placed with in house foster carers (14%).

Adolescent entrants are more likely to move placements which may be due to the fact that they are likely to present with challenging behaviour.

The goal for the majority of care plans was long term foster or residential placements (49%).

### **2.4 Adolescent graduates (those who first looked after when aged less than 11 but now 11 and over)**

The majority of this group were placed with agency foster carers (50%).

The Case Study notes that the considerable use of agency placements would suggest there are insufficient numbers of in house foster carers. This is particularly true for children aged 11 and over who are much more likely to be placed in agency placements.

For those children who entered at a younger age who are now aged 11 and over, perhaps there is a case for thinking what alternative permanent options there are inside and outside the care system. Although these children's placements are more stable than those entering aged 11 and above, the opportunities to leave the care system are limited.

The goal for three quarters of these children was to remain in foster or residential placements, suggesting very few will leave care before they turn 18.

### **2.5**

In addition to the information above the Case Study of the Care System for Children in Northamptonshire also highlights that:

- Of the children that became looked after in the year ending March 31<sup>st</sup> 2014: 40% were aged 0-5 and 39% were aged 11 and over
- The foster placements for those currently aged under 11 were more likely to be in house, whilst those who were over the age of 11 were more likely to be agency.

### **2.6 District variations** were also revealed:

- During the course of the year analysed, Wellingborough witnessed the largest rise in the numbers of looked after children, increasing by 55% compared to the 2013 figure. East Northamptonshire (38%) and Northampton (21%) also saw comparatively large rises. Kettering and Daventry saw a decrease in rate of -27% and -4% respectively.
- 49% of entrants into care resided in Northampton before they entered. Approximately 30% of the counties population aged 18 and under resides in Northampton, suggesting there is a disproportionate amount of children residing in Northampton prior to them becoming looked after.
- The number of 16+ year olds residing in Northampton (60%) before they were looked after was significantly higher than other areas of the county.

## **2.7 Gender and ethnicity:**

- Overall males outnumbered females (56% to 44% respectively), which is similar to the national picture. In terms of the gender breakdown based on the age of the child when they entered care, it is interesting to note that males were overrepresented in the 11 to 15 age range (61%:39%).
- Children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds made up 16% of the looked after children population, which is in line with the previous year. The most common ethnicity after white was mixed race children.
- 18% of those entering had an ethnicity other than white and of these 63% resided in Northampton before they entered.
- Over 50% of looked after children with an ethnicity other than white resided in Northampton before they were taken into care.

## **2.8 Independent Fostering Agencies:**

- Alongside the increasing number of looked after children in the county, this shift from in house to agency placements has placed considerable pressures on the children's social care budget. (40% in-house, 31% agency for 2013/14).
- Agency foster placements had the highest average placement length and this was largely due to the high number of adolescent graduates who were in these placements.

## **2.9**

In order to meet the increased demand for foster carers and to have the greatest positive impact on the looked after population, our communications activity should include:

- **Targeting foster carers specifically for children aged 11+.** As the research identified there is a large demand for foster carers for this age group and at present the majority are placed with Agency foster carers. This group are also likely to have the goal of long term fostering.

- **Attracting foster carers from Independent Foster Agencies to becoming county council carers.** The children in the 11+ age group are the most likely to be placed with agencies. They also have a higher number of children moving placements possibly due to them presenting more behavioural difficulties than other age groups.

Our market research shows that our current carers chose to work for Northamptonshire County Council due to the increased amount of support on offer. This increased support may mean that carers are better equipped to manage the challenging behaviour presented from this age group, and result in increased stability and less placement moves.

- **Geographically targeted activity.** Although there is demand for foster carers across the county consideration during campaign planning should be given to the specific demands in Northampton.

### 3.0 Targeting potential foster carers

In order to support local authorities in recruiting sufficient foster carers, the Fostering Network together with the Department for Education, commissioned research into the intrinsic motivations of foster carers, essentially looking at why foster carers care. Their findings can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-and-fostering-understanding-motivations-and-barriers>

Further local research in conjunction with the Campaign Company reinforces the findings within our county and has enabled us to identify that the vast majority (83%) of our foster carers fit within the Pioneers group of the Values Modes sets. A further 14% fit within the Prospector set.

This insight enables us to build a profile of our current and future foster carers and highly target our campaigns in a way that directly appeals to their intrinsic motivations.

#### 3.1 Targeting Pioneers:

As Pioneers are much more likely to become foster carers it makes sense to target the activity to this group. The recommendation from the market research organisation was that:

“The target audience should be people who have a pioneer values set and ideally have experiences of working with children or teenagers, and/or have their own personal circumstances such as exposure to foster caring in their own upbringing.”

The in-depth market research has given us a great insight into our pioneer target market. Pioneers who may be interested in becoming foster carers are people who:

- Are motivated by an intrinsic desire to ‘do the right thing’ and to contribute to improving society.

- Are often the first to respond to a call to action in the local community on the basis of moral imperative – something that must happen because it is the right thing.
- Are likely to be concerned with, and active, in the local community
- Are between 18 and 50 years old
- May have worked in residential units, as youth workers, or other caring professions.
- Are open minded, calm in the face of challenge, reflective and level headed.
- Are experienced. Those who foster aged 11+ need the capability, capacity and experience of looking after young people. Those who work with children and teenagers, or people who have their own children will be better prepared for the challenges that they will face in fostering.

This group are:

- Likely to be motivated by the outcomes they can deliver rather than being motivated primarily by financial gain. This makes things like the support available a primary consideration when choosing between being a foster carer for a local authority or independent fostering agency.
- Motivated by social concepts such as social justice, challenge and reward, pedagogy and applying vocational skills.

The research also showed that men are slightly more likely than women to be considering foster caring now or in the future.

### **3.2 Targeting Prospectors:**

14% of our current foster carers are Prospectors. Although this is lower than the percentage of Pioneers it is an area that we should aim to expand by appealing directly to their motivations. In terms of what motivates them, this group are very different to that of the Pioneer.

Prospectors who may be interested in becoming foster carers:

- Are motivated by wanting to 'be the best' at what they are doing
- Are focused on economic maximisation
- Are not interested in causes
- Look for opportunities for advancement and take great pleasure in recognition and reward
- Like the ideas of status, hierarchy, and competitiveness
- Are at the centre of things locally

- Are motivated by monetary gain and maximising their own standing and importance

The market research into foster carers' motivations, together with the analysis of the looked after population, will enable us to follow an evidence-led, motivations based approach to recruiting foster carers.

#### 4.0 Key communications messages

The key messages of all communications should be phrased in ways designed to appeal to the Pioneer and/or Prospector target market.

Key messages that will resonate with the **Pioneer target market** and drive them to action are:

- The identifiable rewards in looking after foster children, particularly helping individuals to grow and overcome barriers
- The challenge, hard work, and ordinariness of the people who are foster carers
- A narrative that reassures them that the pathway of becoming a carer, and the rewards meet the initial motivation
- The breakdown of family relationships, destabilising the environment for the child, will resonate strongly with Pioneers and therefore encourage them to act.
- The experience, greater support, and benefits of the local authority over independent fostering agencies
- The first hand experiences of foster carers

The key messages that will resonate with the **Prospector target market** are:

- The financial rewards both immediately, and the opportunity to increase monetary gain with experience
- The idea of fostering caring as a career
- The first hand experiences of foster carers who are doing this as a career
- Prospectors may be enticed by the increased salaries of the independent fostering agencies, therefore a key message is the fact that we place with our own carers first, resulting in more weeks with a placement, and therefore more consistent income
- How to transfer from an IFA to working directly with the local authority

In line with attracting these key markets we are currently refreshing the look and feel of the marketing materials used. The previous 'star' materials did not resonate with foster carers as they felt that they were ordinary people rather than being extraordinary stars.

In line with this focus group feedback the new designs are:

- Evidenced based
- Include pictures of young people aged 11+ and include some BME households
- Focus on every day activities, showing they are normal people living normal lives
- Worded in line with the foster carers motivations

These designs are currently being reviewed by a group of existing foster carers to ensure that they convey the desired messages. Initial feedback gained from the NFCA highlighted that these appeal much more to them as foster carers than the star campaign did.

## 5.0 Marketing approach

In order to deliver these key messages to the target audience we recommend a mix of highly targeted activity and wide reaching activity.

### 5.1 Highly targeted activity: Utilise existing foster carers

Word of mouth is a key tool, as the target groups like direct two way communication. Therefore we wish to use our existing foster carers, who are at present a largely untapped resource. We want to encourage our existing foster carers to become active advocates.

This activity will also have a knock on effect with the retention of foster carers as the Values Modes research showed that they want to have input into the wider service discussions, and that they want to feel valued. 40% of our existing foster carers also think there is a clear role for them in the recruitment of new carers.

We will utilise current carers through:

- **Focus groups** – we will engage with existing foster carers on all marketing campaigns going forward. We will actively seek their opinion on any artwork or materials produced to ensure that they resonate with the target market
- **Case studies** – We will develop as many case studies as possible for use across the website, social media, and local media. The evidence shows that the pioneer group respond to hearing people's personal experiences. The Prospector group will respond to hearing from foster carers that treat fostering as a career.

- **Fostering events** – Direct two way communication is preferred over and above all other methods by the target group. This means that the foster open events and road shows are crucial.
    - The events need to be scheduled on a variety of days/times to enable the potential carers to find a time to suit them – Prospectors in particular will want an event to fit around their existing career commitments.
    - We will promote the fact that these are an opportunity to engage with current foster carers, to hear their first hand experiences.
  - **Re-launch the recommend a friend scheme** – Our existing foster carers are ideally placed to recommend potential foster carers. The research shows that our existing foster carers came into the role through either their own first hand experience, or by hearing other carers talk about the role. They know what skills are required and are likely to generate high quality enquiries.
  - **Re-launch the e-newsletter** that used to go out to existing foster carers. Ensure it is pioneer focused and includes content on recruitment activities etc. Consider whether this could be used as something that should also be sent to those who have shown an interest in fostering, although have not yet committed.
  - **Increase collaborative working with NFCA.** The Northamptonshire Foster Carers Association act as a support group and voice of local council foster carers. The NFCA are keen to be more involved with recruitment and retention activities so a collaborative approach would be beneficial to us all.
- **Develop a contact programme.** Based on the fact that many of our pioneer and prospector target audiences may have worked with children in caring professions in the past we will develop a contact programme that drives at their capacity to perform the role of fostering.

We will do this by:

- **Targeting key workplaces**, mapping those deemed most appropriate such as residential units, nurseries, schools, hospitals, and children’s centres. We will develop a workplace road show, involving the stories of existing carers. This will resonate with Pioneers and also be an opportunity to involve existing carers.
- **Ensure the database of contacts is utilised effectively.** By capturing details of people who may be interested in fostering in the future (and asking them whether they can be contacted by us in the future), we will be able to continue communicating with them, ensuring that when the time is right for them to foster, they think of the county council over and above the independent fostering agencies.
- **Targeting messaging near the identified workplaces.** Although pioneers prefer two way communications, the traditional media such as outdoor advertising still have their place in reinforcing messages and triggering the desire

for a conversation. This could be a county-wide activity or just targeted to Northampton workplaces.

- **Mapping social media sites.** As the target market is likely to be active in the local community we will map social media sites for local schools, hospitals, community groups etc. Social media forums will appeal to Pioneers as it presents the opportunity for the two way dialogue they prefer. We will actively promote fostering to the target market utilising these sites and pages in a way that reinforces the fact that they have the skills and experience we are looking for.

## **5.2 Highly targeted activity: Increasing opportunities for two way engagement**

Building on the desire for face to face communication we will maximise the ways in which potential foster carers can engage with us in a two way dialogue.

We will do this by:

- **Engaging with our library workers** to enable them to talk knowledgeably on Fostering. This reinforces the fact that the libraries are the 'front door' to council customers and gives potential foster carers a friendly way to ask a few questions before taking the next step. Libraries are often seen as hubs for the local communities, which will also be appealing to the Pioneers and Prospectors desire to get involved in their local community.
- **Greater utilisation of the pop-up office.** The fostering service has run pop-up office events in the past, which allow them to have a visible presence in the high street. The pop-up office could tour the local libraries, providing any potential foster carers a more detailed discussion and also reinforcing the key messages to the libraries staff. The libraries service host over 72 events a week and have over 600 new people joining the library each week, giving us access to a wide range of local people.
- **Capitalising on the councils new web chat facility.** To add a 2 way element to our online presence we will investigate the possibility of incorporating the council's new Live Web Chat capability to the Fostering and Adoption web pages. This will enable potential carers to web chat with Customer Service Centre operatives who can be trained to answer enquiries on fostering. This will appeal to the Pioneers preference for 2 way conversation over reading information.

We will also utilise the Customer Service Centre facility to cross market services on their automated call system, thereby providing fostering messages to a large number of people at no additional cost to the council.

## **5.3 Highly targeted activity: Fostering as a career**

The Prospector group are likely to consider fostering as a career, rather than something they do for the greater good, so we will tailor some specific activity to this group:

- **Recruitment advertising.** The fostering service should utilise the council's e-recruitment system [www.publicsectorjobseast.co.uk](http://www.publicsectorjobseast.co.uk). By placing a recruitment advert for foster carers as a job vacancy on there, we will be targeting the Prospector audience directly. This is no cost and will also mean the vacancy is also advertised on JobsGoPublic and at all of the local jobcentres.
- **A supermarket road show.** We will take the fostering stand around to the large supermarkets across the county. We will actively engage with supermarket customers but will also hand leaflets to staff stacking shelves or working on the tills to promote fostering as an alternative career and encourage them to come and visit the stand during their lunch breaks.
- **Local job fairs.** Across the county the local media and/or other organisations often run job fairs. The fostering stand should be taken to these events along with literature to promote fostering as a career. The representatives on the stand should ensure that their key messages are around the career opportunities and monetary benefits rather than the bigger cause related messages.

#### 5.4 Wide Reaching Activity

In addition to the highly targeted aspects to the recruitment campaign we will also undertake some wide reaching marketing activities designed to reach a large number of people regardless of their Values Modes profile.

We will ensure the language used taps into the motivations of Pioneers (as they are by far the most likely to foster) but we will deliver this across channels designed to reach as many people in the county as possible.

We will do this through:

- **Placing adverts in community magazines.** Magazines focussing on local communities tend to be well read if they contain well written, locally focussed editorial. This will provide good coverage across the county but will also tap into the community mindedness of the Pioneers.
- **Online advertising.** The council has a growing online presence across social media. We will enhance the reach of these social media channels by undertaking some paid for online advertising. We will utilise a variety of options, advertising generally to Northamptonshire residents, but also doing some targeted online advertising to reach the local people who have experience of working with children.
- **Poster campaign.** We will develop a poster campaign to be run in Doctors Surgeries, Children's centres, Libraries, and Hospitals. These have been identified as places where we are likely to attract people who currently work with children and young people.

We will also ensure that enough posters are produced so that following the road shows held at key workplaces they can be displayed to act as a reminder of the key message and call to action.

- **Radio advertising.** Although expensive, radio advertising is very effective at reaching large numbers of people across the county. The majority of independent foster agencies advertise on local radio to attract foster carers. At key campaign points throughout the year we will utilise radio to differentiate ourselves from the IFAs and communicate our experience and the support we provide.
- **Regional advertising campaigns.** Working with the local authorities within the East Midlands region, we are currently running a joint television advertising and radio campaign. This consists of advertisements on day time television and also television on demand, as well as local radio.

If the evaluation of this campaign proves it to be successful we would recommend further joint working on high impact campaigns. This will get our message across to a huge number of potential foster carers, utilising mediums that would usually be too costly on our own.

- **Bus advertising in Northampton.** There are currently buses running in Northampton with large advertisements for NCC fostering. The contract for these is about to come to an end so the adverts will be removed. This is an expensive communications channel but it does have high impact and is visible throughout a whole year. This channel could be used specifically to target potential carers in the Northampton region.
- **Media opportunities.** We will proactively engage with the local media to generate coverage across local news channels.

## 6.0 Campaign cost and timings

The majority of these activities will incur a cost. The actual cost of each campaign will be calculated as media bookings are made.

We propose running a mixture of high impact campaigns and smaller low cost campaigns throughout the year. High impact campaigns utilise more of the wide reaching marketing tactics which incur a greater expense. The smaller campaigns concentrate more on generating media coverage and social media activity which are comparatively low cost.

We would recommend a total of six campaigns, three high impact, and three lower cost campaigns. A campaign would therefore run every other month. This would be supplemented with ongoing activity such as events, newsletter, contact programme and social media.

Key dates throughout the year will be incorporated into our campaign planning including:

- Mothers Day – March
- Foster Care Fortnight – June

- Fathers Day - June
- Sons and Daughters Month – October
- National Adoption Week (promoting both adoption and long term fostering) - November
- Christmas – December

## **7.0 Evaluation**

In order to measure the effectiveness of all marketing and communications activities we will evaluate their success in the following ways:

- The number of enquiries received in the campaign period and in the immediate period following a campaign.
- We will also compare the number of enquiries to those from the previous year if possible to benchmark against and to determine any seasonal trends etc.
- As the website and online enquiry form are the main call to action in all communications activity, we will monitor the number of web hits to assess whether campaign activity is having a positive impact.
- When people first enquire they are asked some basic marketing information. If this data can be made available this can be used to help inform the success of campaigns.