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Foster Carer Recruitment

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PhD in Education
The University of Edinburgh
2021
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

They say it takes a village to raise a child and the same can be said of a doctoral thesis. It has taken a village of amazing people supporting me in every way throughout my PhD to get me to the finish line. I cannot fit them all in this acknowledgement, but I hope they are aware of my gratitude for their support, whether big or small.

First of all, I would like to thank my parents who remained supportive as I worked through applications and struggled to get funding. Mom and dad, you did not blink when I asked if you would fund my studies, and as always, you have been encouraging and supportive, celebrating every small milestone with me over the last few years.

Secondly, I must acknowledge Leon, my life partner, who was patient as the PhD took precedence over wedding planning in the first year. Leon, you did not know what you were signing up for, marrying a PhD student. But you’ve shown up for me in every way, reading my work, listening to my struggles, and encouraging me to rest when I needed it. You have filled my life with laughter and joy, helping me to maintain balance on this tough journey.

Where would I be without my supervisors, Debi and Autumn? What can I say except thank you? Thank you for sticking with me and believing in my work, especially in the first year when I struggled to find direction. You’ve dealt with having to prepare for my progression board a few weeks before my wedding and then a thesis submission a few weeks before my baby was due. I’m not sure this is what you signed up for, but you’ve both been incredibly supportive throughout the journey. You have challenged me every step of the way to produce the very best of me and have elevated my thinking and my work. You have helped me find my academic voice and given me confidence in the quality of my work. I am also incredibly grateful for every research participant that took time, during the height of a global pandemic, to be part of this incredible work.

Finally, I must acknowledge God who has been like my third supervisor, guiding me throughout the process. I would not have embarked on this journey if God had not placed such a passion in my heart for the vulnerable. This journey has required more of me than I thought I was capable of. However, with every setback and challenge, I have felt God give me wisdom, courage, flexibility, boldness and discipline to keep pushing forward.

There are many others in my “village” including the staff and PhD community at Moray House. From family to new and old friends, those who are near and those who are far, I have had incredible support throughout this journey, and I am grateful for it.
ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the pursuit of a better experience of permanence and stability for children in foster care. In this case, permanence and stability is not about legal permanence but about relational and geographical permanence. It is about reducing the instance of unnecessary placement changes in foster care. Research has shown that instability in placements is linked with numerous negative outcomes for children as it compounds any emotional, behavioural, and educational difficulties they may already have because of their history. Instability also impacts their future placements. Research has also shown that foster carers are a key factor in children’s experience of permanence and stability. Having a diverse pool of carers who have the right characteristics and skills for successful placements is integral to successful matching which in turn has an impact on children’s experience of permanence and stability within placements. Foster carers are one of the most important resources in the care system, accounting for over 70% of placements for looked after children in England. Despite this, there is a very sparse evidence base on how this important resource is acquired.

This study reports on exploratory research conducted to discover how foster carer recruitment is undertaken in England. The methods used included an online survey of recruiters in England (n=51), content analysis of fostering ads run on Facebook (n=62), a case study with a fostering agency and another case study with a campaigning agency. The case studies involved interviews with 2 recruiters and one agency founder as well as interviews with 3 recently approved foster carers. These methods hold unique strengths that also complement each other’s weaknesses. The survey of the entire population presents vast data while the case studies provide rich detail. On the other hand, content analysis of the ads eliminates response bias by analysing recruitment material. The resulting data provides multiple layers of perspectives to the research findings.

Although there is a scarcity of research on fostering recruitment, this study draws from research in multiple disciplines to fill in the gaps in literature, resulting in an ‘inter-disciplinary banquet’. This includes significant research in social marketing on effective techniques for fostering recruitment. It also draws on known information on the experience of fostering, motivations and barriers to fostering, current placement needs, and the traits of successful foster carers. This knowledge drives the discussions on current recruitment practices and how effective they are in recruiting the right carers.
In addition to discussions on the efficacy of current practice, the study takes on a descriptive element, describing the landscape and process of fostering recruitment as revealed in the data. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, this study describes the various levels of influence in a potential carer’s world and how recruitment influences each of these levels. The author’s own three-phase model is used to describe the very intricate process of fostering recruitment from introduction to exploration and finally, training and assessment. Each of these phases holds unique characteristics and involves different forms of output and approaches from recruiters. The two novel models are an innovative contribution to the field, opening it up to new ways of conceptualising foster carer recruitment.

This study challenges current recruitment practice, arguing that recruitment should include the very same factors that make a fostering placement successful; being supportive, relational, and being aware of the individual needs and traits of carer. A common thread throughout the thesis is the need to recruit ‘the right carers. The criteria for who is ‘right’ is based on the types of placements the agency needs which includes the need for increased diversity for cultural matching as well as the need for carers who can take in children with special needs or sibling groups.

Fulfilling one of the functions of exploratory research, this study provides a foundation upon which further research can build upon. As mentioned earlier, there was a strong multi-disciplinary nature to the research and perhaps that is more representative of practice in the ‘real world’. Future research and practice would benefit in drawing from various fields such as marketing, public health and even customer relations. Foster carer recruitment may seem to be an unlikely solution to instability in care, but this study invites practitioners to consider its potential to improve children’s experience of permanence and stability in foster care.
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PhD in Education, The University of Edinburgh, 2021
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
My PhD journey began in 2017 as I handed in my resignation letter. I had spent two years setting up and running the first ever fostering programme in Kenya. It had been an arduous task because the institutionalisation of children in children’s homes or orphanages was and is the prominent means of care for vulnerable children in the country. Although new policy had just been set to shift the country toward more family and community-based methods, it had barely been disseminated, let alone implemented. It was therefore understandable (but regrettable) when my organisation decided to end the uphill task of setting up a fostering programme, choosing to return to what they and the country knew best (children’s homes). Based on international and regional trends, I knew that this was not the right move as the country truly was shifting towards family-based forms of care such as foster care, albeit very slowly. Furthermore, the programme I ran had successfully proved that foster care could work, having placed 20 children with families within those two years. However, the uphill task of awareness building, community mobilisation and foster carer recruitment proved to be a bigger commitment than the organisation was ready to undertake. With the end of the programme came the end of my fieldwork, freeing me to return to academia. The two years running the fostering programme had placed in me a passion for foster care and a curiosity about how countries with a much longer history of foster care were practicing it. Naturally, I was drawn to return to the UK where I had undertaken my masters’ studies. As an outsider, my understanding of foster care in the UK was heavily influenced by media and sensationalised headlines which created a picture of a system where children bounced around from home to home, never finding a sense of stability or permanence. I therefore determined that my contribution to the field would be to conduct research aimed at improving permanence for children in foster care in the UK. This thesis is the academic record of that journey.

THESIS OVERVIEW
As stated above, this thesis provides an academic record of the scientific journey in search of new insight that could help improve permanence for children in foster care. Holliday (2007) describes the writing up of qualitative research as an unfolding story where the argument develops through the whole process from literature review to data analysis and discussion. This has influenced the chosen structure of my thesis as it more accurately depicts the PhD journey. In addition to this, the thesis reflects my thinking style which is often inductive. As a result, my writing style is inductive too, inviting you to come along the journey of discovery with me.

The next two chapters in the thesis will present the literature review. The first of these will focus on foster carers. It will give a brief introduction to foster care before exploring permanence in foster care. By examining the factors affecting permanence in foster care, it
will identify the integral contribution foster carers make to children’s experience of stability and permanence in foster care. This will provide the basis for the systematic review that was conducted as part of the literature review. The systematic review, which covers recent research focused on foster carers in England, will offer insight into the experience of fostering and will also identify a gap in research on the recruitment of foster carers. The key themes on fostering identified through the systematic review will later recur in the findings chapters as integral aspects of foster carer recruitment.

The second literature review chapter will attempt to fill the knowledge gap identified in the systematic review by expanding the search to other countries and other fields such as marketing. It will begin by highlighting the need to recruit more foster carers. It will then discuss the various factors affecting recruitment. The third section of the chapter will present recent research on foster carer recruitment. Finally, the chapter will propose the use of an ecological approach to understanding foster carer recruitment. This will be done by introducing ecological models and the various ways they have been used in multiple fields to describe ecosystems and the key relationships within the systems. The chapter will conclude by presenting a draft of the ecological model that was adapted for the field of foster carer recruitment.

The fourth chapter in this thesis is the methodology chapter. Having discovered how under-researched recruitment of foster carers is, the research methodology will present the exploratory research methods employed to explore the field. This was heavily influenced by the ecological approach. The 3 research methods used in the research were aimed at producing data that is rich, vast and relevant to practitioners. This will be presented in this chapter, along with justification for the use of the three methods. The methodology chapter will also present the methods used to analyse the data produced. The chapter will conclude by providing a personal reflection on the process of data collection and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the process.

The findings resulting from the fieldwork will be presented in four chapters. Each of these chapters will describe the research findings and provide discussions that consider those findings within the context of current research and, where relevant, identify positive practices. The first of these will present the final version of the ecological model adapted for foster carer recruitment. This will provide an overview of the ecosystem within which recruitment occurs. The next three chapters on findings will be based on the author’s own model, created to describe and represent the intricate process of foster carer recruitment.

Finally, in the ninth chapter, the thesis will provide a summary of the findings, connecting them to the initial desire to find ways to improve permanence and stability for children in foster care. The chapter will then provide a discussion on implications for future research,
policy and practice. The thesis will conclude with a reflection on the research journey and how impact was built into the process through continuous engagement with practitioners throughout the journey.

CONCLUSION

This thesis celebrates the PhD journey as a quest for new knowledge. It is heavily influenced by my desire to produce research that is relevant to the field and can be used to influence practice. The thesis also reflects the curiosity with which I explored the field as an outsider to UK fostering practice. This is evident in the way I conducted the research, covering broad areas that gave an overview and helped identify gaps that I could then try and fill, stepping from the known into the unknown. Like Alice following a rabbit down a hole, I found myself in fields such as marketing and public health, discovering a wealth of knowledge that may have been ignored or overlooked by others within the UK social work context. What started off as a journey stemming from frustration and burnout doing frontline practice, became a rich experience that has allowed me to contribute new knowledge to a field I am passionate about, providing some answers and guidance to questions I found myself asking many years ago when running the fostering programme. The journey begins with the next chapter that begins by answering a question many people ask when I tell them what I’m studying. “What is foster care?”
CHAPTER TWO: FOSTER CARERS

This chapter is the first of two chapters presenting current literature that is relevant to my research project. The aim of this chapter is to identify a gap in current literature that could link to a better experience of permanence and stability for children in foster care. This chapter will start by introducing foster care and the concepts of permanence and stability within care. It will highlight how foster carers are a key factor in stability and permanence. This will provide context for the systematic literature review which will be presented in the second section of this chapter. The systematic review will identify foster carer recruitment as a gap within current research, which will be discussed in the second literature review chapter.

INTRODUCTION TO FOSTER CARE, PERMANENCE AND STABILITY

Foster care is one of several methods of providing care for children who are vulnerable and in need of care and protection. In foster care, children are placed with families who may receive compensation or assistance for looking after them. Fostering looks different in every country and its present-day iteration can be likened to traditional systems of care in many nations. In my country, Luo widows and orphans were “inherited” by the deceased’s relatives in order to provide them with protection and care (Sidang, 2019). Similar practices have been recorded in many other African nations including but not limited to South Sudan, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique (Sidang, 2019). Forms of foster care have also been present in some religions. Islamic tradition has the system of Kafaalah which is akin to foster care and is recognised by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (Assim & Sloth-Nielsen, 2014). Jewish and Christian traditions, as documented in the old and new testaments of the bible, also provided instruction on care for orphans by people in the community (The Holy Bible, NIV, 2011).

In the UK, the first recorded instance of formal foster care was in 1853. Reverend John Amistead removed a child from a workhouse in Cheshire and placed them with a family who were paid by the local council to care for the child (Fundacion Emmanuel, 2003; Guishard-Pine, 2007). Foster care continued to be practiced in various forms during the 1900s until it was first legally formalised in the Children’s Act in 1989 (Guishard-Pine, 2007). Today in the UK there are over 70,000 children in foster care which accounts for up to 70% of children within the care system. (Home For Good, 2020). Foster care is recognised in international policy as an appropriate form of alternative care for children who cannot be cared for by their families (United Nations, 2010). The UN defines foster care as “situations where children are placed by a competent authority for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic environment of a family other than the children’s own family that has been selected, qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care.” (United Nations, 2012 p.6).
How are Children Placed in Foster Care?

Children come into care for various reasons including abuse, neglect, child’s disability, parental illness or disability, acute distress in the family, family dysfunction, socially unacceptable behaviour, low parental income or absentee parenting (Department for Education, 2020b). Children also come into care at different ages and move in and out of the care system for varying periods of time and varying reasons. Any child who has been under the care of the local authority for more than 24hrs is considered to be ‘looked after’ (NSPCC, 2018). Sometimes when a child first enters into care they are put in an initial placement. These placements give the relevant authorities time to assess the child’s home situation and to create a care plan for the child. Every child entering care must have a care plan created. The care plan outlines the details of the child’s journey in care and is geared towards having intentional interventions for the child with the goal of permanence and positive outcomes for the child (The Scottish Government, 2010). Care options and interventions for a child include being placed in foster care, adoption, living in secure units, children’s homes, semi-independent accommodation or hostels, among others. In the UK there are over 98,000 children who are ‘looked after’ (NSPCC, 2018). Of these, over 70% are in foster care placements.

When children are placed in foster care, a range of foster care services are offered based on the children’s needs and their journey through care; these services include emergency foster care, short term foster care, respite care and long-term foster care (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Foster care was initially developed as a short-term solution that provided children with a family placement until they could find permanence either in adoption or reunification with biological parents (Schofield, 2000). Permanence is a goal of care (UK Parliament, 2013). Reunification with the biological family is one of the first avenues for permanence that is sought for children in foster care. However, it has a rate of about 55-58% in the UK (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). In Scotland, 54% of children who were looked after were reunited with their biological families in 2017 (National Statistics Scotland, 2018). Even at such low rates, reunification is not always permanent and some children re-enter into care. In the case of children for whom reunification is unsuitable, either because of failed attempts at return, death of biological parents or through assessment, long term solutions for care are sought (Fernandez & Barth, 2010).

The second avenue for permanence is adoption but only about 10% of looked after children who are over 10 years are adopted (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). The rate of adoption decreases with a child’s increase in age. In England, only 1% of looked after children who were over the age of 10 were adopted between April 2016 and March 2017 (Department for
Education, 2017). Furthermore, the presence of siblings, deep connections to the family, or the objection of the parents to adoption, may disqualify adoption as an option for many children (Sinclair, 2005b). It is then found that there are children for whom the care system needs to offer long term care such as kinship care and foster care. Adoption has been considered to be a better form of permanence in comparison with kinship care and foster care. A select committee reviewing legislation noted that this view needs to be adjusted because other forms of care also offer the child permanence. “Adoption is only one solution for providing children in care with the love, stability and support that they need. Long-term fostering, kinship care and special guardianship play a significant role in meeting the needs of many of the children who cannot be cared for by their birth parents” (UK Parliament, 2013). The committee echoed the growing recognition that long term foster care can offer permanence to children in care and in some cases, is the best care option.

What is Permanence in Foster Care?
As the previous section has discussed, permanence is a goal of the care system. The select committee on adoption in the UK recognised that having a sense of permanence was more important than the type of permanence (UK Parliament, 2013). This was in reference to the care solution but also hinted at the intricate nature of ‘permanence’. A study by Sanchez (2004) explored youth experiences of permanence in foster care. In her report based on interviews with young people in foster care, Sanchez found that permanence fell into three categories; relational permanence, physical permanence and legal permanence (Sanchez, 2004). Relational permanence has to do with relationships and bonds with peers, family, school friends, romantic relationships, etc. Physical permanence includes physical spaces, schools, homes, neighbourhoods, community spaces, etc. Legal permanence is based on achieving guardianship, adoption, reunification or other long-term placements (Sanchez, 2004). Legal permanence or the lack thereof can affect looked after children’s experience of physical and relational permanence. However, children and families can experience a ‘sense of permanence’ outside of legal permanence. The goal of this paper is to explore ways to improve the sense of permanence and stability that children in foster placements can experience within those placements. Disruptions in placements ruin children’s experience of permanence.

A disruption is a change in a child’s placement. The frequency of the occurrence of disruptions is referred to as instability. Disruptions in care happen for two primary reasons: authority-led moves or a breakdown in the carer-child relationship. The next section will discuss authority-led disruptions.

Authority-led disruptions
In his study on disruptions of foster care placements, James (2004) reported that 70% of
the disruptions were authority/policy related. Another study done in the UK revealed that 43% of disruptions were authority-led (Ward, 2009). Authority-led disruptions are moves that are planned or initiated by authorities. The reasons behind these moves include but are not limited to: moving the child to a better matched placement, reunification with biological family, pursuit of better cultural match, uniting siblings, and carer respite (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Ward, 2009). While it is evident that the motivations for these disruptions are good, there is ongoing debate that the disruptions may not always be in the best interests of the child. It is for this reason Stott & Gustavsson (2010) argue that legal permanence is often pursued at the cost of relational and physical permanence. They describe disruption as being the unintended consequence of some policies. Koh, Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, (2014) echo this, noting that children’s need for stability in care should be considered alongside their other needs such as the need for permanency, well matched foster placements, reunification with family and/or placement with siblings. There is a need for authorities to reduce the number of disruptions children experience in care even if they are planned and are seemingly well intentioned, especially if a child has settled well into a new placement. It is also reasonable to suggest that when placement decisions are made, authorities mitigate the need to disrupt the placement in the future. For example, placing siblings together in initial placements can reduce disruptions intended to reunite siblings. The same should be considered for disruptions for better cultural matches and physical locations. Matching, the process by which authorities determine where to place children, will be discussed further in the third chapter of this thesis.

**Breakdowns in the Carer-child Relationship**

The second type of disruption in a placement is caused by a breakdown in the carer-child relationship. There is no singular factor that causes a carer-child relationship to breakdown and for the placement to disrupt. Rather, several factors affect the stability of the relationship, causing it to thrive or putting a strain on it until it breaks down. A stable placement is one that is thriving and thus less likely to break down leading to a disruption in the placement. Some of the factors affecting the stability of fostering placements include: the characteristics of the child, the biological family’ characteristics, the child’s age, behavioural problems, history of abuse and mental health problems (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Font, 2015; Holtan, Handegård, Thørnblad, & Vis, 2013; Lockwood, Friedman, & Christian, 2015). In some cases, these factors can be precursors to a breakdown. A systematic review by Oosterman, Schuengel, Wim Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers (2007) found the following to be predictive factors of breakdowns: foster children being older, high involvement of biological families, biological parent’s history of drug and abuse, children’s history of neglect and abuse and presence of biological children of the foster family. Additionally, the first 6 months of placement were found to have the highest chance of
breakdown (Oosterman et al., 2007).

As the research shows, three key parties involved in a child’s placement can affect its stability: biological parents, children and foster carers. The agency plays an important role too, as was discussed in the previous section. This section will therefore focus on the three other parties. Research suggests that biological parents can affect the stability of a placement if there are negative contact experiences with the child (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Schofield, 2000; Sinclair, 2005b; Ward, 2009). However, their impact on a placement is often not sufficient to cause it to breakdown (O’Neill, Risley-Curtiss, Ayón, & Williams, 2012). Perhaps this is due to their limited interaction with the child and foster family.

Children come into care having experienced adversity, the effects of which can put a strain on their placements. Children’s behaviour is highly associated with breakdown of the carer-child relationship (O’Neill et al., 2012). Additionally, the age of a child is another child-related factor linked with breakdowns, with older children being linked to more breakdowns (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Oosterman et al., 2007). However, foster carers are provided with training and support to handle behavioural issues, thus potentially mitigating placement breakdowns due to this reason. Similarly, age related factors can be mitigated during the matching process to ensure that foster carers are capable of meeting the age-related needs of a child amongst others. The literature review revealed an unexpected aspect of breakdowns as some placement breakdowns are initiated by children. Some children work towards a breakdown through “bad behaviour” or running away as they feel this was the only way to get the social workers to hear them (Ward, 2009). In such cases, the breakdown was viewed positively by the children as it was their desired outcome.

The third key party in the carer-child relationship is the carer. The stability of a placement rises and falls with carers and how they navigate the extraordinarily complex issues of children’s behaviour, contact with biological parents, and the authority’s decisions. In a study conducted in Norway, foster carers were identified by children, social workers and biological parents as being one of the reasons why placements failed (O’Neill et al., 2012). Focusing on age, race, income, education and marital status, a study on foster carers and kinship carers found no significant relationship between these carer characteristics and stability. The study revealed that placement stability was affected by how foster carers undertook the fostering task. Specifically, participants in the study referenced situations where carers did not accept the children as they were or had unrealistic expectations of how the children should adapt to their families. Carers were called out for having poor attitudes towards foster children and lacking understanding on the duties of fostering a child. Some children in the study described feeling discriminated against and felt that they were excluded from the family. In other
situations, they felt pressured to be like the biological children in the family.

A study on foster carers in the US found a statistically significant relationship between parental support and stability, as well as limit setting and stability (Crum, 2010). Interestingly, it was parents who were not completely firm in their limit setting that were more likely to have stable placements. There was a need for authoritative parenting accompanied by flexibility. This flexibility allows the parents to adjust to the child’s needs as described by Schofield (2000). The study by Crum (2010) found a positive correlation between limit setting and breakdown. Carers who were rigid in their rule setting and did not involve the children or adjust to their needs were more likely to experience instability. These carers were more likely to be perceived as demanding, controlling, and less democratic in their parenting. Crum suggests that because children who have been abused are more likely to have maladaptive behaviours, a rigid authoritarian parenting style may exacerbate the behavioural issues leading to breakdowns. They found no statistical significance in the relationship between parenting alliance, communication and parenting satisfaction and stability.

It is clear from these studies that foster carers have an integral role in carer-child relationship. While biological parents and the fostered children can impact the carer-child relationship, it is foster carers’ response to these factors that has the biggest impact on the placement stability. This is not to say that foster carers are the main reason for breakdowns, for that would be an unreasonable conclusion to make. Rather it is to point out how significant they are in making a foster placement a success. Indeed, when we look at the protective factors of stability, we find that foster parents are associated with most of them too.

Protective factors of stability

Protective factors boost the stability of a placement and help prevent it from breaking down. This section will discover the protective factors of stability in fostering placements. In their systematic review, Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day (2015) found that a large proportion of the protective factors revealed by the study were linked with foster carers. These include:

- Carer(s) being motivated to care for children as opposed to wanting something back from the child or company for their biological children.
- Carer(s) being tolerant, child-centred, effective at setting boundaries.
- Carer(s) providing opportunities for the child to develop intellectually.
- Carer(s) providing discipline and routine.
- Carer(s) being flexible, organised and persistent.
- Carer(s) practicing good communication and being able to help the child cope with difficult feelings.
• Carer(s) being caring and patient with the child and helping the child feel accepted into the family.
• Carer(s) being prepared for the child’s specific difficulties.
• Carer(s) having a good family/social network (Rock et al., 2015).

Stability has also been linked with foster carers who are well trained, are receiving support from their fostering agency, have been appropriately matched to the temperament of the child and are child-oriented carers (Lockwood et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2005b). Other protective factors are: carers’ involvement in school, carer’s involvement of the child in extended family activities or family activities such as going on holidays, carer’s management of child’s activities outside the home, carer’s imparting life skills with child such as sex education, budgeting & independence living, sharing the child’s past, and meeting the child’s emotional needs as shown by their emotional age and not their chronological age (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Children’s involvement in the matching process is also a protective factor for stability (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Holtan et al., 2013). When children and foster parents are involved in the matching process, a placement is more likely to be stable.

This section has discussed how foster carers are an integral part of the foster care system. Foster carers are a key element in children’s experience of permanence within foster care. Literature indicates that foster carers’ behaviours and attitudes can be protective factors influencing the stability of the carer-child relationship or they can cause disruptions in placements. Although placement stability can be affected by local authority decisions, some of this can be mitigated. Similarly, training and support can help foster carers deal with strains on the carer-child relationship that are caused by the children in care and their biological parents. Having explored the causes of disruptions, the next section will discuss the effects that these disruptions and subsequent instability can have on children in foster care.

What Are the Effects of Instability in Foster Care?
Instability and disruptions can have an adverse effect on a child, often undermining the very goals of placing them in care. It affects a child’s outcomes in care, their future placements, and later in life (Holtan et al., 2013). Children experiencing instability in care placements have been described as having more mental health and behavioural problems as well as delayed educational attainment than their peers who experience stability in care. Instability also threatens a child’s evolving sense of identity and belonging, and their ability to form attachments (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Koh et al., 2014; Ward, 2009). Instability has an impact on self-esteem, delinquency, educational achievement, behaviour patterns, social network disruption, and drug use. It can bring about feelings of loneliness, loss and a lack of a sense of belonging (Holtan et al., 2013). Instability can also lead to relational anxiety and has a direct negative impact on children’s wellbeing. One study found that a lack of future
planning was prominent in children who had experienced instability; they tended to develop an attitude of focusing on the ‘here and now’ as a result of the multiple moves (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). A history of unstable placements can also cause a child to withdraw, disconnect or give up on forming new relationships with foster families (Rock et al., 2015).

Rock et. al (2015) reflect that instability compounds existing difficulties that the children have from their history and previous upbringing. This can lead to children finding themselves in a vicious cycle as described by Oosterman et. al (2007), whose review revealed that emotional and behavioural issues are both a factor causing children to enter care and an effect of instability in care. The effects of disruption that occur in the pursuit of legal permanence can thus undermine that goal, as children struggle to form the very trusting relationships that are needed to ensure legal permanence (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). It is important to note that instability in care can also be a continuation of instability that the children experienced prior to being in care. In a 2002 study of 42 infants in care, 11 had had four or more addresses before being in care (Ward, 2009). Care may thus offer better stability than the child’s past but less stability when compared with other children.

Finally, it is important to understand how many children experience instability in care. A longitudinal study conducted on 176,965 children found that 72% never moved or only moved once (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). In England 68% of children in foster care during the year 2017 experienced only one placement (Department for Education, 2017). While instability is not the experience of all children in care, there is no “acceptable” percentage. Given the effects of instability discussed above, every child in foster care should experience stability. This paper aims to contribute to the growing work aimed at improving stability and permanence for children in foster care.

Conclusion on Instability and Permanence in Foster Care.

So far, this chapter has put the research into context by introducing the key concept of permanence within the foster care system. The preliminary research revealed that foster care is a process that helps to take care of over 70% of looked after children in the UK (Home for Good, 2020). It provides over 70,000 children with a sense of permanence, giving them an opportunity to develop well and thrive. The research also debunked my initial view of foster children “bouncing from one home to another”, revealing that this is not the typical experience of most children in foster care (Department for Education, 2017; Fernandez & Barth, 2010). However, for those children who do experience disruptions in their placements, it can have adverse effects on their future including their future experience of permanence within other placements (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Holtan et al., 2013; Koh, 2010; Oosterman et al., 2007; Rock et al., 2015; Stott & Gustavsson, 2010; Ward, 2009).
For children experiencing instability, the experience in foster care is hard, and the effects of their history are compounded with the effects of experiencing instability in care. There is room for improvement in the way Local Authorities assess and plan for disruptions in a placement to ensure that children’s need for stability is considered alongside their other needs (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010). There is little that can be done about some of the factors affecting the stability of a placement such as the child’s history or the biological parents because these are the very factors that have led to a child being in care. However, well matched placements reduce tension placed on the carer-child relationship which is vital for stability (Fernandez & Barth, 2010; Ward, 2009). Placements can also be planned in the best way possible through good matching practices that involve the foster carer and the child, better supervision of contact by social workers and better training and support being given to both the foster carer and child during a placement.

My brief introduction into the foster care system and permanence seemed to revolve around foster carers. They are the biggest resource in the system and, as the literature revealed, they are a crucial factor in the success or failure of a placement. Foster carers are key factors in children’s experience of permanence and stability in care. This preliminary information guided my next steps in undertaking the literature review. I sought to get a better understanding on foster carers; what they experience, who they are, how they foster, how they are recruited, trained and supported. Can these things be improved upon to increase stability and achieve better permanence for fostered children? In order to do this, I conducted a systematic review which will be presented in the next section.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW ON FOSTER CARERS IN ENGLAND

Systematic reviews differ from literature reviews because of their value for transparency, lack of bias, and rigour (Sharland, 2012). The application of transparent, rigorous and replicable methods through a systematic review would allow me to identify, analyse, synthesise and draw conclusions on the totality of research in the field as defined by the protocol (Shlonsky, Noonan, Littell, & Montgomery, 2011). While systematic reviews are widely used in the field of health, such reviews are focused on evaluating the efficacy of interventions. This is often achieved by conducting meta-analysis and by having strict inclusion criteria of quantitative studies with experimental designs (Sharland, 2012). Systematic reviews conducted in other fields, such as social work, can vary from these traditional systematic review designs with the inclusion of qualitative designs. Organisations such as the UK Centre for Evidence for Policy and Practice Information (EPPI) have been instrumental in expanding the use of systematic reviews in other fields such as education to collect and synthesise information that is up-to-
date (Sharland, 2012). The purpose of this systematic review matches this approach which is reflected in the design and methodology. The review parameters were selected to answer the research question, rather than to fit into the strict criteria upheld by traditional systematic reviews. The flexible approach to shaping the systematic review helped it serve its purpose within the context of a PhD project. This included conducting the review as a solo reviewer rather than having two or more reviewers as is recommended by reviewing bodies such as Cochrane. The next section will present the search protocol for the systematic review I conducted and provide rationale for the study design.

**Systematic Review Protocol**

The first step in conducting a systematic review is in setting the search protocol. This begins with defining the research question. The aim of the systematic review was to cover the totality of the field so the research question was crafted to be as inclusive as possible. “What do we know about Foster Carers?” The next step was to define the geographical parameters for the protocol. The care systems in the four nations that make up the UK differ as do the proportions of children in foster care. In Scotland, children in foster care account for 34% (4,798) of children in care. In Northern Ireland it’s 79% (2,664), in Wales it’s 71% (4,868) and in England it’s 72% (57,658) (CoramBAAF, 2020). As the nation with the largest number of children in foster care, England was selected for the study.

The search period was then narrowed down to the last decade for two reasons. The first being the limited time available for the review (3 months) and the second being limited capacity from having one reviewer. English, which is the dominant language used in England was chosen for the review. Four academic databases and four sources of grey literature were selected for the review. This was done through consultation with experienced researchers in the field. An academic librarian was also consulted during the process to provide guidance on the protocol and selection of search terms. The search terms were refined by running trial searches in one of the databases. The final protocol is presented below:

| **Research question:** What do we know about Foster Carers in England?  
| **Search Protocol:** foster AND carer OR caregiver OR parent  
| **Search Period:** 2008-2019  
| **Language:** English  
| **Databases and Grey Literature sources:** ASSIA, IBSS, SCOPUS, CELCIS, NSPCC, Social Care Online, Web of Science, and Better Care Network. |

*Table 1. Systematic Review Protocol*

As mentioned earlier, the review boundaries were selected to match the objective of the review. The absence of the intent to evaluate interventions allowed for a wider inclusion
criterion. This included grey literature that was not peer reviewed as well quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. The main criteria for the inclusion were that it had to include research that was focused on the carers. This was important as majority of the research conducted in fostering is often focused on the children who are looked after. I found that even when foster carers were main participants, the object of the study was often the children. The table below presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to the results of the review.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCLUSION CRITERIA</th>
<th>EXCLUSION CRITERIA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Research focused on the foster carers</td>
<td>• Research not focused on the England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grey Literature including non-peer reviewed research,</td>
<td>• Research not in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Quantitative research</td>
<td>• Research not focused on foster carers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Qualitative research</td>
<td>• Book Reviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mixed methods research</td>
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*Table 2: Systematic Review Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

The search was conducted from January to March 2019. It yielded a total of 2,479 results. These headlines and abstracts were reviewed based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This produced 136 papers for full document review. These documents were reviewed further, and 99 documents were excluded, leaving a final 35 documents for analysis. Although the inclusion criteria required that the focus be on foster carers, they were not the only participants in the studies included. Foster carers were the main or only participant in 28 of the documents. Nine of the documents had other participants such as practitioners, care leavers, looked after children, kinship carers and adoptive parents. Where there was no foster carer participation, research was included if the focus of the research was foster carers. Of the documents included in the review, almost half were evaluations of trainings and interventions (17). One was a literature review. A variety of research methods was found in the final documents. 15 had qualitative research, 10 had quantitative research, 5 had mixed methods, 2 were case studies, 2 were reports and 1 was a literature review.

**Data extraction and analysis**

Similar to the review protocol, data extraction and analysis was aimed at meeting the quest for knowledge in the field rather than the evaluation of interventions. Thematic analysis was thus employed. The first step in doing this was to summarise the data found in the documents by plotting it on a table. The table had categories for the title, methodology, area(s) of knowledge covered in the paper, and theoretical framework used. The table below offers a

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sample of this step. The knowledge area was the key focus of the analysis and themes arose from the items coded under this category. Items coded in the knowledge area were grouped together to form three major themes for further data extraction and analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOCUMENT</th>
<th>KNOWLEDGE AREA</th>
<th>THEORIES</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oke, N., Rostill-Brookes, H., &amp; Larkin, M. (2013). Against the odds: Foster carers’ perceptions of family, commitment and belonging in successful placements. Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 18(1), 7-24.</td>
<td>Fostering Experience Carer-child bond Carer Relationship with local authority Carer Relationship with biological family</td>
<td>Positive psychology and solution focused approaches are listed as the rationale for looking into successful stories with a focus on human strengths, resilience, and the capacity to develop in the face of diversity  'Commitment' and 'belonging' are the two constructs the authors use to frame the study.</td>
<td>Type: Qualitative Research Tool: 'This is my baby' is a semi-structured interview tool used to assess a carer’s sense of emotional bond and commitment with a child. Participants: 7 carers (or 9 as two interviewed as couples) all were between the age of 48-65. All white. Analysis: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data.</td>
<td>This study views successful placements as those that had achieved stability and good levels of psychosocial functioning despite earlier indicators of the contrary results. In the discussion they reference Sinclair’s four states of permanence as an indicator of a successful placement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Sample of the data extraction

The table of included studies can be found in the Appendix.

Systematic Review Findings and Discussion

The systematic review was aimed at revealing the totality of knowledge in the field regarding foster carers. The review was not exhaustive as it was limited by time and the number of reviewers dedicated to it. Nonetheless, it provided some understanding on the research areas covered in the field, thus revealing some research gaps. The review also provided insight on foster carers and the fostering task. This was evident in three main themes: fostering is relational, it is personal, and it requires training and support. The findings proved to be significant in light of the data revealed in the latter part of the research project. This section will introduce and discuss the three themes from the systematic review, providing the basis for further discussion later in the data chapters of this thesis.
1. Fostering is Relational

At its core, fostering is a relational task. The systematic review gave a detailed glimpse of the complex relationships foster carers must navigate as part of their fostering tasks. These include their relationship with the foster child, their relationship with their own family, the relationship between their family and foster children, their relationship with social workers, local authorities/agencies and their relationship with the foster child's biological family. Each of these relationships has unique challenges and places demands on foster carers. Not only must they manage each of these relationships, but they are affected by them. Foster carers often have to be mediators between the different parties and how they interact with each other. Whether it’s the relationship between social workers and the fostered children, fostered children and their biological parents, or social workers and the biological parents, foster carers are also affected by the interactions between these parties. This section will present each of the relationships and how foster carers navigate them.

The Carer Relationship with the foster child

The relationship between a foster carer and the fostered child is the most crucial relationship in the foster care system. Research with foster carers by Samra, Beinart, & Harper, (2011) revealed that the relationship with the foster child was important to carers. The carers discussed how they tried to ensure that the child felt confident, cared for and nurtured by ensuring the child's emotional and physical needs were met (Samra et al., 2011). This can sometimes be hard because of the child's history. Children enter into care for various reasons including maltreatment, neglect, parental addiction, abuse and behavioural issues. Effective foster carers must be aware of the child’s history and the impact it has on the child and themselves. A foster carer’s sympathy for the previous hardships of the foster child serves as a motivator for their own efforts towards helping the child (Taylor, Swann, & Warren, 2008). Their understanding or interpretation of a child’s behavioural problems can influence their own emotional and behavioural responses to the child. This was echoed in another study that found that carers in the study were more likely to connect current behaviour of a child to the mental state of the child, rather than to the immediate external circumstances (Bunday, Dallos, Morgan, & Mckenzie, 2015).

The systematic review also revealed that the carer child relationship can sometimes be affected by the relationship with the biological parents. One study described two types of carer relationships with biological families; inclusive vs exclusive foster carers (Bunday et al., 2015). Inclusive carers accept a child and the child’s connections to their biological family and other social connections. Exclusive carers on the other hand only accept the child and reject or exclude the child’s prior social and biological connections. While carer’s involvement does not improve a child’s outcomes, carers can help children cope with any of the complex difficulties that come up during or after contact. Carer’s attitudes towards the child’s
biological parents can affect the child’s attitudes towards contact. Additionally, the carer’s attitude towards contact can cause the child to have divided loyalties or it can create an overlap of care (Bunday et al., 2015).

The review also gave insight into the complex role foster carers take on. This involves having some parental commitment and care in the context of a temporary relationship. Two studies in the systematic review described the fostering relationship as being one of unconditional parental commitment (Masson, Hackett, Phillips, & Balfe, 2014; Oke, Rostill-Brookes, & Larkin, 2011). In some ways this was expressed as ‘claiming a child’ and expecting the relationship to continue after the placement was over. For example, some carers view themselves in the grandparent role of any future children of their foster child (Oke et al., 2011). However, the permanence implied by this view is not always reflected by foster children. One study found that successful carers were able to accommodate a temporary/provisional commitment from the child, understanding that the child’s commitment may be affected by external factors including their relationship with their biological parents and the possibilities of moving on to more permanent placements (Oke et al., 2011). In addition to being a type of parental figure, foster carers also play the important role of role model. One study showed that male carers and older male biological children were found to be important role models for male foster children who exhibited harmful sexual behaviour, teaching them positive interactions (Masson et al., 2014).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the carer-child relationship is crucial to the stability of a placement. Research on this area has tended to focus on the children’s perspectives and experiences in this relationship. This is positive as children are active agents in the relationship. However, carers play a big role in ensuring the success of this relationship. As the literature revealed, the carer’s responses to and attitudes towards the child, their history, and their behaviour factors into the success of the relationship. The third theme will further emphasise the importance of this relationship as it is often the focus of training and support offered to foster carers.

**The Carer Relationship with the child’s biological family**

The primary interaction between foster carers and the biological family happens during contact. The review revealed that contact with the child’s biological family can be a great source of stress for foster carers and their foster children. Contact evokes strong emotions from foster carers; some are suspicious or wary of parent’s motivations, others get upset at the maltreatment the children had suffered at the hands of their families, while others have positive experiences with the biological parents during contact (Masson et al., 2014). Oke et al. (2011) described the successful carer’s view of biological parents as ‘critical empathy’. Other studies describe it as ‘mixed emotions’ (Austerberry et al., 2013; Masson et al., 2014).
In research done by Samrai et al. (2011) carers felt that contact with the foster child’s birth family often has a detrimental effect on the child. Another study revealed that it is a stressful experience for both carer and foster child (Austerberry et al., 2013). Negative contact visits can affect the foster child’s behaviour, the relationship between the carer and child, the carer’s biological children, and can involve aggressive and violent behaviour from the biological parent towards the child (Austerberry et al., 2013). Complicating this further, one study noted that a carer’s attitude towards contact can cause the child to have divided loyalties or the feeling of having to choose between the foster carers and the biological parents (R. Sen & McCormack, 2011). One study found that of the difficulties experienced in the fostering experience, carers report difficulties with contact more than difficulties with dealing with the child’s behaviour (Austerberry et al., 2013). Carers tend to be more involved in contact if there is a clear plan towards reintegration. They are also more involved in sibling contact than parent contact. Aside from regular contact visits, carers were more involved in indirect contact e.g. supervising and/or initiating telephone calls (R. Sen & McCormack, 2011). It is worth noting that in some instances contact is perceived as a positive experience and some carers are even able to establish a relationship with the birth family separate from the authorities’ supervision (Oke et al., 2011). Due to its complex nature, contact is also a source of tension between carers and local authorities/agencies. A study on foster carer’s experience in contact found that 67.8% of foster carers reported dissatisfaction with support in contact; more than reports on dissatisfaction with support in handling the child’s behaviour (Austerberry et al., 2013).

As mentioned in the first chapter, the relationship between foster carers and biological parent may not directly affect the stability of a placement. However, the review revealed that it can be a source of stress for foster carers, impacting the carer-child relationship and the carers’ relationship with the local authorities. This indicates that there may be a need for support in navigating the emotional burden of contact on the child, as well as the logistical aspects of it. This will be explored further in the third theme which covers training and support.

The Carer Relationship with their own family
The review revealed that a carer’s biological family can be a point of support during placements. Conversely, it can also be a source of tension and stress. The latter is especially evident when a foster carer feels that they are caught between foster child and biological child conflict. The study by Thompson, Mcpherson, & Marsland (2016) revealed that carers often have to be mindful of the implications of age difference between the fostered and biological child. This includes knowing the biological child’s preference of older or younger children. The foster carers in this study found that they had to make decisions on how much to consult with biological child in the fostering process. The carers in the study felt tension
and perceived rivalry for parental time, affection and practical input during placements. This tension led to carers feeling tired, overwhelmed and stretched (Thompson et al., 2016). When there was perceived tension, carers reported that there was a conscious or unconscious desire to preserve the biological family by ending the problematic placement (Samrai et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2016). Despite this innate desire for family preservation, foster carers sometimes prioritise foster children despite their older biological children’s objections. The tension between biological children and foster children can also be present when the biological children are older. Plumridge & Sebba (2016) found that when facing unfounded allegations from the authorities, some foster carers kept the matter hidden from their biological children or revealed it to them after the charges had been dropped because they did not want their children to encourage them to quit fostering.

The review revealed that although the relationship with foster children is important to foster carers, it can come second to their relationship with their biological child when foster carers feel that they have to choose between the two. Just like fostered children who can feel torn between their biological parents and their carers, foster carers feel that they sometimes have mixed loyalties. Where the placement is detrimental to the integrity of their family, foster carers will often choose, albeit reluctantly, to terminate a foster placement. Foster carers do, however, seek to find ways of balancing their care for their foster children and their own biological children. This can often include consulting them or hiding information from them. This would be a critical area for training and support to be provided to both foster carers and their biological families. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Carer Relationship with the fostering agency, social worker and family worker
The review revealed that good relationships with link workers and the children’s social workers were essential for stable placements (Samrai et al., 2011). However, these relationships were found to be problematic. Carers in the study identified that communication from social services was quite problematic. This included poor communication between the link worker and children’s social worker; they felt that they received mixed messages from the two workers (Dodsworth et al., 2013; Samrai et al., 2011). Research from an independent fostering helpline revealed that difficulties in communicating with social workers and link workers was a heavily reported problem (Blackburn, 2016). Further tension in the relationship between carers and authorities arises from differing opinions on how much carers should be involved in decisions related to the child (Samrai et al., 2011). Some carers also reported feeling let down by the system with some reporting feelings of powerlessness and being shut out in the decision-making process (Taylor et al., 2008). Poor relationships made it difficult for carers to reach out to link workers. In situations where carers felt they had a poor relationship with the social worker, they also felt that the social worker did not meet the
child’s needs. Carers also report feeling that their work is underappreciated by local authorities/agencies (Samrai et al., 2011).

The relationship between the carer and the local authority/agency is complicated as they find themselves working with and seemingly against the system. Foster carers find themselves being the advocate for their foster children. To do this, they must work against systems that they feel have let them and the foster children down (Taylor et al., 2008). The tension rises from the expectations authorities have on their carers. In addition to this, the professionalisation of foster care and its implications on the outcome and quality of care provided is a huge debate globally. Carers find themselves caught between a strong divide of the carer vs parent debate. The foster care system requires foster carers to operate as professionals and often discourages “parent-like” behaviours. This can be an unrealistic demand as foster carers often find themselves changing between the two roles of carer and parent on the needs and wants of the foster child. The study by Schofield, Beek, Ward, & Biggart (2013) revealed how some children prefer to and choose to call their foster carers ‘mom’ and ‘dad’. Others have relationships with their biological parents and feel that they do not want another parent in their lives. Foster carers are often keen to honour these opinions. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the carers describe themselves having ‘unconditional parental commitment’ to the children they foster. The study also revealed that while some carers might choose to identify with one identity (carer or parent), their description of the fostering experience includes roles from both identities i.e., both professional roles and parenting roles. Authorities and agencies remain inflexible in their expectation of carers to be professionals; to call themselves carers and not parents, and not engage in parent like behaviours such as claiming the child, all the while not treating the carers as professionals by disregarding their opinions on decisions made for the child and training carers using material from parenting classes. Ironically, foster carers’ experience and research have found that parenting actions, such as claiming a child, that are frowned upon, are often what leads to successful placements (Oke et al., 2011). The study by Oke et al. (2011) revealed that success in fostering was a result of some ‘disobedience’ to the authorities. The study further explained how despite this tension from their “disobedience”, some foster carers were viewed quite positively by social workers and allowed to just ‘get on with the job’ (Oke et al., 2011). This is an indicator that social workers too can see the discrepancy between policy and the actual outcomes.

Another instance when carers and local authorities/agencies find themselves on opposing sides is when allegations are made against a foster carer. Foster carers feel particularly let down by local authorities/agencies when it comes to dealing with allegations made against them. In a study on the impact of unproven allegations on foster carers, carers reported feeling abandoned and unsupported by their local authority or agency (Plumridge & Sebba,
Conclusion on the relational nature of fostering

The research revealed a complicated relationship between foster carers and the fostering agencies and social workers. This leads one to wonder if there is training or support offered to foster carers on how to navigate these relationships. Similarly, how do fostering agencies address the conflict? Is there training on how to improve their relationship with carers? The research on support given to carers shows that authorities are trying to improve the fostering experience (Dodsworth et al., 2013). The third theme of findings will explore if the trainings address some of the issues revealed in this section.

Conclusion on the relational nature of fostering

The systematic review revealed the very relational nature of fostering. Various studies showed that foster carers have to wear different hats. To the children they are carers, parents, therapists, confidants and advocates for them (Masson et al., 2014; Oke et al., 2011; Samrai et al., 2011). With the system, they are an employee, a part of the team and sometimes an enemy when allegations are made (Blackburn, 2016; Dodsworth et al., 2013; Oke et al., 2011; Plumridge & Sebba, 2016; Samrai et al., 2011). With biological parents, carers can be co-parents, confidants or rivals (Austerberry et al., 2013; Masson et al., 2014; R. Sen & McCormack, 2011). The review revealed the very intricate tight rope foster carers must walk as they navigate these delicate relationships and the relationships between the different parties involved. This leads one to wonder how foster carers manage this. What skills and traits do they have that enable them to navigate the difficulties of fostering? How does fostering affect them and how are they able to meet these challenges? The next section gives a glimpse of the inner workings of foster carers as revealed in the review.

2. Fostering Is Personal

The review revealed that fostering can profoundly affect foster carers and requires them to draw on inner strength and traits in order to be effective in the fostering task. The review also revealed that the challenges and positive outcomes of fostering have a personal effect on foster carers. This section will discuss the glimpses of the internal workings of foster carers as revealed in the systematic review.
The personal cost of fostering

As iterated earlier in this paper, plenty of research has investigated instability, with many studies exploring the effects of instability on children. However, instability can also deeply impact foster carers. A study by Donachy (2017) explored the effect of breakdowns on foster cares. The six foster carers in this study revealed how unsuccessful placements had affected their self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy and confidence. They expressed feelings of deep loss, helplessness, and hopelessness after having tried all they could for the child in their placement. Carers discussed how they tried to make meaning of the child’s behaviour and respond to it but were bewildered and unable to reconcile complex behaviours from children who could be angelic in behaviour at one point but turn violent easily. Some of these carers felt they always had to be alert and their home had become a prison that they were trapped in with a violent child they could not help (Donachy, 2017). Another study revealed the feelings of grief, loss, sadness and distress carers feel at the end of placements (Samrai et al., 2011). Even successful carers in the study by Oke, Rostill-Brookes, & Larkin (2011) expressed feelings of grief at the end of placements that they thought were successful. The strain of fostering can often affect carer’s parenting style and affects carer anxiety, stress and depression (Morgan & Baron, 2011). In addition to this, the study revealed that foster carers can also experience compassion fatigue due to the nature of their work.

Compassion fatigue was initially used to describe the experiences of nurses who felt “worn down” by the continual experience of hospital emergencies (Figley, 1995). Compassion fatigue is also referred to as secondary trauma, secondary victimization, or vicarious trauma (Figley, 1995). As these terms suggest, compassion fatigue is experienced by those in close proximity to people who have experienced trauma such as their family or working professionals helping them. Compassion fatigue in helping professions has been widely researched. However, research specific to compassion fatigue within the fostering context is relatively low (Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016). A study on 131 foster carers in England found that 19.8% of the carers were above the clinical cut off for secondary trauma while 25.2% were at high risk of secondary trauma and 30.5% were high risk for burnout (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018). Foster carers not only risk their emotional wellbeing by fostering, but their physical safety too. A case study on a non-accidental death of a foster carer by Maclean (2016) raised the important issue of child-carer violence, an issue that the study found to be under-researched. The study revealed that foster carers have reported being threatened or abused physically/emotionally but authorities rarely act on these reports. 48.1% of foster carers in a study revealed that they had been physically harmed by a foster child in their care (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018).

An online survey of 546 foster carers in the UK found that foster carers had higher levels of burnout than people working in other stressful helping professions (Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016).

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Focus groups from the same study provided more detail about how foster carers experience compassion fatigue. Foster carers reported experiencing anxiety, fear and panic attacks, as well as increased anger and crying. “Have you ever woken in the morning and thought ‘I can’t do this again’? ... I even had one morning where I got out of bed, got into the shower, and it must have been about half five in the morning, because I wanted to bawl my eyes out in the shower with no-one banging on the door, because I was still sad about the child’s history (Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016 p.15).” Compassion fatigue can have an effect on carers’ ability to perform their caring activities as it has been found to lead to lower levels of concentration, a decrease in self-esteem, and feelings of depression, irritability and hyper-vigilance (Clark, 2021). A systematic review on compassion fatigue in foster and kinship carers found that while compassion fatigue is present in this population, it is not higher than other helping professionals (Clark, 2021). The global systematic review focused on the support given to carers and identified 35 studies from various countries. The studies revealed that as little as 23 % of carers identified official or formal support from social services. Furthermore, the support provided was found to be inadequate by the carers (Clark, 2021).

The personal effects that fostering placements can have on foster carers was evident in the literature from the systematic review. Carers risked experiencing direct trauma or vicarious trauma during their fostering placement. Do authorities offer foster carers access to therapy or psychological support? The literature indicated an evident need for support that would help carers cope with grief, trauma, depression and other psychological effects of fostering. The training and support will be discussed later in this chapter. The literature provided deeper insight into the character traits foster carers have which enable them to endure challenges and thrive in the fostering experience. This will be discussed in the next section.

**Personal Traits of a foster carer**

The review revealed three key characteristics that successful foster carers have. These are empathy, tenacity and hopefulness. This section will explore these traits and how they enable foster carers to thrive in the fostering task.

Fostering requires empathy and sensitivity to a child. Successful foster carers use these qualities to build realistic expectations of the child’s recovery in light of their history (Oke et al., 2011). Taylor et al. (2008) found that this empathy for the previous hardships of the foster child served as a motivator for their own efforts towards helping the child. To do this, foster carers also need to have proactive listening skills; listening, understanding, observing, tolerating behaviour and accepting some unpleasant aspects of the child (Oke et al., 2011). This allows them to facilitate the child’s trust in them, an important part of building attachment. Carers are also sensitive and nurturing (Harris-Waller, Bangerh, & Douglas, 2018). They are expected to use their sensitivity to their foster child to identify and seek help
for mental health issues their foster children may have (Bonfield, Collins, Guishard-Pine, & Langdon, 2010).

A key character trait that foster carers must also develop/have is tenacity. This is described as having a stubbornness, persistence, toughness, determination and desire to not be defeated by the fostering task (Oke et al., 2011). A study by Morgan & Baron (2011) echoes this and found that foster carers who show greater warmth, consistency and persistency experience more successful placements even if the children display challenging behaviour. Resilience in foster carers is illustrated in the study by Plumridge & Sebba (2016) which outlines the deeply personal hurt carers experience when unfounded allegations are made on them yet up to 80% of carers who experienced these continued to foster after charges were dropped or were found to be untrue. Perhaps this tenacity and resilience is linked to the hope that carers have.

Hopefulness in fostering can be described as an overwhelming positivity about the child, the fostering task, and fostering’s effectiveness in transforming the life of a child (Oke et al., 2011). This motivating hopefulness can be found in the study on carers whose foster children had harmful sexual behaviours (Masson et al., 2014). The carers in this study described the challenges of caring for children who had erratic, volatile, aggressive behaviours. The children had sexual, behavioural, emotional and sometimes mental issues. The carers expressed altruistic motivations for caring for their foster children; they wanted to be family for a child who did not have a positive experience with family. Some carers were angry about the way the system treats vulnerable young people and were disappointed in the system’s low expectations of the outcome of the children. These foster carers often found themselves being advocates for the children in their care, even in situations where the child had perpetrated abuse on another child. As part of their fostering task, carers had to handle complaints from schools and neighbours regarding their foster child’s behaviour outside the home. Foster carers in this study discussed being motivated by wanting to develop their caring skills while others felt that fostering was what they were meant to do. Additionally, some carers referenced religious beliefs as being a strong motivation or background factor in their decision to foster (Masson et al., 2014).

The personal traits identified in the review certainly helped to provide an understanding on how foster carers are able to foster despite the challenges and personal effect that fostering can have on them. However, it makes the researcher wonder if the expectation for carers to have these traits affects how they are supported in their work. For example, does the expectation of/perception of carers having tenacity lead to them receiving less support than they need? Do carers who are perceived to have grit receive less care when they experience grief or trauma because ‘they can handle it’? Perhaps this could be explored further in
research. The information about the character traits of successful foster carers may also be useful in recruiting and assessing potential foster carers. This will be explored further later in the thesis.

The benefits of fostering
The review revealed some additional information that foster carers do not just endure because of their inner hope, tenacity and empathy. Foster carers find fostering to be positive and worthwhile (Samrai et al., 2011). A study on foster carer’s experience on placement moves found that placements were seen as successful if they terminated at the planned time and the child moved on to a long-term placement or was reintegrated at home. While the carers did not always support moves, they supported those where the child was happy with the arrangement. A placement was also seen as successful if the carers continued to stay in contact with the child after a placement had ended. Carers in this study felt that even though their experience was tough, fostering had a positive impact on their family.

In another study, foster carers felt that their parenting improved as a result of the fostering experiencing; this positively impacted their relationship with biological children (Thompson et al., 2016). Parenting improved as parents realised the importance of their role in the lives of their own children. It is unfortunate that more research did not focus on the positive aspects and benefits of fostering. The high number of foster carers and low resignation rates suggest that carers are satisfied with their work. This would be a narrative worth telling. Based on the systematic review, research in the recent past has focused more on supporting and training foster carers with almost half of the documents being evaluations of trainings and interventions.

Although the review revealed information on some of the benefits of fostering, it was scarce. This reflects the lack of interest research seems to have shown in foster carers as individuals. Information on the perceived personal benefits of fostering would be beneficial in recruitment of foster carers as well as in support and retention of carers. The next section presents the final theme of findings from the review: training and support.

3. Fostering Needs Training and Support
The first two themes from the review revealed how challenging fostering can be. The fostering task cannot be undertaken alone, and foster carers need training and support. This section will explore the support foster carers have access to as well as the trainings they receive.

Support
The review revealed that having good social support is associated with stable placements (Miller, Randle, & Dolnicar, 2019). While no article in the review focused on the social support received by carers, some of the research mentioned that carers received invaluable support from their family members, extended family, friends and religious circles. Some
carers choose to rely more on these circles for support than on their local authority or independent fostering agency (Oke et al., 2011). Foster carers can also access formal support by calling an independent helpline and/or attending formal trainings run by their independent agency or local authority.

The Fostering Network runs a national fostering helpline which was the focus of a study in the review. The study, conducted on 57 foster carers and potential carers, revealed that the fostering helpline helped foster carers feel valued and cared for (Blackburn, 2016). Some carers who called had been on the verge of quitting but after talking to professionals on the helpline, they decided to stay. The carers reported that they felt valued, listened to, empowered and in control due to the help they received on the fostering task. As it is run by an independent agency, it is a powerful tool that has been used by carers in crisis and future carers in critical times. These crises included difficulties in communicating with agencies/authorities, needing legal advice regarding an allegation made against them and feeling that the social worker, authority or agency were providing their foster child with impersonal services (Blackburn, 2016). The study revealed that when foster carers can access support, it is effective in the retention of carers.

The information on the support offered to carers was quite sparse considering the challenges described earlier in the paper. The fostering task places foster carers at risk of experiencing direct trauma, vicarious trauma, grief, and even clinical levels of depression. However, there was no mention of professional psychological services offered to foster carers. As an integral part of the system of care responsible for over 70% of children in care, foster carers deserve to be provided with adequate professional support for their work. Foster carer well-being and mental health affects how they foster and should be considered in the care system. The findings from the review did not reflect this. There is a need for further research into foster carer support and well-being, perhaps looking at how this affects carer retention, stability and the fostering experience for both carers and children. The next section will focus on the studies on the training provided to foster carers.

Training
As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of the studies in the review focused on trainings for foster carers. These trainings were often aimed at addressing the issues faced by foster carers. The study by Osborne & Alfano (2011) was very informative about some of the issues faced by foster carers. During consultative sessions with an educational psychologist, foster carers consulted on behavioural management, educational issues, emotional well-being of the child, medical issues, reassurance about current strategies, advice on accessing support, carer support, relationship with the child, being a new carer, and establishing routines (Osborne & Alfano, 2011). Another training session with foster carers revealed that foster carers were
struggling with the foster children’s internal emotions and behaviour, external emotions and behaviour, education, eating, healthcare, relationships, physical development and the carer’s responsibilities and duties (Brown, 2014). Most of these consultations focused on the child and how to care for them. This is an indicator of how carers are concerned about their fostering task and often more concerned about their foster children than their own well-being. Carer well-being was often neglected and rarely the key motive behind the carer training given. In the studies included in the review, the training given was often aimed at helping them be effective carers and largely focused on the children and the impact of the training on the children. This section will discuss the findings on trainings revealed by the systematic review.

The review indicated that foster carer training has changed over time. Previously it was solely focused on behavioural modification but this changed as professionals realised that looked after children have complex needs, and training is now based on attachment and trauma informed theory (Braiden, 2016). Eleven articles in the systematic review were solely focused on training. The trainings ranged from one-day trainings to 12-week training programmes. The trainings mentioned and reviewed in the research included: The Solihull Approach (S. Brown, 2014; Harris-Waller et al., 2018; Madigan, Paton, Mackett, Project, & House, 2017), Incredible Years Parenting Training (Bywater et al., 2011), Park’s Parenting Approach (Davies, Webber, & Briskman, 2015), Golding Attachment Focused Training Programme (Laybourne, Anderesen, & Sands, 2008), KEEP foster training (Roberts, Glynn, & Waterman, 2016), Reflective Fostering Programme (Redfern et al., 2018), Collaborative Reminiscence Approach (Shotton, 2010; Shotton & Alnwick, 2013), and Education Support (Osborne & Alfano, 2011). These trainings focused on the caregiver-child relationship and most sought to build the carer’s understanding of the child’s developmental needs and the effects of the child’s history on their present actions, thoughts and behaviours. This would enable the foster carers to make meaning of their foster child’s behaviours. The foster carers were then given practical tools on how to manage their response to the child’s behaviour. All the trainings reported positive effects supported by some statistical significance, with qualitative interviews corroborating some of the results. While the trainings used a mix of pre and post-test measures to analyse their effectiveness, only the KEEP research measured long term effects by taking measurements at the 6-month and 12-month period after the training. Of the studies on trainings, this research was the most comprehensive as it measured the outcomes of 853 foster carers who went through KEEP training programmes between 2009-2016 (Roberts et al., 2016). Incredible Years measured effects 6 months after training (Bywater et al., 2011). Although given to the foster carers, the trainings were aimed at increasing stability in care and increasing outcomes for children. Aside from Solihull (S. Brown, 2014; Harris-Waller et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2017) and KEEP (Roberts et al.,
2016), the rest of the trainings were one-off research studies done on single local authorities, signifying the need for more uniform approaches to foster carer training and the evaluation of the trainings.

Given the issues foster carers face in the fostering experience, this review showed a failure of current trainings and support in meeting certain issues such as carer-child abuse and issues faced as a result of contact. However, the trainings do address most of the issues foster carers face. Foster carers reported an improvement in the trainings and support provided to them by the local councils and agencies, but they also cited logistical obstacles to attending these, such as transport and child care (Masson et al., 2014; Samrai et al., 2011). There is room for improvement and growth in the type of training offered to foster carers. For example, trainings can focus on instilling or encouraging the traits of successful foster carers such as tenacity and resilience. Another critique of the evaluations of trainings was the failure to measure long-term effects of the training. Only two of the eleven trainings did so. There was also no indication if there was training or support that was focused on types of placements. For example, support for sibling placements, trainings on how to care for children from a different race/culture, or even trainings for foster carers caring for children with disabilities. Additionally, there was no mention of training or support offered to the biological family of foster carers. The research indicated that biological children can be affected by placements and when this happens, it can cause foster carers to choose family preservation over the foster placement. It is possible that offering support to biological children might help mitigate such problems. Similarly, biological children who experience violence or trauma during a placement may need mental health support. While the research revealed in the review indicates that efforts are being made by local authorities and fostering agencies to train their foster carers, a lot more can be done to improve training and support. This training and support would improve children’s experience of permanence by improving the fostering experience for both carers and children.

CONCLUSION

The systematic review was aimed at revealing what research has covered about foster carers within the last decade. It illuminated the very personal and relational nature of the fostering task and how foster carers are supported through an extraordinarily complex undertaking. Foster carers are nurturing people with great empathy, tenacity and hope who must take on multiple roles as they relate with the different parties involved in the fostering task (Bonfield et al., 2010; Harris-Waller et al., 2018; Masson et al., 2014; Morgan & Baron, 2011; Oke et al., 2011). The foster carer-child relationship is of utmost importance to them, but it can be affected by external factors such as the relationship with the biological parents and the care system’s decisions (Rock et al., 2015; Samrai et al., 2011). When a foster carer is well trained
and supported in their work, they remain motivated and can meet the incredible challenges of
this task (Blackburn, 2016; Miller et al., 2019; Oke et al., 2011). The training and support
provided to foster carers changes with each agency and authority. It often focuses on the
child-carer relationship but fails to address some of the other issues faced by carers such as
child-carer violence and the personal effects fostering has on carers. Interestingly, these
three themes revealed by the systematic review were also evident in the data from my
research. This will be discussed further in the finding’s chapters.

The discussion identified some of the gaps present within the current research themes. In
addition to this, there were two other evident research gaps. There was a noticeable lack of
research on the retention of foster carers and the recruitment of foster carers. The only
mention of foster carer recruitment found through the systematic review was on the
effectiveness of the independent helpline in recruitment of foster carers. Three out of seven
potential foster carers who contacted the helpline proceeded with the application process
after talking to someone on the helpline while one of the seven was able to determine that
fostering was not for her (Blackburn, 2016). It is surprising that there is no research on how
to acquire foster carers who are such a critical resource for this form of care.

Of the two big knowledge gaps identified in the research, recruitment presents a bigger
opportunity for further research than retention. Retention research would likely be linked to
training and support which, as the review revealed has been the focus of a lot of research on
foster carers. I thus chose to expand my literature review to look into recruitment of foster
carers. The systematic review inspired a lot of questions about research on recruitment and
current recruitment practice. The knowledge available about the fostering task as well as the
skills and traits that lead to successful placements can be used to influence recruitment. Is
this reflected in recruitment practice? Does current recruitment practice impact children’s
experience of permanence in foster care? If so, how does it do that? In the second phase of
my literature review I sought to answer these questions and more. This is presented in the
next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT

The systematic review revealed that foster carers are an integral part of fostering. It showed how fostering is relational, must be supported and has personal implications for foster carers. Most importantly, my initial literature review led me to see a huge gap in research about the recruitment of foster carers. This chapter is the second phase of my literature review which involved expanding my search terms to include all and any information I could find about fostering recruitment globally. The research revealed the importance of recruitment in meeting the need for foster carers and its potential for improving the fostering experience through provision of better matching choices. In addition to revealing the more nuanced aspects of recruitment, the literature revealed some of the factors that affect recruitment. This chapter will begin by discussing why recruitment is necessary. It will then discuss the factors that affect recruitment. It will then cover current research on recruitment. Finally, the chapter will conclude by presenting an ecological model for studying and understanding foster carer recruitment.

THE NECESSITY OF RECRUITMENT

A look at two recent reviews on fostering in England by the Department of Education, point to the need for foster carer recruitment (Baginsky, Gorin, Sands, King’s College London, & Quest Research and Evaluation Ltd, 2017; Narey & Owers, 2018). The report from 2017 highlights the fall in inquiries and applications for registration as foster carers from 2013 through to 2016. It stated that at the start of 2017 there was a shortage of foster carers, especially those willing to take care of children with special needs (Baginsky et al., 2017). It stated recruitment as a critical issue:

“Perhaps the biggest current issue in fostering is how to secure the future recruitment and retention of enough, high-quality foster carers. It is not a new issue, but our children’s system will be jeopardised if we fail to do so...”

(Baginsky et al., 2017, p. 213)

Recruitment of new carers is necessitated by two major factors: the increase of children entering into the foster care system, and the need for better matching.

Recruitment meets the growing needs of the foster care system.

On March 31st 2016, there were 44,320 foster families in England, a one percent drop from the previous year (Department for Education, 2018). There were 53,420 children in foster care in England on March 31st 2017 (Department for Education, 2017). In 2018 there were 55,200 foster children being cared for by 43,500 foster families in England (The Fostering
Recruitment is necessary for better matching. Although the previous section dealt mostly with statistics and numbers, the need for carers is not as simple as a specific figure such as the 8,100 new carers that The Fostering Network suggests is needed in England (The Fostering Network, 2019b). The need for foster carers is a lot more nuanced than this number. As mentioned in the national report, the need is for more diverse and high-quality carers. This is primarily due to the matching process. Matching is how social workers determine the foster carer with whom they will place a child. It is a “form of complex decision-making influenced by more than case factors alone” (Zeijlmans, López, Grietens, & Knorth, 2017, p. 1). Matching is one of the factors that affects the success and stability of a foster placement (Lockwood et al., 2015; Sinclair, 2005b; Sinclair & Wilson, 2003). In matching, factors such as child’s age, behaviour, ethnicity, geography and siblings, are matched with foster carers’ factors which include their training, geography, ethnicity, and preference for the child’s age and gender (Zeijlmans et al., 2017). It is important to note that other factors such as chemistry between the child and carer, as well as child and carer involvement in the matching process, also affect the stability of a placement (Koh et al., 2014; Ward, 2009).

In an ideal setting, social workers would have a variety of foster carers to choose from to ensure foster children and carers are matched as well as possible. However, when there is a limit to carers available, compromises are made by social workers (Zeijlmans et al., 2017).
These compromises may mean placing a child outside of the council boundary, placing children with carers who are not trained for specialised needs which strains them, or placing them with foster carers who do not match their ethnicity and/or culture. In 2019, 21% of foster placements were outside of the council boundary, affecting the children’s experience of physical permanence (Department for Education, 2020c). Being placed outside of council boundaries causes major interruptions to a child’s life. This includes experiencing loss of friendships due to distance, having to orient themselves to a new geographic location and moving schools. These are factors that affect the stability of a placement. The strain of mismatched placements can also cause breakdowns in placements due to stress on both the carer and the child. Additionally, it may lead to disruptions caused by authorities when they move the child because a better geographical match has been found (Ward, 2009).

As was discussed in chapter two, placement disruptions can be caused by a breakdown in the carer-child relationship or by a policy based/planned move by the care system. Agency-led disruptions sometimes occur as a result of poor or compromised matching with agencies disrupting a placement if a better match is found (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Better matching would therefore reduce the occurrence of these type of disruption. However, matching, as previously discussed, is often compromised due to the lack of diverse placement options (Zeijlmans et al., 2017). Better recruitment could thus potentially reduce disruptions by providing a better pool of diverse carers which would improve matching. Given that I started this journey looking into permanence and stability, it was interesting to find that the recruitment of foster carers can be a factor that improves the experience permanence and stability of placements. Having established the necessity of recruitment, the next section will explore the factors affecting it. As mentioned earlier, this chapter expanded the literature review to include global research as well as knowledge from the field of marketing. The rest of this chapter will reference some social marketing information as it fills some of the gaps within social work research.

**FACTORS AFFECTING RECRUITMENT**

Although there is sparse literature on the recruitment of foster carers, there is research that would potentially be useful in recruitment. This includes research on the motivations and barriers to fostering. Knowledge on why people may or may not engage in a behaviour has historically been used by social marketers to design marketing campaigns (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). Social marketing is a field of marketing that aims to encourage positive behaviours in the public for good (Lindridge, MacGaskill, Ginch, Eadie, & Holme, 2013). It has been found to have a positive impact on social issues such as wearing bike helmets,
reducing smoking and increasing recycling (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). This is done by influencing people’s behaviours as well as their attitudes, awareness, and knowledge about a social issue (Lindridge et al., 2013). In the case of fostering recruitment, fostering is considered as the positive behaviour that recruiters seek to encourage. As mentioned earlier, knowledge motivations and barriers of engaging in a certain behaviour is used to design campaigns to influence that behaviour. This section will discuss the motivations and barriers for fostering starting with the former. This information will then be used in later findings chapters to guide discussions on the efficacy of current recruitment practice based on their ability to address the barriers or reference the motivations.

Motivations for fostering.

Why do people foster and what has that got to do with recruitment? Understanding the motivation for fostering can help recruiters to target and identify people with “high foster care potential” (De Maeyer, Vanderfaeillie, Vanschoonlandt, Robberechts, & Van Holen, 2014). Rather than being the result of a single motivation, there is an interplay of several motivations that result in a person or couple choosing to foster (Migliorini, Rania, Cardinalli, Guiducci, & Cavanna, 2018; Rhodes, Cox, Orme, & Coakley, 2006). A Flemish study found that foster carers had an average of 8.96 reasons for fostering (De Maeyer et al., 2014). In this study which was conducted on 192 foster carers, a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 17 reasons were identified by the foster carers as motivations for caring. It used a modified version of a tool developed in an American study identifying the top reasons for fostering as being child centred (Rhodes et al., 2006). The Flemish study mirrored the results of the American study which was conducted on 108,592 foster families in 1991. In the two studies, the top motivations for fostering were listed as wanting to give a child a good home, wanting to provide a child with love, and wanting to provide a home for a child who would otherwise be in an institution (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006). In the two studies, 62.3% - 99.5% of foster carers identified with these motivations. In an Australian study, the top three motivations for fostering identified by foster carers were love for children, interest in the child’s wellbeing and wanting to share family resources (Delfabbro, Taplin, & Bentham, 2002). I conducted a small review of seven studies identified in during my literature review. The seven studies explored the motivations of foster carers and give a better glimpse of the complexity of the decision. The studies were conducted in 6 countries: The UK, Sweden, Italy, Australia, The USA and Belgium. Altogether they listed about 27 reasons why people foster. The table below presents the motivations found in the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation for fostering</th>
<th>Frequency of citation within the 7 studies</th>
<th>Frequency within in Top 3 motivations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like/love Children</td>
<td>4 (J. D. Brown, Gerria, Ivanova, Mehta, &amp; Skrodzki, 2012; Cole, 2005; Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012)</td>
<td>2 (Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to give a child love</td>
<td>3 (De Maey et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>2 (De Maey et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Want to give a child a home</td>
<td>3 (De Maey et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>2 (De Maey et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child's Wellbeing (Want to help/save/ rescue a vulnerable child/family)</td>
<td>5 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Cole, 2005; Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>2 (Cole, 2005; Delfabbro et al., 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to parent a child</td>
<td>3 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>1 (Migliorini et al., 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family enrichment (Want biological children to experience helping others/ instil in them values about helping the community and being aware of social issues)</td>
<td>3 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Migliorini et al., 2018)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Want to make use of their parenting skills</td>
<td>2 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Delfabbro et al., 2002)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experience being fostered or growing up in fostering family or with neglect and abuse</td>
<td>4 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Cole, 2005; De Maey et al., 2014; McDermid et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for companionship or Love</td>
<td>4 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; De Maey et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>As an expression of religion or spirituality</td>
<td>4 (J. D. Brown, George, Sintze, &amp; St. Arnault, 2009; De Maey et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to continue parenting after biological children leave home (empty nest)</td>
<td>4 (Andersson, 2001; J. D. Brown et al., 2012; McDermid et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>1 (Andersson, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot have children/adopt</td>
<td>6 (Andersson, 2001; J. D. Brown et al., 2012; De Maey et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td>1 (Andersson, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>References</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foster to adopt</td>
<td>4 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to help children from a culture they are part of or particularly identify with</td>
<td>1 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting a need in the community/ give back to society</td>
<td>5 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Cole, 2005; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006) 4 (Cole, 2005; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep families together</td>
<td>1 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain a sense of purpose</td>
<td>1 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing the family size/ companionship for children</td>
<td>4 (Cole, 2005; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the image of fostering</td>
<td>1 (Cole, 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide a good stable start in life</td>
<td>1 (Cole, 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness, grief or loss</td>
<td>4 (Cole, 2005; De Maeyer et al., 2014; Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay at home parent</td>
<td>2 (Andersson, 2001; McDermid et al., 2012) 1 (Andersson, 2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to share resources / have something to offer</td>
<td>2 (Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012) 2 (Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire a challenge/responsibility</td>
<td>2 (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; Delfabbro et al., 2002)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To increase family income</td>
<td>2 (Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single and want a child</td>
<td>1 (De Maeyer et al., 2014)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of the need</td>
<td>1 (McDermid et al., 2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To please partner</td>
<td>2 (De Maeyer et al., 2014; McDermid et al., 2012)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As the table above shows, the motivations for fostering are complex and quite varied. There have been several attempts at understanding and classifying why people foster. The section below will discuss two ways that researchers categorise motivations for fostering.

**Classifications of motivations**

In some of the literature, fostering motivations are classified as being intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations stem from the carer’s values, beliefs, standards, traits and perceptions;
and extrinsic motivations are driven by a perceived external reward (J. D. Brown et al., 2012; A. Helm, Peltier, & Scovotti, 2008; McDermid et al., 2012; Migliorini et al., 2018). There was inadequate explanation for these two categories within the literature. For example, the literature failed to disclose if the perceived external reward was for the carer or could include rewards/benefits for the child. Researchers also group motivations for fostering into three categories; child-focused, self-focused and community-oriented (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Migliorini et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006). These categories, though seemingly self-explanatory, can be construed differently by different researchers. For example, research on foster carers in Italy found that half of the fostering families who did not have a biological child listed wanting a child as the main motivation for fostering (Migliorini et al., 2018). The researchers in this case labelled this as a child-focused motivation, but this can also be labelled as a self-focused view if the motivation of having a child was for their own sense of happiness or completion. On the other hand, if they wanted to have a child because they wanted to love a child, this would qualify the motivation as being child focused. These two methods of categorising fostering motivations are not completely objective and leave room for interpretation by the researcher. One of the studies went beyond simple classification and used theory to explain why people foster. This will be discussed in the section below.

**Social Resource and Exchange Theories**

Some literature references social resource theory as a means of understanding why people foster. Social resource theory suggests that the more resources one has, the more likely they are to give it to another person. People exchange six types of resources when relating with each other; love, money, status, information, goods and services. Migliorini et al. (2018) suggest that foster carers foster because they have more of these resources. Indeed this is supported by foster carers who listed wanting to share their resources as a motivation for fostering (Delfabbro et al., 2002; McDermid et al., 2012). However, this view as described by Migliorini et al. (2018) seems to be inadequate and oversimplified. It does not, for example, explain why people who foster are in the lower income bracket and can thus be perceived as not having surplus resources. Perhaps it is the foster carer’s own perception of having more resources to give when compared to the children’s parents. This points towards altruistic motivations for fostering, if the foster carers perceive themselves as having more resources than the children. This includes intrinsic motivations such as wanting to give the child a home, stability and love. However, it also fails to account for the perceived benefits of fostering which account for a number of the motivations, especially the extrinsic ones.
Although not found within the literature on motivations for fostering, exchange theory may provide deeper insight into why people foster. Exchange theory has been used in social marketing theory to explain why people engage in certain behaviours (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). As the name suggests, exchange theory involves the reciprocal nature of social interactions. It is suggests that people engage in behaviours if they perceive benefits that are equal to or greater than the cost (Kazemi & Törnblom, 2012; Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). Where social resource theory presents an unequal balance of resources, social exchange theory accounts for perceived benefits. The previous chapter revealed the very personal cost of fostering to foster carers. However, it also revealed the perceived personal benefits of fostering. A look at the motivations for fostering shows that foster carers are motivated by perceived personal benefits as well as benefits for the children. This would explain a larger number of the motivations revealed by the seven studies including, family enrichment, desiring a challenge, finding a purpose, being an expression of religious beliefs, or wanting to increase family income. The perceived benefits of fostering may differ from person to person, but social exchange theory provides a better understanding of the reasons why people might foster. Indeed, it also accounts for why people often have several motivations rather than a singular one. It paints a picture of people performing internal ‘cost–benefits’ analysis, in order to make a decision on fostering.

The altruistic looking social resource theory might also present a problematic image of fostering. Although it presents foster carers as people with an abundance of resources, it does so at the cost of the image of the children who are fostered. These children seem to lose agency as participants in the fostering relationship, having been relegated to being recipients of social resource. In this case, the almost ‘angelic’ foster carer is seen taking on the ‘burdensome’ foster child. In this theory, the foster carers are the givers of these social resources that they hold in abundance while foster children are portrayed as takers or receivers. Such representations of fostering can be problematic as they contribute to stereotypes about foster carers and foster children which can affect recruitment. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the thesis. On the other hand, social exchange theory presents a more balanced view of the fostering relationship, with both carers and children contributing to the relationship. I posit that social exchange theory presents a much more realistic view of the fostering relationship, acknowledging the agency of both parties, and the value they can both bring to the relationship. Although minimal, the literature in the systematic review acknowledged that there are benefits to fostering. There has been substantial research on the benefits of fostering for children in care, but there is an evident
need for more research on the benefits of fostering for the carers and family. This might help recruiters in their practice.

**Implications for Recruitment**

The data from the seven studies reveals how complex the decision to foster is. The data also contradicts the stereotype of foster carers being motivated by money. Stereotypes about fostering will be discussed in greater detail in other sections of this thesis. Although the attempts at classifying and theorising motivations for fostering were subjective and underdeveloped, the literature did paint a clear picture of foster carers. It showed that foster carers are people who love children and want them either in addition to the ones they already have or as a means of starting a family. They are aware of the need either because of prior experience fostering or being fostered, or because they were neglected or abused and do not want other children to go through it. This data also shows that foster carers are interested in the child’s wellbeing and want to respond as an expression of their religion or as a contribution to society. They are also people who have the time to care, sometimes because one is a stay-at-home parent.

Marketers have long utilised knowledge on motivations for a behaviour to craft a marketing campaign. In many ways recruitment of foster carers happens within the marketing field, as will be evidenced in the finding’s chapters. Numerous studies similarly have also recommended that characteristics and motivations of carers should be used in the recruitment of foster carers (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014b; A. Helm et al., 2008; McDermid et al., 2012). These factors are also used in the formal assessment of potential foster carers (Alper & Howe, 2015; Blazey et al., 2013; Luke & Sebba, 2013). There are several ways that this information can be used in recruitment. For example, the need to respond to a need in the direct community was cited in 5 studies and listed as a top reason in four. This can be used by local authorities to recruit foster carers within their local authority who have strong ties to their community and desire to improve it. This section has revealed information that can be valuable for recruiters. Whether or not recruiters are utilising this knowledge will be explored later in the paper. The next section will now discuss the barriers to fostering which can affect recruitment.

**Barriers to fostering.**

Some research has been conducted to reveal some of the barriers to fostering (A. Helm et al., 2008; McDermid et al., 2012; Randle, Miller, Dolnicar, & Ciarrochi, 2014). Although the categories were not used in the literature, obstacles to fostering can be categorised as child focused, system focused and self-focused. System focused obstacles are highly
influenced by negative media coverage of the foster care system. They include mistrust of social workers (McDermid et al., 2012), poor public image of the social services (McDermid et al., 2012; Metcalfe & Humphreys, 2000), fear of receiving inadequate support from social services and worry about the nature of the relationship with social workers (Metcalfe & Humphreys, 2000). Potential foster carers also fear rejection during the assessment process (McDermid et al., 2012). The issue of the public opinion of the care system will be covered in more detail later in this chapter.

Self-focused barriers to fostering are based on perceived and real inadequacies felt by the foster carers. These include lack of awareness of the need, lack of understanding of the fostering task (McDermid et al., 2012) and not feeling like they were good enough for the job (Metcalfe & Humphreys, 2000). Potential foster carers also fear that their motivations could be questioned, and that they could be perceived as being in it for the money (McDermid et al., 2012).

Child focused obstacles are based on the child and their biological families. These include a fear of the child’s problems, discomfort of the children being returned to the family (McDermid et al., 2012) and fear of issues with the biological parents (Metcalfe & Humphreys, 2000).

One of the top barriers to fostering is the public opinion of fostering. This includes the perception of foster care and the care system within which it is found. The section below will explore this concept in greater detail.

**Public Opinion of Fostering**

To date, no research has focussed on the public opinion and/or perception of foster care in the UK. However, some literature indicates that this opinion is low. A study on the recruitment of foster carers in the UK noted that poor public image of social services was consistently mentioned as an obstacle (Metcalfe & Humphreys, 2000). More recently, the 2017 report on foster care in England points to courts and local authorities having a lack of confidence in the quality of care provided through foster care, leading to it being viewed as a last resort (Baginsky et al., 2017). The gravity of this statement in a national report should not be underestimated. If the very courts and authorities directly involved in placements have a low opinion of foster care, the public would scarcely be expected to hold better opinions giving their limited understanding of the care system. The foster care system is plagued by the untrue narrative that it is a failing system that does not give stability to children and has carers who are driven by money (a narrative that I too was guilty of holding). Although this
Foster Carer or Foster Parent, does it matter?

To some the term used to refer to people who foster may seem like an issue of semantics, but to different people involved, it holds deeper meaning. Some long-term foster carers choose to identify as foster parents in order to help normalise their foster child’s experience as well as to steer clear of the negative and clinical stereotype attached to the term “carer” (Blythe et al., 2013, 2012). In identifying as foster parents, they are declaring their love, commitment and attachment to the child they care for, wanting others (including the child) to know that they see their care as more than ‘just a job’. While the two titles of being a carer or a parent are often pitted against each other, the roles are not mutually exclusive and foster carers often find themselves holding the two identities at once. A study by Schofield et al. (2013) revealed the different ways in which carers approach these identities. Majority of the participants in this study mainly identified either as carers or parents, but also accepted and identified with the other role as part of their daily experience. For example, there were carers who primarily identified as professional carers while also having parental commitment to the child. Additionally, there were foster parents who recognised the benefits of being a skilled professional who was an integral part of a child’s care plan (Schofield et al., 2013). These two groups of carers were flexible in their identity and role, often allowing their relationship with the child and the child’s needs to shape their identity. Some who primarily identified as carers...
did so in deference to the relationship their foster child had with their biological parents, while others who identified as parents did so because of the expressed wishes of the child to have a parental relationship with their foster parent. The study, conducted in the UK, also revealed that some participants chose to identify solely as a carer or a parent, often feeling that the other identity impinged on their duties. These strong feelings of identity as being either a carer or a mother were also echoed in studies in Australia (Blythe et al., 2013, 2012).

On the other end of the foster carer vs foster parent debate is the professionalization of fostering. Led by organisations such as The Fostering Network, this movement is as a result of foster carers feeling that their integral role in the care of a child is often undermined by the care system (Schofield et al., 2013). Studies conducted on foster carers have revealed that they often feel helpless, and their expertise is neither sought nor valued when important decisions are made about children in their care (Austerberry et al., 2013; Samrai et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2008). The move to recognise the unique skills and expertise of foster carers is thus perceived as being beneficial to both the carers and the children. However, labelling them as foster carers can play into the stereotypes already held publicly about them. The push to advertise it as a professional job, including advertising the pay, may not help to fight the stereotype that foster carers are ‘motivated by money and do not love children’.

The matter of compensation of foster carers remains a controversial topic for many people. In the foster home, it can be the elephant in the room, serving as an uncomfortable issue for the foster carer and foster child. Some foster parents recognise the need for compensation but also recognise society’s discomfort with parental love being paid for (Butler & Charles, 1999). A national study on the public perception of foster care in the US revealed inconsistencies in the public perception of foster carer compensation (Leber & LeCroy, 2012). When asked about whether people foster because of the money they receive from the government, 38% agreed that they do while 50% disagreed and 12% were unsure. On the other hand, 52% of people surveyed agreed that it is ok for financial compensation to play a role in the decision to foster while 39% disagreed. Finally, when asked if the financial compensation received was enough to cover child-care, only 26% agreed while 44% disagreed. Although this study was done in the US it points to the underlying issue shared by many, which is that people are uncomfortable about putting a price on parental care, especially when it is for children who are vulnerable and in need of care and protection (Leber & LeCroy, 2012). Foster carers do not want to be seen to be motivated solely by money (Doyle & Melville, 2013). An Australian study on foster carer motivations found supplementing the family income to be the lowest motivation identified by foster carers out of 18 motivations (Delfabbro et al., 2002).
two studies that mentioned money as a motivation for fostering, it was neither the only motivation nor a top one (Delfabbro et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 2006).

Regardless of the fact that money is not the main motivation, discussions on compensation are difficult for the public to understand. Indeed it caused the researcher some discomfort to read a study by (Kirton, 2001) in which one carer discussed feeling like some children were worth the compensation while others weren’t. The study which was done in the UK in 1997 explored how recent changes in compensation were perceived by foster carers. It highlighted the very nuanced role of financial compensation in the fostering experience. As the carers evaluated the joys and challenges of fostering and compared it with the compensation, easy placements were perceived as being worth the compensation while harder ones were not seen as being well compensated. ‘It has crossed my mind. I think: “Oh, no, this one is worth twice as much as another child” . . . but if the chemistry isn’t right between you, they can be diabolical and if it’s fine, you can handle it’ (Kirton, 2001 p.201). Despite some foster carers having these thoughts, compensation played little part in any of the 20 carer’s motivation to foster. In the study, eleven of the twenty carers identified the fostering task as being akin to parenting, three portrayed it as a job and six felt that it was a hybrid between the two. Interestingly, the identification of fostering either as a job or a parenting task, was not correlated with views on compensation. Some carers who identified with it as a parenting task still felt that the compensation was insufficient for the task. Furthermore, identifying with fostering as a parenting task did not exempt foster carers from desiring to be treated professionally by social workers. As was later highlighted by Leber & LeCroy (2012), Kirton (2001) found that carers who viewed fostering as a hybrid between parenting and a job did so in response to the needs of the child they were fostering, with one carer describing herself as a parent to the child with her under long term care, while also describing caring for another child with her on a temporary basis as a job because he had a relationship with his family. Both studies noted that the professionalisation of foster care is hard as fostering is both a public matter and a private one. It is the professionalization of an intimate and personal space; the home, which brings with it risks and benefits.

Foster care stands out as a successful and crucial tool for the care of children in the care system in many countries. In the UK, the system caters for over 70% of children in care and many studies reveal that the task of fostering is undertaken by people who are skilled, passionate, caring, and professional. Whether they choose to identify as foster parents, foster carers or both, is a highly nuanced debate that affects all parties involved, and shapes the public perception of foster care, inadvertently affecting the recruitment of foster carers.
When it comes to recruitment of new foster carers, it is unclear if fostering agencies and local authorities understand how the decision to highlight foster care as a profession (e.g., by mentioning compensation) or as a passion (e.g., by appealing to intrinsic motivations) is received and perceived by the public and potential foster carers. Foster carer recruiters may unwittingly be undermining their own work by depicting stereotypes and misconceptions already held by the public. Well intentioned decisions such as the professionalization of foster care may achieve positive effects for the fostering experience but may be perceived by the public as monetizing parental care. As will be discussed later in this chapter, recruitment has the unique opportunity of shaping public opinion and educating the public on foster care. In doing so, it may improve public perception of foster care and attract new carers who were held back by misconceptions and stereotypes.

CURRENT RESEARCH ON FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT
Having identified the importance of recruitment and its potential in impacting children’s experience of permanence in foster care the third step in my literature review was to look at current research in foster carer recruitment. There have been recent advances in how we understand foster care recruitment, especially in Australia where Melanie Randle has dedicated over a decade in incorporating social marketing techniques into research on foster carer recruitment. This section will discuss some of Randle’s work as well as other key studies from around the world, focusing on what they reveal about recruitment.

Message Framing in recruitment advertisements
As mentioned earlier, Randle’s research connects fostering recruitment with marketing. Foster carer recruitment falls in a special category of advertising which has sometimes been linked with non-profit marketing. However, Randle, Miller, Stirling, & Dolnicar (2016) posit that it does not fall in the same category. The act of giving donations is different from that of becoming a volunteer and vastly different from becoming a foster carer who may be viewed as a highly engaged paid volunteer. Randle, Miller, Stirling, & Dolnicar (2016) identify the unique task of becoming a foster carer as a high-cognitive-behaviour donation because it requires considerable effort and commitment from the person. In their study, they argue that marketing techniques based on monetary donation do not fit foster carer recruitment campaigns; instead, foster carer recruitment campaigns can be likened to campaigns for organ donation (Randle et al., 2016). The message framing techniques employed by non-profits are therefore unsuitable or not as effective when used in foster carer recruitment. Each of these messages must be framed differently in order to influence people’s behaviours. What is message framing?
Message framing is a marketing tool designed to influence people to engage in a specific behaviour. Although this includes the choice of wording, it also involves the use of vivid imagery, poignant words and persuasive statistics. Chang & Lee (2009) found that the framing of an advertisement is effective at influencing people’s donation behaviours. The study found that negative framing was more effective than positive framing in eliciting donations (Chang & Lee, 2009). This is why advertisements that are negatively framed to induce guilt in the viewer are effective at eliciting donations. Building on this research, Randle et al. (2016) conducted research that found that negative framing is not as effective when recruiting foster carers. They posit that this is because negative framing elicits guilt which is an emotion that is effective when the action does not involve much thought. However, when it comes to tasks that require elaborate thinking, positive messages produce lower psychological reactance and are perceived less as having manipulative intent; they thus produce more long-term positive reactions (Randle et al., 2016). Unlike other foster carer recruitment research and reports, this study was not based on actual campaigns. Instead, the researchers created marketing materials and tested them on potential foster carers. It found that potential carers were more likely to respond to positive framing than negative framing.

The work by Randle et al. (2016) stands out amongst literature on foster carer recruitment because it discusses and analyses the content of recruitment marketing material and how it connects with human behaviour. In an area with such sparse research, this study provides critical information that can be used to shape recruitment practice. While this study focused on framing advertisement messages to illicit certain emotions, the following section will explore cultural framing.

Cultural Framing in recruitment campaigns
Cultural framing is necessary for appealing to specific cultures that match the needs of the foster care system. A study by Colton, Roberts, & Williams (2008) found great diversity in motivations to foster. These varied from country to country and were influenced by religion, fostering systems and cultural traditions. Foster carer recruiters can thus appeal to ethnic and cultural motivations for becoming a foster carer in order to meet their matching needs. This has been done by appealing to cultural values (Capello, 2013), creating posters in other languages (Clift, 2011), understanding cultural influences on motives (A. Helm et al., 2008), and changing the language used in the exploration and training sessions to accommodate other cultures (Capello, 2013). Two campaigns illustrate the use of cultural framing for recruitment.
The first of this is an Australian campaign which chose to have the same message and campaign translated into several languages (Clift, 2011). The campaign undertaken in New South Wales, Australia, surpassed its target of 20,000 hits to the website and calls, receiving 25,000 hits and calls during the campaign period. This was 4 times the number of phone enquiries in the previous year. It also managed to get 7.5 million impressions online, with the main video being viewed 82,675 times (Clift, 2011). While this was not a scientific study, marketing methods often include elements of scientific rigor such as the use of focus groups and measurements of effect. The team in this campaign eliminated confounding variables by ensuring no other foster carer recruitment campaigns were running during the same period.

The second campaign that made use of cultural farming was conducted in the USA. Capello (2013) describe making many adjustments in their processes to recruit more Hispanic foster carers to compensate for the growing number of Hispanic children in foster care in the USA. They did so by creating ads in Spanish and placing them in spaces frequented by Hispanic people. The training sessions were in Spanish, and assessment was done with a bilingual Spanish speaker present. They also trained staff on the cultural values such as ‘respeto’ that were highly linked with motivations to foster and accessed services that would assist Latino families (Capello, 2013).

This USA campaign went further than the Australian one by using knowledge on Hispanic culture to shape the advertising, placement of marketing materials, and by conducting trainings, workshops and assessments in Spanish. The campaign also presented a more holistic image of recruitment by going beyond advertisements. The two campaigns present examples that would benefit recruiters in England, who as discussed earlier, are faced with the need to build a more diverse pool of foster carers to meet the ethnic and cultural needs of children in foster care. This, as mentioned earlier, can improve children’s experience of permanence in foster care.

**Assessment of Foster Carers**

Moving away from the focus on recruitment campaigns, this section will present research on the assessment process which occurs during the later stages of recruitment. Like other areas of recruitment research, this too is a neglected area. The aim of this part of recruitment is to assess if an applicant’s circumstances and characteristics would enable them to be an effective foster carer (Luke & Sebba, 2013). However, an international literature review on foster carer assessment found that the predictability of the instruments was not tested. Research identified by the review failed to find a link between the characteristics and competencies tested, and the success of foster carers they assessed. Many of the studies
included in the review failed to test successful outcomes such as achievement of permanency, stable placements, carer retention and child safety & well-being (Luke & Sebb, 2013). Considering how high the stakes are in foster care, it is troubling that the very instruments used to identify and assess potential carers have not been adequately tested for their ability to perform this role.

Part of the issue with current assessment instruments may lie in how they have been developed. Rather than being developed for their specific role, assessment has historically borrowed from assessment tools used in other social work situations such as safeguarding (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014b). Although both situations involve assessments of an individual within the context of their relationships and environment, they have different objectives and thus should have different approaches. If the original tools of assessment were primarily developed to identify risk and to mitigate it, it would contribute to an adversarial approach to foster carer assessment. Although identification of potential risk is one goal of foster carer assessments, it is one of many goals (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014b). Approaching a foster carer assessment with the same attitude and tools as those used to assess a biological parent who is considered to be at risk to their children would likely lead to an adversarial interaction and assessment. Steering away from this adversarial approach, the literature review on assessments of foster carers presents a relational approach to fostering assessment where the assessor and applicant work together during the assessment (Luke & Sebb, 2013).

Another potential issue identified in current assessment is that it appears to have been modelled on white heterosexual couples, subjecting applicants who do not fit into this ‘criteria’ to additional scrutiny. Earlier in this paper I noted the need to attract a more diverse group of carers to suit matching needs for children from ethnic minorities. It is possible that this lack of carers from ethnic minorities could be due to implicit bias built into the assessment process. H. C. Brown & Brown (2014) note that assessors may be at risk of making assumptions about people who are ‘superficially similar’ to them. The authors describe how social workers in such situations may assume that they share similar experiences, perceptions and feelings and thus be less thorough in the person’s evaluation. The authors do note that this can happen in any situation, not just when a white social worker is assessing a white applicant. However, given the demographics of England being a white majority country, this bias would likely favour the majority population.

While the authors were cognisant of implicit bias when it comes to race and ethnicity, their discussion on the assessment of gay and lesbian carers was far less inclusive. The authors have been developing a model for assessing gay and lesbian foster carers which they presented (H. PhD in Education, The University of Edinburgh, 2021
Additional functions of recruitment
The final literature on recruitment to be presented in this chapter is on the additional functions of recruitment. The literature revealed that fostering recruitment does not just serve the immediate need of bringing in more foster carers. It also serves as a form of awareness raising and can impact the public brand of fostering. These two functions shall be discussed below.

Awareness raising
Foster carer recruitment educates, raises awareness, and shapes public opinion of foster care. Part of this is because the general public can be quite unaware or ignorant of what foster care is or what fostering entails. This was mentioned as one of the barriers to fostering presented earlier in this chapter. In one Australian study conducted on foster carer recruitment, 52% of 756 participants in a survey indicated that they did not know anything about foster carer recruitment (Randle et al., 2014). In situations like this, recruitment material functions more as a tool for raising awareness and educating the public about fostering. A study on the effectiveness of a foster carer recruitment campaign in Australia provided further insight on this (Delfabbro, Borgas, Vast, & Osborn, 2017). The study was able to uncover the habits of people interacting with recruitment material, noting that many people use recruitment campaigns as a means of obtaining information about fostering rather than responding immediately and applying to become a foster carer. This points to the lack of information available on foster care that is accessible by the public. It also points to the role recruitment
plays in demystifying foster care, educating the public as well as recruiting carers. The study concluded that this is the reason why large recruitment campaigns do not always result in an increase in carer numbers as they serve the purpose of education (Delfabbro et al., 2017).

If provision of information is a key component of foster carer recruitment material, the lack of clarity, inconsistency of information and confusion reported in the industry should be concerning (Baginsky et al., 2017; Berrick, Shauffer, & Rodriguez, 2011). Inconsistency in the provision of accurate information on fostering hinders foster care recruitment. As Sheldon (2002) reported, having a sustained presence locally is the key to reaching potential foster carers. The national report for the Department for Education found that the competitive and aggressive way local authorities and agencies ran recruitment campaigns left potential foster carers feeling confused (Baginsky et al., 2017). The competition had even resulted in ‘golden hellos’ which are incentives some agencies use to poach registered foster carers from other agencies or local authorities (Baginsky et al., 2017; Narey & Owens, 2018). The confusion in the recruitment industry was reiterated in the 2018 review for the Department of Education which suggested that a national campaign would address this issue (Narey & Owens, 2018). This would serve to demystify fostering and provide consistent information on fostering, removing the noise created by the competitive and inconsistent agency specific marketing. Joint campaigns can also help meet the need for provision of consistent information on fostering. Joint efforts have proven to be a successful strategy for authorities in the North West of England who run a joint campaign, ‘You can Foster’ (Narey & Owens, 2018). Another example of combined efforts is found in North London where 6 local authorities run a Facebook page for fostering (Stringfellow, Keegan, & Rowley, 2019). The campaign in New South Wales, Australia, is another example of a joint campaign run by an independent agency put together purely for the sake of raising awareness (Clift, 2011).

Rebranding foster care

Branding may appear as an unlikely need when it comes to foster care, but a campaign in Australia successfully proved the impact of rebranding foster care (Clift, 2011). The campaign managed to achieve and surpass its goals by creating a campaign that rebranded foster care and targeted a wider and more diverse audience than the typical foster carer. They felt the need to rebrand foster care because foster care is largely invisible in Australia, and just like the UK, it is not often depicted positively. When discussed in the news, it is often in relation to tragic deaths. It is frequently not seen as a community undertaking and is associated negatively with the ‘faceless bureaucracy’ of local authorities (Clift, 2011). The Australian campaign, run on behalf of the Department of Community Services, used focus groups and
journals to gain understanding of the public’s perception of fostering as well as their motivations and obstacles to it. The three themes that emerged were centred on potential carers’ kindness, fear of the children and a cultural desire to restore a lost childhood. These three things became the focus of the advertising campaign which was notably done in multiple languages to appeal to different cultural backgrounds (Clift, 2011).

Berrick et al. (2011) also took a marketing approach to foster carer recruitment, viewing it as a branding issue. Their study reported heterogeneity in approach and messaging when it comes to foster carer recruitment in the US. They found that although common recruitment strategies followed recognized best practice, they were not based on the motivations for fostering and were not targeted at attracting quality foster carers. Berrick et al. (2011) posited that branding would not only deliver a clear message, but also connect to the target audience’s emotions and motivate them to act. They therefore conducted a study to develop the brand identity of an ideal quality foster carer. This was summarised in 6 themes; flexibility, teachability, team player, loving, interested in strengthening a family, and up for a challenge (Berrick et al., 2011). The Australian study was successful in using the 6 themes to create a marketing strategy that several authorities were willing to use, but they did not go on to report their process and findings for using the campaign (Berrick et al., 2011). They noted that some limitations to such recruitment campaigns is that they cannot be measured as easily as most marketing campaigns. Whereas marketing campaigns are evaluated by increase in sales, foster carer recruitment is more of a long game in that foster carers sometimes consider recruiting for several years before making the decision to foster (Berrick et al., 2011). While the study feels incomplete without the results from the implementation of the branding focused campaigns, it does start the conversation on an important need that can be served by foster carer recruitment. Rebranding foster care could change the public perception of foster care and attract a more diverse group of foster carers that would match the needs of the agencies.

Conclusion on current literature on recruitment
The exploration of the literature on recruitment has unveiled a behemoth task for recruiters. Recruitment must meet a very urgent need for foster carers, but not just any carers. It needs to find the right carers who match the needs of the children in the care system. This includes meeting needs for ethnically and culturally diverse carers, as well as carers who are able to take in the placements that are harder to find matches for. It also identified issues within the assessment phase that may hamper fostering agencies’ ability to meet this need. Aside from the demographic needs, recruitment needs to identify carers with the right character traits.
that contribute to successful placements. Recruiters do this while working against the barriers to fostering. They have some research knowledge available to them to aid them in recruitment, including knowledge on motivations for fostering, and some research on how to frame their advertising culturally and positively for optimal results. The poor public image of fostering means that recruiters have an additional need for rebranding foster care. Moreover, public ignorance about fostering means that recruiters also have to serve the function of raising awareness and educating the public.

Recruitment appears to be more than just advertising. Rather, as the literature suggests, foster carer recruitment is influenced by numerous factors, both personal and public. As a result, recruitment needs to target multiple levels of society. Recruitment influences on the personal level to attract the right carers as well as the public sphere to raise awareness and dispel common myths and misconceptions about fostering. There is an apparent need to find a way to properly study these multi-level strategies in order to adequately understand foster carer recruitment. I sought out to find an appropriate model for this purpose. Such a multi-pronged strategy is described in ecological models in social marketing. Ecological models suggest that some of the most powerful behaviour change interventions are those that are crafted to influence the market at multiple levels (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). The next section will discuss ecological models and how they can be used to understand foster carer recruitment.

**USING ECOLOGICAL MODELS TO UNDERSTAND AND STUDY RECRUITMENT**

My undergraduate studies in Psychology were my first introduction to ecological models, specifically, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model for child development. Though developed in the fields of developmental and social psychology, ecological models are used widely in other fields. Indeed, social work which tends to borrow from psychology, has incorporated ecological perspectives into its work. This section will begin by introducing ecological models. It will then discuss the use of ecological models in other fields. Finally, the section will conclude by adapting the ecological approach to foster carer recruitment.

**Introduction to ecological models**

Ecological models are all based on the basic principle that the environment within which an individual or organism is in has an impact on them. As mentioned earlier, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory significantly impacted development psychology by providing a more holistic understanding of the various factors that affect a child’s development. His theory explored how a child’s development is affected by 5 systems: the Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner,
The Microsystem is composed of close relationships that the child has direct contact with. These include family, close friends and teachers. The next system is the mesosystem which is the relationships between the child’s Microsystems, such as teachers interacting with parents. The exosystem which is next, incorporates both formal and informal structures which do not contain the child but can affect the child. This can include the neighbourhood, or the parent’s workplace. The macrosystem encompasses the cultural elements that affect the child including community beliefs, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. The final system is the chronosystem which encompasses major life events, transitions, and historical events (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The diagram below illustrates this model.

![Ecological Systems Theory Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020)*

Although it is a prominent model, Bronfenbrenner’s model is not the only ecological model. The table below provides an overview of key ecological models and the components they introduce.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecological Model</th>
<th>Components</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Lewin, 1951) Field theory</td>
<td>Life space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Barker, 1968) Environmental/ecological psychology</td>
<td>Behaviour settings – physical and social situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>Levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) Ecological systems theory                     | Microsystems  
|                                                                      | Mesosystems  
|                                                                      | Exosystems  
|                                                                      | Macrosystems  
|                                                                      | Chronosystems |
| (Bandura, 1977, 1986) Social learning theory                         | Behaviour  
| Social cognitive theory                                              | Person  
|                                                                      | Environment (mainly social)  
|                                                                      | Reciprocal determinism |
| (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988) Social ecological model   | Intrapersonal  
|                                                                      | Interpersonal  
|                                                                      | Organizational  
|                                                                      | Community  
|                                                                      | Public policy |
| (Stokols, 1992) Social ecology model for health promotion            | Personal attributes  
|                                                                      | Physical environments  
|                                                                      | Social environments  
|                                                                      | Environments are multidimensional (i.e., varying levels of complexity and scale)  
|                                                                      | Human–environment interactions occur at multiple levels and are reciprocal |

*Table 5. Ecological Models (Salmon, Hesketh, Arundell, Downing, & Biddle, 2020)*

Each of these models tries to describe the major components in human ‘ecosystems’ with some focusing on the interactions between the components. Noticeably, the components appear to focus on one individual, starting with their personal attributes, attitudes and relationships, moving outward as the individual interacts with other external components. Each model also has its limitations. McLeroy’s has been criticised for failing to recognise the significance of culture and class. Lewis’s model was criticised for being too simplistic, leading Bandura to introduce the concept of ‘reciprocal determinism’ which recognised the reciprocal interactions between the person and their environment (Salmon et al., 2020). Despite their individual shortcomings, ecological models are important because they recognize the various environmental factors that influence/affect a person’s development and/or behaviour. They are criticised for being too general, but I find that this is also their key strength. This non-specificity provides a framework that each field can adapt to the ecosystems that they are studying, which is why they have been adopted into so many disciplines.
The fields of public health and social marketing use the ecological approach to influence behaviour change (Lindridge et al., 2013; Salmon et al., 2020). For example, it has been used in high-income countries to reduce smoking rates by addressing it at multiple levels (Salmon et al., 2020). The figure below shows how the ecological perspective is used to understand health behaviours and craft interventions that influence them. In true ecological fashion, the model above groups key factors in different levels. In this case, the main components of this model are ‘individual’, ‘social’ and ‘environmental’. Each of these levels is made up of key factors that affect health showing how it was adapted to the field.

![Ecological model of factors associated with health behaviours](Salmon et al., 2020)

The adaptability of ecological models can be viewed as their biggest strength as well as their biggest weakness. Ecological model’s failure to identify specific variables, to define the extent to which their interactions with each other affect a behaviour, and to prescribe interventions is thus seen as a challenge (Salmon et al., 2020). Any field wishing to apply this approach must explore and describe their own ‘ecosystems’ and determine what the key components and relationships are. It is only then that a field can prescribe interventions or actions to influence a change.

In social work, ecological approaches work alongside systems theory (Ungar, 2002). One significant example of this is Munro’s use of a system’s approach to explore failures in child protection which traditionally focused on finding human error (Caffrey & Munro, 2017). The systems approach placed human error at the centre of the ‘ecosystem’ and traced the
different factors that may have impacted upon the individual’s judgement. Following in Munro’s footsteps, D. Helm & Roesch-Marsh (2017) explore how an ecological perspective can be used to understand and to improve social worker’s judgements. Veering slightly from placing the individual at the centre of the ecosystem, these two examples place behaviours at the centre of the ecosystem and examine the impact that personal, societal and organisational factors play in impacting a social worker’s judgments. The figure below presents the ecological model adopted by D. Helm & Roesch-Marsh (2017).

![Ecological model of a social worker’s judgements](image)

*Figure 3. Ecological model of a social worker’s judgements (D. Helm & Roesch-Marsh, 2017)*

The model is, like most adaptations of the ecological approach, very specific to this context. It can likely be adopted by fields studying employees or employee decisions and behaviours within a certain organisation, but it is inadequate in describing the environment in which foster carer recruitment takes place. The model would exclude key components in fostering recruitment discussed earlier in this thesis. How then can one apply the ecological approach to recruitment? The next section will explore this by identifying and adapting another ecological model for this purpose.

**Applying the ecological approach to recruitment**

Although there is no prescribed method of creating an ecological model or applying the ecological model to a given ecosystem, in this section I will use core ecological principles to adapt the approach to fostering recruitment. This will be done by identifying the known characteristics of the fostering recruitment.

The centre of the ecosystem is one of the key elements to identify when creating or adapting an ecological model. Each ‘ecosystem’ in the models presented was organised around one
individual or behaviour. In the social work ecological model above the behaviour was social work judgments while in the health model the centre of the ecosystem was an individual. This is not to suggest that the individual or behaviour is the most important or most impactful component in the ecosystem, rather that they are the focus of the model. In the case of fostering recruitment, the potential foster carer is the point of focus and thus the centre of the ecosystem.

Having identified the centre of the ecosystem, the next step is to identify the other key components of the system. These were outlined in the earlier sections of this chapter. The biological family is one of the major components that can influence the decision to foster or to quit fostering. Fostering organisations and their recruitment activities might also qualify as a major component that would influence a potential carer’s decision to foster. Additionally, myths, stereotypes and the public opinion on fostering can impact a potential carer’s attitudes towards fostering, forming a third major component.

Taking these known characteristics of the fostering recruitment ecosystem, I compared them to current ecological models. Bronfenbrenner’s was the closest match to this. I therefore used the Bronfenbrenner model to create the initial draft of the ecological model for fostering recruitment. The figure shows the initial adaptation of the model.

![Figure 4. Draft of the ecological model for foster carer recruitment (author’s own)](image)

As the figure above shows, there were two fields that didn’t fit into the recruitment model. These are the mesosystem and the chronosystem. Given the scarcity of information available on fostering recruitment I opted to keep the two levels in the draft of the model in case the data revealed information that fit into the levels. This draft model was used later during data analysis to organise information about fostering recruitment. This provided to be useful in
helping describe the fostering recruitment ecosystem. Using the data from the research, the model was adapted further. This included renaming the levels or systems to provide a better description of the components they contained. The findings section of this chapter will present the final version of this ecological model for foster carer recruitment model.

CONCLUSION
This chapter has been a journey across multiple disciplines. Weaving together knowledge from the fields of psychology, social work, public health and social marketing, the chapter has presented some of the major factors to consider when studying fostering recruitment. The chapter begun by highlighting the evident need for more foster carers to meet the increase of children entering care and to improve the matching process. The chapter then went on to discuss the major motivations and barriers to fostering, which are key factors affecting recruitment. It then went on to highlight key research on effective methods in the framing of recruitment ads and campaigns. Finally, the chapter presented the ecological perspective that ties all of these components together, highlighting the multiple systems affecting a potential carers’ decision to foster. Although this is a wealth of information, it fails to accurately describe the field of fostering recruitment, raising numerous questions. How are recruiters meeting the demand for foster carers? Is the need creating a desperation that results in accepting ‘any carers’ rather than the ‘right carers’ who meet the very specific demographic needs of the agency? Do motivations and barriers to fostering factor into recruitment strategy and practice? Are recruiters framing advertisements positively or are they influenced by the negative strategies of non-profit donation campaigns? Are ads and campaigns culturally framed to attract the diverse demographics of carers that are needed? And finally, is recruitment practice targeting the multiple systems that affect a person’s decision to foster? The next chapter presents the methodology that was used to tackle these questions.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

The first three chapters introduced the importance of permanence and stability within foster care. They also identified foster carers as a key factor affecting children’s experience of permanence and stability in foster care. The literature review revealed an apparent gap in the recruitment of foster carers, and also provided an ecological understanding of how the decision to foster is affected by factors at multiple levels. This chapter presents the methodology created to explore the fostering recruitment ‘ecosystem’. The chapter will begin by discussing exploratory research and why it accurately describes the aims of this research. The next section will describe the research population that the study will cover. Next will be three sections discussing the three methodologies selected for the research. This will be followed by descriptions of the ethics process and a reflection on the data collection process and how it was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter will end with the presentation of the participants who took place in the research and how the data was analysed.

INTRODUCTION

The scarcity of research in this field lends this initial research towards methods that are exploratory and descriptive in nature. Exploratory research is often a neglected and undervalued form of research in the social sciences (Stebbins, 2001). In his book on exploratory research, Stebbins (2001) explains how exploration aims to be as broad and as thorough as possible. It seeks to describe every area of importance in a phenomenon. Similarly, descriptive research explores what is currently happening in the field (Mikszta & Elpus, 2018). This involves describing the characteristics of a phenomenon (Ivey, 2016). Exploratory and descriptive research are often used when little is known about a given phenomenon. Using broad and systematic methods, this type of research provides a foundation of knowledge upon which future research can be built. The ecological approach mentioned in the previous chapter highlighted the importance of understanding the key components within an ecosystem in order to guide the development of interventions. Exploratory research would fulfil this function, providing a foundation upon which future research can build. With this in mind I crafted three research questions focused on exploring and describing the landscape and process of foster carer recruitment in England.

- What is the process of foster carer recruitment in England?
- What are the factors affecting foster carer recruitment in England?
- How do the methods of recruitment help or hamper the recruitment of foster carers in England?
In order to develop the research methodology, I first sought to understand the research population. This will be described in the section below.

**POPULATION**

There are many organisations that participate in recruitment of foster carers. They can be assigned to two major groups: fostering organisations and network organisations. The primary difference between these two groups is that fostering organisations have children placed with them for fostering while networks do not. Networks participate in recruitment, training and/or support of foster carers. Some networks also participate in advocacy and campaigning, while others also offer support and training for social workers and other staff in the fostering organisations.

**Fostering Organisations**

There are two major categories of fostering organisations: Local authorities (LAs), and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). Fostering falls under the jurisdiction of the Department for Education in England. However, I found limited and conflicting information available about the organisations that foster. One report by the Department of Education lists 444 fostering organisations in the England in 2020 (Department for Education, 2020a). This includes 144 local authorities and 300 Independent Fostering Organisations. The list however is not comprehensive as it has incomplete contact details and does not differentiate between types of IFAs. It does, however, contain physical addresses for every fostering organisation it lists. Curiously, another report by the Department of Education sites 431 fostering organisations, including 138 LAs (Department for Education, 2020c). Both these documents were released in the same year and are an indication of how hard it is to navigate the fostering landscape. For my own research, I was able to find 409 contacts for fostering organisations but some of these emails generated error messages when contacted proving how difficult it is to find accurate information. There is an evident need for comprehensive information on fostering organisations in England.

Local Authorities (LAs) are run by the government and are based on geographical administrative areas. In some areas, two or more local authorities combine their fostering programmes to run joint campaigns or joint fostering programmes. An example of this is Foster 4 in northern England which is run by Cheshire West and Chester Council, Halton Borough Council and Warrington Borough Council. In other areas, Local Authorities run their fostering services through a trust. For example, Doncaster Children’s Trust runs fostering for Doncaster Borough Council. Local Authorities maintain legal responsibility for all children in care in their area as children come into care through the local authority. If the
LA cannot find a good match for a child among their carers, they place the child with a foster carer in an Independent Fostering Agency and pay the IFA for this service. IFAs then pay their carers. These activities are monitored by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) which inspects and regulates all children’s services including fostering in LAs and IFAs. An OFSTED report can influence a carer’s choice in fostering organisations as well as a placement social worker’s decision to place a child with an IFA. 63% of all foster placements are within LAs (Department for Education, 2020c).

Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) are either run for profit or run by charities. They range in size and capacity. Some are small organisations with a dozen or so foster carers while others are large agencies spread across England with numerous offices. In March 2020 the Department of Education reported that the top 6 largest IFAs accounted for 51% of all fostering households amongst IFAs, and 18% of all fostering households nationwide (Department for Education, 2020c). The figure below shows the distribution of fostering households amongst fostering agencies in England in 2020.

![Figure 5. Distribution of fostering households amongst IFAs and LAs with details on the top largest IFAs (Department for Education, 2020c)](image)

**Networks & Campaigning organisations (N&Cs)**

The second group of stakeholders in fostering recruitment are organisations that participate in recruitment and support of foster carers. Some are membership organisations for foster carers belonging to both IFAs and LAs e.g., CoramBaaf & The Fostering Network. Others are membership networks for IFAs e.g., Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers (NAFP). Other organisations focus on recruiting and supporting a specific demographic of carers e.g., New Family Social which supports LGBTQ+ carers. These organisations...
participate in recruitment and can be points of unification by running joint campaigns. There is no comprehensive list of these organisations as they can range in membership and mission. Furthermore, fostering organisations often have membership, working relationships and affiliations with multiple organisations in the N&C category.

Based on my research objective of getting a thorough understanding of fostering recruitment in England, I included these two major stakeholder groups in my research. Although N&Cs do not foster, they contribute significantly to the field of recruitment as will be discussed in my finding’s chapters.

**METHODS**

Having established an understanding of the research population, I sought to select a research method that could study recruitment within this population while maintaining the aims of exploratory research for broad and systematic methods. The ecological perspective of needing to understand recruitment at multiple levels influenced the choice of methods. Rather than finding one method, a combination of three methods was chosen. Each of these methods contributed to a specific aspect of the research and complemented the weaknesses of other methods. The methods chosen were survey, case study and content analysis. The combination of these three methods gives a broad yet detailed view of fostering recruitment in England. Each of these methods would individually be prone to weaknesses, but together, they complement each other, improving the quality of the data produced and the rigor of the research process. While the case study and survey produce data from self-reporting that holds the risk of response bias, content analysis of marketing materials provides a more objective look at a major component of recruitment. A further limitation of the survey is found in the openness to researcher bias in the wording of the questions. Using multiple choices in the survey further constrained the answers. By including some open-ended questions, I hoped to limit this issue. The survey and case study produced data that described the process and intent of recruitment while the content analysis provided a deeper understanding of what message is received by potential carers. The Table below summarises the individual strengths and weaknesses of the three methodologies. The result is a robust exploratory research process that produced data that was vast and rich.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SURVEY</th>
<th>CASE STUDIES</th>
<th>CONTENT ANALYSIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generalizable</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides Detail</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Bias</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PhD in Education, The University of Edinburgh, 2021
| Response Bias | ✓ | ✓ |
| Exploratory | ✓ | |
| Descriptive | ✓ | ✓ |
| Sampling bias | ✓ | |

*Table 6. Summary of Methodology Strengths & Weaknesses*

The sections below will expound on each of these methods.

**Online Survey**

This first research method was chosen for its core strength which is its broadness. Surveys tend to be particularly useful for generating new data and in generalizing about a whole population (Buckingham, 2004). They are suited to descriptive research. Although not unique to surveys, one disadvantage of this methodology is that respondents know they are being studied and can thus manipulate the information they give (Buckingham, 2004). There is a risk that recruiters may inflate their activities to make themselves seem better or more competent. The anonymity presented by filling out an online survey might reduce the occurrence of such incidences. Another disadvantage of surveys is that they are not as good at collecting complex or detailed information. This may be slightly mitigated by using a semi-structured questionnaire which gives room for a few detailed responses. Despite these shortcomings, a survey would be one of the best ways to get a vast amount of information from recruiters in England. The large geographical distribution of the population and limited resources necessitated the use of online methods.

I constructed an online self-completed survey with semi-structured questions. For this task I used J-Survey which is an online tool that is approved and recommended by the University of Edinburgh in keeping with good research practice and GDPR guidelines. The first step in constructing the survey questions was to break down the information I intended to gather. In keeping with my ecological perspective this was kept as broad as possible. Below are the seven main questions I wanted the survey to address:

1. Recruitment team (Do they have work experience in the area? What is their professional background? What number of personnel are allocated to their team?)
2. Resources used (What is their budget? Do they outsource to marketing agencies?)
3. Training (What training is available to them? What training have they accessed? Do they access any other sources of information such as journals, blogs, seminars or workshops to equip them for their work?)
4. Methods (What methods are used? Why? What is the effectiveness & frequency? What obstacles do they face? Do they engage with online and social media marketing? Have they participated in joint campaigns with other agencies/authorities?)

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5. Targets (If and how they set, measure and track their targets and why they use these methods)
6. Results (How they feel they are doing, how their organisation evaluates their work, etc)
7. Marketing Material (What do they think works? Why? What do they want to communicate?)

These questions were expanded, generating a total of 50 questions. The survey was piloted and tested by three volunteers, including two researchers and one social worker. Feedback was used to make adjustments to the document. The final survey was estimated as taking 30 minutes to complete.

Survey sampling
The survey was targeted at the whole population (universe) of fostering recruiters in Local Authorities and Independent Agencies. This is similar to the method used by Stringfellow et al., (2019) who used an online questionnaire during a study on the use of Facebook in foster carer recruitment in England. The study had a response rate of 40.3% which this was achieved through two phases of data collection. After receiving a low initial response rate (14%) from emails sent to contacts retrieved through the Fostering and Adopting Agency, the researchers contacted non-responsive agencies by phone first and then sent out the emails (Stringfellow et al., 2019). As mentioned earlier, finding a comprehensive contact list of fostering agencies in England was difficult. I began by getting a list of all the administrative councils in England. I then searched for the fostering service of each of these 343 councils, noting their contact information including website, phone number and email address, where they were available. I also took note of all fostering agencies that appeared in each council search. Where contact details were unavailable on the organisation’s website, online query forms and Facebook page inboxes and phone calls were used to directly contact the agencies and authorities to obtain the relevant email address. A search was also conducted on the directory of The Fostering Network. These searches resulted in a contact list of 409 agencies and local authorities. Five rounds of emails were sent between 15th January and 4th May when the survey was closed. The emails were directed to the recruitment officer/head of recruitment with instructions that only one participant was required to complete the survey on behalf of each organisation. The initial aim was to close the survey in March but when the country was put into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey deadline was extended. In addition to cold emails, the survey was also shared with recruiter networks such as the National Association of Fostering Providers. The final result was 50 complete survey responses which were included in the final analysis, a response rate of 12% (50/409). This can be compared to the 43% (60/149) response rate achieved by Stringfellow et al. (2019) in their online survey of fostering agencies in England. An initial comparison indicates that the
study had quite a low response rate and this can be attributed to two things; the first is that Stringfellow et al. had a lower contact list of 149 organisations compared to my list of 409 contacts (Stringfellow et al., 2019). Secondly, the context of the study being conducted early in the COVID-19 pandemic affected the response rate. This and other issues faced in the research process will be discussed later in this chapter. The complete survey can also be viewed in the appendix.

Case Studies
The second method chosen for the research was case studies. Case studies provide an in-depth description of a process from multiple angles (Thomas, 2016). Yin (2009) describes case studies as being complementary to other research methods or being the exploratory part of larger research. Where the survey provides a wide picture of foster carer recruitment in England, the case studies will zoom into that picture to reveal more nuance and detail.

The use of case studies is widely criticized in literature for a lack of rigor and systematic procedures, not being generalizable and producing large amounts of unreadable material (Yin, 2009). During the data collection and planning phase it became evident that the case study could indeed produce vast amounts of complicated data. I thus chose to use one data collection method within the case study to mitigate this issue. I initially wanted to include content analysis, observation and focus groups in the case studies but felt that this would further complicate an already intricate mix of methodologies. The switch to online methods also necessitated a simpler approach. Each of the organisations in the case study also invited me to participate in an online recruitment session, but this was not included in the data analysis as it was difficult to gain consent from the wide range of participants involved in the sessions. I considered this as part of the process of building rapport and attended but did not take notes. This and other issues will be discussed further within the reflexive section discussing the implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent restrictions.

I chose to use online interviews as the primary data collection tool for the case studies. The case studies focused on the process of recruiting carers from both the organisational and the foster carer perspective. It thus included interviews with staff and recently recruited carers who have passed assessment. Embracing the exploratory nature of the research, I created semi-structured forms for the interviews. Interviews for staff were personalised, based on the roles they had in the organisation. However, the same form was used for all three foster carers. During the interviews, I referenced the questions but also followed up on interesting themes that arose in the discussions. This allowed the conversation to flow more naturally and
for unexpected themes to be pursued. The appendix section of this thesis contains the interview questions used for the case studies.

**Case study sampling**

Participants in the online survey were invited to participate in the case study. This was included in the final section of the survey. Out of this, three fostering organisations indicated interest in participation. One local authority, one independent fostering agency and one joint network of 3 local authorities in northern England. Two N&C organisations were also approached for participation in the case study. These two were sourced through my contact networks as it is difficult to get a comprehensive list of N&Cs. The 5 organisations were sent formal invitations to participate in the case study. Due to complications in the COVID-19 pandemic the local authorities were unable to participate, having found themselves overwhelmed by the crisis. One of the network organisations also failed to follow up with the conversation. This left two organisations for the case study: a national N&C, and a small IFA. Optimally the case studies would have included a local authority, but I stopped pursuing this when the data collection period was coming to an end and the local authorities were still unable to commit to a specific time for the research. One interview was conducted with a recruiter in the N&C. For the IFA, interviews were conducted with two staff and three foster carers. The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams which was approved and recommended by the University. Each interview was 45 minutes long. With participant consent, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

**Content Analysis**

The final method chosen for this research was content analysis. This is a methodology that is commonly used in the field of communication. It is a flexible methodology that can be a powerful tool for understanding both the latent and manifest meanings of a piece of communication (White & Marsh, 2006). Content Analysis has historically been used to analyse text (Krippendorff, 2004). However, it has been developed for use in multiple media including images, audio and video (David, Thomas, Randle, Bowe, & Daube, 2017; Waters & Wang, 2011). Content Analysis straddles the divide between being a data collection tool and a tool for analysis. Rather than being one of the two, it is a systematic approach that influences both the data collection and analysis. It produces data that is both quantitative and qualitative in nature (Krippendorff, 2004). I followed 5 basic steps of conducting content analysis: define research questions, identify the sample, create a coding scheme, code and analyse (Busch et al., 2012). I also included a pilot to test the coding scheme as the methodology was new to me.
Content analysis sampling

Fostering recruitment advertising occurs on many platforms. These include but are not limited to bus stop ads, bus ads, tv ads, radio ads, newsletter articles, posters, flyers, Google ads, Facebook ads, Twitter ads and other online ads. All of these use different forms of media including text, audio, visual and pictorial media or a combination of them. The first step in identifying the sample was in finding something in an accessible collection. The decision was made to focus on Facebook ads because there is an online ad library that is run by Facebook. This database allows anyone to search and access every ad that is run on the Facebook platforms (Facebook, Instagram & Messenger). This would not only provide actual advertisements but would also give access to the back-end information such as target population’s age, gender, and geographical location. Social Media advertising has risen in the last decade. In the UK, Facebook ads account for 28% of the digital ad spending, second to google (He, 2019). The Facebook ads would thus cover a considerable section of the digital ad market. Fostering agencies were late to the game when it came to social media engagement, just like their counterparts in the non-profit/ charity/ NGO field. This method would therefore also serve as an indicator of how they are adapting to the digital marketing trends. The Facebook ad library contains both video and image-based ads. I chose to analyse one form of media, images, as they accounted for majority of the ads found.

The search terms ‘fostering’, and ‘foster care’ were used alongside a geographical filter for England. This produced 350 and 110 results, respectively. A review of the results revealed 71 ads that were unique and relevant to the topic. Ads from January 2019 – September 2020 were included in the analysis. Where the ad had been run multiple times, the first iteration of the ad was used. Where the ad contained an image carousel, only the first image was included in the analysis. Sometimes marketers will use an image carousel with each image only containing a fragment of the whole message. For example, it could be a series of images on “why foster”. Inclusion of only one image on the carousel, would thus be an incomplete representation of the entire message in the advert. This was put into consideration when collecting samples, but there was no instance of this. The ad that had more than one image contained the same models/ carers in different poses, or the same information arranged differently. Once the ads were identified a screenshot was taken and they were saved. The image below contains a sample of an ad that was included in the content analysis. The section on the right contains the ad while the section on the left gives details on the ad spend and targeted demographics based on gender and age.
Figure 6: Sample of ad from the Facebook Ad library

Coding Scheme

The coding scheme is at the heart of content analysis. Priori coding creates codes based on existing knowledge. The coding scheme or coding framework is developed by first analysing literature to identify categories that are relevant to the study (David et al., 2017). The literature review revealed three main categories: framing, targeting, and promotion. These categories were then broken down into codes which were then used to create a coding scheme. This is summarised in the table below. The coding scheme, which is in the form of a structured questionnaire was then put online and a pilot test conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION AND KEY LITERATURE</th>
<th>CODES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FRAMING</td>
<td>Message Framing is how text and imagery are used to illicit emotion from the viewer of an advertisement in order to encourage a certain type of behaviour e.g. signing up to be a foster carer (C. Chang, Lee, Chang, &amp; Lee, 2010; C. T. Chang &amp; Lee, 2009; Randle et al., 2016).</td>
<td>Imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotions Evoked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TARGETING</td>
<td>Targeting uses the known motivations for fostering and the known needs of fostering agencies to attract certain</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Content Analysis Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROMOTION</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotion involves positioning the desired behaviour as desirable and using messaging that invites the viewer to take some sort of action (Philip Kotler &amp; Lee, 2008).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Culture/Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Type of Fostering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Motivation for fostering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Call to Action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Piloting the coding scheme

A coding manual and three sample ads were sent to two researchers for piloting. The primary researcher and two researchers then used the coding scheme to input data from the ads. Piloting researchers were invited to give feedback on the instrument, and this was used alongside an analysis of the data gathered. The section provides an analysis of the differences in the respondent’s answers and the possible implications. It also identifies possible solutions to increase validity and reliability of the coding scheme. The discrepancies in the pilot can be grouped into 3 major areas.

1. Identifying age and race (Questions 4 & 5)

This was a smaller issue that only occurred twice. It is hard to clearly identify age and race from a photo. The question is, would this directly affect the integrity of the coding scheme? I would posit that the answer is no, for two reasons. Firstly, the coding will be done by one person, giving it some consistency. Secondly, the aim of content analysis is to decode what an advertisement is communicating. While this is done as objectively as possible, it is still limited by the subjectivity of the observer, something that cannot be fully removed. This however does not invalidate the entire process as the observer’s point of view is still a valid representation of at least one point of view (albeit their own) of an observer of the ad. Like any form of communication, ads are subjective to the interpretation of the recipient/observer. This is discussed further in point 2.

2. Identifying emotions evoked by the ad. (Questions 2, 3 & 6)

The piloting researchers’ coding varied in every iteration of the questions about identifying the emotions evoked by the ad. This was potentially problematic as it is one of the primary
coding areas that were identified in the making of this instrument. The ability to capture the emotions evoked by an ad is a necessary function of the coding scheme. While previous research mentioned certain emotions, the primary connection was tied to the group of emotions, i.e. positive vs negative (Randle et al., 2016). This research revealed that positive emotions were more effective in foster carer recruitment than negative emotions. Rather than simply coding it as a negative or positive emotion in the coding scheme, I wanted to expound on these feelings, thus allowing the coder to identify more nuanced emotions. Positive emotions included happiness, empowerment, compassion, and pride. Negative emotions were annoyance, pity, sadness, guilt, and sympathy. During the analysis, these emotions would further be coded as positive or negative. Although the pilot showed variance in the emotions, these were consistent when coded as “positive” or “negative”. I.e., they all fell in the same larger category. The only exception was when respondents chose the “neutral” option. Although initially included to try and give a variety of emotions, it was not in line with prior research and would hinder the analysis process. I thus removed it from the final coding scheme.

The first two issues identified in the pilot point to some of the weaknesses of this methodology. Although it is often viewed as an objective research methodology, content analysis can be vulnerable to researcher bias. This is especially in this case where the researcher is coding emotions evoked by an ad. As revealed in the literature review, ads are meant to evoke an emotional response in viewers. This emotion is what guides the behaviour intended by the ad which, in this case, is to become a foster carer. Indeed, we cannot assume that an image would evoke the exact same emotions in every single viewer. However, as demonstrated by prior research, the content analysis aims to reduce bias and capture the very essence of what the ad is communicating, including the positive or negative emotions it evokes. This weakness shall be taken into consideration when analysing and discussing the research findings. It is also worth noting that the coding scheme contained many other questions that were more objective, such as the number of children in an image.

3. Structure and Training (Questions 8, 10, 11, 12 & 13)

The final issue identified in the pilot was connected to structural issues in the coding scheme as well as researcher training. In one instance there were discrepancies in a question about the “call to action”. The coding scheme should have clearly defined this code. Additionally, piloting researchers were only asked about the explicit call to action. It is possible that seeing the second question about the implied call to action would prompt the researcher to think through what the advertisement explicitly invited the reader to do, and what was implied by
the presence of other details such as contacts. Better training may also have mitigated the issue as the researchers would have a better understanding of some of the advertising elements. Two of the researchers were unfamiliar with the coding scheme and the elements of advertisements during the pilot. Were they to be involved with the final analysis, more comprehensive training would be needed to familiarise them with all the different terms, definitions and how to properly identify specific information. However, these issues will not affect the content analysis as the primary researcher shall be the only one conducting the coding.

The pilot was especially useful in identifying structural issues in the coding scheme which were rectified for the final coding scheme. It also revealed some of the weaknesses of this methodology. When combined with the other two methods in this research, these weaknesses can be tolerated. The final version of the coding scheme is located within the appendix.

ETHICS
Research ethics can be seen as falling into two major categories; procedural ethics and ethics in practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Procedural ethics, as the name suggests, involves gaining approval from the relevant institutional research board while ethics in practice refers to day-to-day ethical decisions made during the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). My research procedural ethics was conducted in accordance with the Moray House School of Education and Sports’ ethical guidance. The research was approved as having met the level two criterion. This is defined as research where there is consent from the participants and data subjects. Institutional Review Boards exist to ensure the safeguarding of human subjects in research by reviewing study designs (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). However, such boards do not have control over the day-to-day decisions made during data collection and analysis that can impact the participants. The onus is therefore on the researcher to ensure that they present a complete and clear study design to the review board (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009). My study design was presented clearly to the board, and I made all the recommended adjustments as part of the procedural ethics process. In my methodology were in line with the study design that was approved by the board. I found that the procedural ethics process was a small component of ensuring that my research was ethical. During the data collection process, I had to be intentional about making decisions that were ethical. This included ensuring that any adjustments I made in the methodology were in line with the study design approved by the board. In addition to these I encountered a few moments where I had to make decisions that had not been predicted in the ethics
procedures. Guillemin & Gillam (2004) describe how research can have unpredictable, difficult moments where ethical research decisions have to be made. During such moments I consulted my supervisors and kept them aware of the decisions I was making. Some of the key ethical considerations for this research regarded gaining informed consent, assessing risk, and ensuring confidentiality. This section will discuss these ethical considerations made during the course of the research.

Informed Consent
Gaining informed consent from research participants is an integral part of ethical research practice that respects the participant’s autonomy (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The use of multiple research methods complicated the process of gaining consent, especially in the case studies. The ethics board was instrumental in helping me think through this as they required me to submit all my information and consent forms for each method. For survey participants this began with an introductory email that gave background knowledge on my research. They were then invited to click a link leading to the survey and also given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. The first page of the online survey contained the information and consent forms, and participants were not able to proceed to the rest of the survey without giving their consent. The page also provided my contact details in case they needed to ask further questions about the research. A few organisations used this contact to enquire about the research before proceeding to participate. In one instance, a local authority had unique requirements for participation in research. This involved filling in a form and providing additional documentation.

Consent for the case studies was a bit more complex. Once an organisation indicated interest in participating in the case study a formal invite was sent. This provided information on the research, details of the methods and the ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh. After this, individual consent was then sought from the relevant participants. Staff and carers alike were reassured that their participation was fully voluntary even though the organisation had given consent. Each interviewee received an information form and a consent form prior to the interview. The process of gaining consent was slow as the interviews took place online. The forms were often returned late as it required an e-signature or the process of printing, signing, and scanning the form. As a contingency, verbal consent was also sought in the recorded interview. This involved asking for consent to record the interview and then taking the interviewee through the consent form, asking them to confirm each statement. The interviewees had the opportunity to ask about the research and data during the interview. Most did this at the end of the interview.
I initially wanted to observe a recruitment session for each case study and got ethical approval for it. However, both organisations struggled to facilitate the process of gaining consent. Although I had discussed the importance of this with the liaisons, they both seemed to forget when the sessions began and did not inform the participants of my presence or the nature of my participation. For the N&C, I observed a recruitment session with over 30 attendees from various churches across the nation. For the IFA, I observed one of the ‘skills to foster’ training sessions. I had consent from the organisation who was facilitating the session, but I did not have informed consent from other participants. Although both of these sessions were very informational and would have enriched the data, I did not feel comfortable including them in the data analysis as I did not have informed consent from every participant. I discussed this with my supervisors, and they felt that this was the right decision. Therefore, chose to exclude any data from the sessions and considered the sessions as part of the process of building rapport with the organisation. The fact that the sessions took place online may have contributed to the failure to gain informed consent. Were it to have taken place in person, it would have been easier to have a quick word with the facilitators before the session to remind them to take time to introduce me, my research, and to allow me to gain consent.

As the content analysis was analysing documents in the public domain, I did not need to gain consent for their use. Another ethical issue that is connected to that of gaining informed consent is that of confidentiality. The next section will discuss this.

Confidentiality
Ethical research practice recognises the right for research participants to maintain some privacy and control over what they wish to disclose about themselves (Bos, 2020). In accordance with this, participants should be granted anonymity by default and their information and data handled with high standards of care and safety (Bos, 2020). Ensuring this began with the selection of a platform for hosting the online survey. There are numerous platforms that perform this function, but I chose to use J-survey as it had been tested and approved by the University.

I found that anonymity was a more complex discussion when it came to the case studies. The anonymity of the individuals in the interviews was straightforward. However, the conversation regarding the anonymity of the organisations was a continuous and evolving discussion. In both instances, the liaisons expressed an initial desire to waiver anonymity of the organisation as they were proud of their organisation and the work that they were doing. This led to multiple discussions about the levels of anonymity that they preferred throughout the
research process. In the end, the independent fostering agency requested that they be fully anonymous while the campaigning organisation had no preference in the matter.

During interviews I also found it necessary to reiterate the steps that would be taken to protect the data I gathered. Curiously, although this was mentioned in the beginning of the interview before the recording began, most of the interviewees asked about it again at the end of the interview. This points to one of the difficulties of the formal process of gaining informed consent, which is that the participants are sometimes disinterested in it (Bos, 2020). I found that participants, even the professionals, seemed to gloss over the information and consent forms when we went through them. It is possible that recording the interviews gave the interviewees a heightened awareness of the need to understand how the recordings would be used. All recordings were anonymised and kept securely on a password protected computer.

**Risk**

Research carries with it potential risk to both participants and researcher (Shaw & Holland, 2014). Depending on the nature of the research and the data collection methods, this can include both physical risk of harm and the risk of emotional distress. A risk analysis of my research identified the work as being low risk to both participants and researcher. The subject of the study was not sensitive, neither were the participants from vulnerable groups. Despite the risk assessment, I faced an unexpected risk when I had to switch to online methods for the interviews. This was based on the choice of programme to use for the interviews. While Zoom was the most popular and most accessible platform, it was not secure. I therefore decided to use Microsoft Teams which had been approved by the University. In this case, the safety of the participants and security of their data was more important than the accessibility of the interview platform. I’ll discuss the consequences of this decision later in this chapter.

**COVID-19 & OTHER COMPLICATIONS**

Perhaps the biggest issue faced in data collection was the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown. Data collection began in January 2019 so most of my data collection time was within the lockdown period. The first ‘casualty’ of the lockdown was interviews and focus groups. The initial plan had been to conduct interviews in person, but these were all moved online. Zoom was the most popular and accessible tool, but the platform had flaws in its security systems and was thus not approved by the University. Microsoft Teams was the recommended software, but this was difficult to set up with the foster carers who were using their phones and did not have Microsoft accounts. In addition to this, the online interview is vulnerable to internet connection problems on either side. In one interview the reception was
so bad that it had to be conducted without video. Without the ability to read body language and see each other, this interview was harder to conduct. Interviews were also quite awkward at the beginning for participants whom I had not previously met or talked to on the phone. As mentioned initially, I hoped to conduct focus groups with the foster carers. The move to online forums made this difficult. During the initial stages of the pandemic, people were unfamiliar with video conferencing programmes, and I felt that moving online would impede the process. I initially chose focus groups because they provide the opportunity for participants to bounce off of each other’s ideas, enriching the information they provide. This effect is difficult to replicate online where participants have to wait for their turn to speak. Little things like the sound of people agreeing with a point are easily lost in online platforms that only share audio from one participant at a time. As a result, I chose to hold individual interviews with the foster carers.

The second issue arising as a result of the pandemic was that it overwhelmed local authorities, affecting their ability to participate in the case study. As mentioned earlier, initial conversations went well, but each of the 3 authorities who volunteered to participate fell through in the end. Recruiters told me of how the numbers of children in need of care rose during the pandemic. In some cases, children had to be moved from homes of elderly and vulnerable foster carers. The number of staff coming in and out of quarantine also put a strain on operations. Understanding the gravity of the situation, I initially proposed that we postpone the research dates. This was received well by the agencies but when the time period lapsed, the situation had not improved, and I finally decided to end my data collection period.

Another issue I found was the lack of a comprehensive database with a list of all the fostering agencies and authorities. As mentioned earlier, this should theoretically be found through the Department of Education. However, their website only allows for searches per postcode. This is likely in order to help prospective carers to find an authority or agency near them. The Fostering Network also has a list of contacts but a number of these were agencies that were no longer in operation or incorrect contact details that resulted in numerous automatic error messages from servers. The search for contacts was thus quite labour intensive and time consuming. As a result, there was no way of telling if my contact list is exhaustive.

There was also a positive side to the lockdown. All three foster carers indicated that the lockdown was why they were available for the interview. Their previous schedules would have made it hard to meet. Some recruiters also cited more availability for things like the survey and emails.
The whole data collection process demanded high levels of flexibility and reflexivity from me. Approaching the process with a curiosity allowed me to continue pushing through hard and complex periods. When the survey participation was low, I experimented with using different terminology in the subject and content of the introduction email. I found that reducing the jargon and acknowledging the importance of their field had an impact. Additionally, I had to actively switch tasks when one area was not progressing well. I used the quiet periods of low email response rates to collect ads for the content analysis. Rather than ignoring the elephant in the room, I included questions about the impact of the pandemic on my respondents in the survey and case studies. No research process goes perfectly but I found that having a good foundational plan and being flexible in the field was the key to a good data collection process. The next section will describe the final participation in the research and how data analysis was undertaken.

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

My research covered data from 69 organisations, ensuring all the major categories were represented in the findings. Altogether the research covered 36 LAs (Local Authorities), 31 IFAs (Independent Fostering Agencies) and 2 N&Cs (Networking & Campaigning organisations). The Content Analysis included ads from 17 organisations: 14 LAs, 2 IFAs and 1 N&C. The Case study involved one IFA and one N&C. The Survey had 51 participants: 19 LAs & 32 IFAs. Notably, 10 of the IFAs in the survey were charities. The table below presents the research participants from each method.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Individual Participants</th>
<th>Fostering Organizations Represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survey</strong></td>
<td>51 recruiters</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Analysis</strong></td>
<td>62 ads</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Case Study</strong></td>
<td>3 recruiters, 3 foster carers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the survey participants had some affiliation with an N&C. 80% of the survey participants identified themselves as members of The Fostering Network with 44% identifying with CoramBaaf and 25% identifying with NAFP. The pie chart below shows how these were distributed.
DATA ANALYSIS

I analysed the data using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis (Swain, 2018). The three research methods produced varying forms of data and my analysis celebrated this. As though examining a multi-dimensional object, my analysis approach tried to assess the data from multiple angles, dissecting it and turning it over to draw as much meaning from it as I could. This began with deductive thematic analysis using priori coding from the content analysis and the ecological model. Although these were helpful in contributing to the overall picture, it seemed incomplete. I therefore chose an inductive approach to analyse the data further through inductive thematic analysis. This section will expound on this hybrid approach to analysis. It is also important to note that the online platform used for the survey and content analysis had an analysis function which aided in the process.

As mentioned earlier, the first two steps in analysis were deductive. This hybrid form of analysis was chosen in keeping with the nature of my research journey that moves from the known to the unknown. Although the literature review had revealed scarce knowledge in the field, it did uncover some knowledge in the area. My experience in academia has taught me that although new knowledge is useful, there is no need to constantly re-invent the wheel. It is both prudent and necessary to acknowledge and build on the previous research in the field. This is why I began with the deductive approach to analysis. The first step was in conducting the content analysis of the Facebook ads. As mentioned earlier, content analysis informs both the data collection and analysis of media. The content analysis can be likened to conducting a survey on a piece of communication. Initial analysis of the content analysis on the online software therefore provided descriptive statistics of the ads. Applying the coding framework to the identified ads using the survey software produced data that I could then analyse using the predetermined codes. This analysis explored the efficacy of the ads in accomplishing the desired outcomes. These desired outcomes were based on both the
literature review and data from the survey and case studies. For example, 80% of the ads in the content analysis had children under the age of 10. I then cross referenced this with other information from the survey and case studies. Was this reflective of what recruiters in the survey and case studies identified as being the key age group they needed to recruit for? Furthermore, how did this information compare to what was revealed in the literature review as age groups of children that agencies were struggling to find carers for? I repeated this process for each piece of information revealed in the content analysis.

The next step in data analysis was to apply the draft of the ecological model. Each system in the ecological model was used as a theme and data that corresponded with it was identified and grouped under that theme. This process entailed going through data from each method and coding relevant information under a specific theme. Once this was done, the combined data in each theme was analysed, and where relevant, sub-themes were identified and developed. The ecological model was then adjusted, and the systems renamed to better represent each theme. The final version of the ecological model will be presented in the next chapter. Although the model was useful in describing the landscape of fostering recruitment in England, it was insufficient at describing the process of recruitment. As a result, a second approach to analysis was applied.

The next phase of analysis took an inductive approach through the use of thematic analysis. approach. The process is iterative and involves several rounds of reading through the data and identifying themes as they arise (Fugard & Potts, 2019). This type of analysis matches the exploratory nature of the research. Having already used priori coding in the earlier analysis, I wanted to explore the data freely, allowing themes to develop. When using an inductive approach to thematic analysis the researcher is open to being influenced by the data (Fugard & Potts, 2019). Initial analysis seemed to present two major themes. The first was linked with outreach recruitment activities that take place in the public while the second phase took place within the recruitment agency. Further analysis revealed a third phase linking the two activities. Thus, my three-phase model was born. This will be presented in later chapters in the thesis. The next section will give a more practical description of my coding process for the entire process of analysis.

I defined a sub-theme as something that occurred twice or more within the data. This was regardless of whether there was congruence within the items in the sub-theme; conflicting pieces of data on the same topic were still put under the same sub-theme and theme. As a tactile person I favoured a physical coding method. I used a large writing pad and sticky notes to arrange themes and sub-themes as they developed. However, because of the variety of
data available I also used Microsoft Word to organise the themes in tables and keep track of quotes, charts and other sources of data that I would need when writing up. When dealing with interviews, analysis often began during the process of transcription. I would then go through each interview and highlight quotes using different colours for sub-themes. Quotes from different interviews would then be grouped together. I would then go through the data from the content analysis and survey and add it to the themes and sub-themes. The multiple forms and sources of data present in the data analysis both complicated and enriched the process. In some instances, themes were populated by all three sources. These sometimes corroborated each other, building strong arguments. In other instances, I used findings from one source to investigate aspects of another source, comparing them to investigate their claims. For example, comparing findings from the content analysis to claims of recruiters as reported in the survey. I found that the themes and sub-themes weren’t as neat as I expected them to be. While this was startling to me, Fugard & Potts (2019) describe this as a normal part of analysis. Indeed, they describe how themes can overlap, complicate each other or even present disagreements. The diagram below provides an overview of the analysis process I used.

**Figure 8. Overview of the hybrid analysis process**

This analysis process also revealed an unconscious bias I had regarding types of research. I found myself unconsciously classifying my own data, valuing quantitative results more than the qualitative elements. I felt strongly inclined to only report findings that had a statistic attached, as though qualitative data was inferior and only valuable if it illustrated quantitative

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data. This was especially evident when reporting themes that only arose in the case studies. Was there some sort of hierarchy of evidence? How could I interpret and value my qualitative data? Having previously been a recruiter, I also felt driven by a need to present findings that would help practitioners. Eventually I went back to my methodology and remembered that I had deliberately chosen methods that would complement each other but were also valuable in their own right. This freed me to celebrate the richness and complexity of my data and to view it, analyse it and present it as one comprehensive piece of research. Each finding provided a layer and perspective to an intricate ecosystem, adding depth and dimension to it. The next few chapters will present these findings.
CHAPTER FIVE: AN ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF FOSTERING RECRUITMENT

One of the goals of a PhD is to discover and present new knowledge in a given field. This chapter is the first of my four data chapters that present new knowledge in the field of fostering recruitment, as revealed through my research. Each of these chapters will follow the same pattern, presenting findings on a major theme followed by the discussion. This first chapter provides a description of the fostering ecosystem using the ecological model presented earlier. It provides an overview of fostering, setting the stage for the next three chapters which ‘zoom in’ on the fostering process.

FINDINGS

In my third chapter I created a draft of the ecological model that I adapted to fostering recruitment. This chapter will use the modified ecological model to present the findings. The diagram below presents the final modified version of my fostering recruitment model.

As mentioned earlier, the model was based on Bronfenbrenner’s model. The potential foster carer is the centre of the model as they are the main subject of this study. The next system has been named the ‘Social Circle’. This is a modification of Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem which is composed of the close social interactions. In this model this includes family and other places where people have regular social interactions such as work, religious organisations and clubs. The next system is ‘Public Structures’ which is based on the exosystem. In this model, this system is composed of organisations that participate in fostering recruitment such as fostering agencies and campaigning organisations. The next system is ‘Public Beliefs’ which is

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based on the macrosystem. This system is composed of public beliefs about fostering including attitudes, myths and stereotypes about fostering. The final system is labelled as ‘Life Events’ and is modelled after the chronosystem. As the name suggests, this system is composed of some of the life events that can impact the decision to foster. In my literature review I noted that two systems didn’t seem compatible with the fostering recruitment model. These were the mesosystem and the chronosystem. While the chronosystem fit with the new data from my research, the mesosystem did not and thus I decided to remove it from the fostering recruitment model. This first section of this chapter will expound on each of these systems and present the findings for each. As mentioned earlier, data analysis combined findings from all three research methods but their distribution within the themes was not even across the board. In some cases, data quoted will be from one source and in other cases it may be from all three sources. This will be addressed at each stage. As a reminder, three methodologies referenced here are the online survey (N=51), the content analysis of Facebook ads (N=62), a case study interview with a Networking and Campaigning organisation (N&G), and case study interviews with an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The IFA interviews were with three foster carers, one recruiter and one of the co-founders. When referencing interview data, I will use pseudonyms assigned to each interviewee.

1. The Social Circle System

In this model, the Social Circle System is made up of direct relationships that a potential carer has. This can include the family, workplace, religious organisation, friendships, clubs and other social circles. Interactions within this system fell into two key themes: introduction and exposure. I define introduction as intentional direct contact with a foster carer whereas exposure is defined by interactions that happen unintentionally by virtue of natural proximity to a foster carer or children in care. The first of these themes to presented is exposure.

Exposure

In the survey, 41% of 51 recruiters identified exposure to fostering as being one of the top reasons why people foster. Exposure was also a key theme from the IFA case study. All three foster carers interviewed reported having had interactions with foster care and/or children who were in care. They also reported that this contributed to their decision to become foster carers. Gloria’s in-laws were fostering when she decided to make an inquiry. Claire, another foster carer, grew up with her mum and aunt being foster carers. She described how she first felt that she wanted to foster when she had her first child. She explained that the early exposure to fostering had given her a clear understanding of what fostering was and the impact it could have on the family and the children. Interestingly, her sister also became a
foster carer. For Claire, it was seeing the progress her sister’s child was making that rekindled her interest in fostering. She describes that interaction here:

“We went out for a meal with the family, and I remember talking to my sister’s young person. She was there. It was her birthday; she’d just had her birthday and she was turning 16. We were talking and I just kind of looked at everybody and I thought, ‘wow, the family’s getting so much bigger.’ My sister’s young person has been with her about 3-4 years and just to see how she’s developed from when she first joined, it was such a nice thing. When she first joined, she was really withdrawn, she was unhappy and then to see her at 16 as a transformed child, I think that gave me the light-bulb moment. I thought, ‘yeah, if my sister did this, I can definitely do this.’”
(Claire, Foster Carer)

Unlike Claire and Gloria who had close family who were foster carers, Victoria’s exposure came through her work. Victoria, the third foster carer interviewed, is a teacher in a special needs school. She described how interactions with children in care made her first think about being a foster carer. During her time as head of year, she saw a lot of carers whom she described as “not caring”. One boy in particular made an impact on her decision to foster. He was being mistreated by his foster carer and seeing him change when he got a new carer helped her see the negative impact a poor placement can have on a child. When his care situation was changed, he transformed. Here’s her account of that boy and how this motivated her to want to “do a better job” than the carers she had seen:

“I had one pupil who I know, he was not being looked after at home very well. I always remember the day he said ‘well, I’m not going home.’ And in the back of my head, I was thinking, ‘yes, finally.’ Because you know... every time he’d made his complaints or allegations and we passed it on and what-not and it was investigated, nothing came of it. And there was nothing that we could – even though we could see that he was not being looked after, he was being abused emotionally, nothing would happen until he refused to go home. And when he refused to go home, they had to do something, and it was amazing just seeing the difference within six months of this boy. You know, before he – in the end he went to live with is gran but initially he was in short term care. He was a skinny little thing (I know puberty would have had a part of it) and within six months he was totally transformed. He’d put
Whether in their families or at work, the exposure to fostering within the social circle had an impact on the three carer’s decision to foster. However, exposure is not a result of a recruitment activity. Recruitment activities through introduction shall be discussed in the next section.

Introduction/ ‘word of mouth’
A key phrase under the theme of introduction was ‘word of mouth’. This phrase appeared several times throughout my research. Although not included as a recruitment method in the survey questions, recruiters referred to it 13 times in unstructured questions. When asked what they thought the most effective method for recruitment was, 8 out of 51 recruiters identified ‘word of mouth’ as the most effective. This came in second to Facebook ads which was the most popular option. One recruiter in the survey put it simply “we prefer word of mouth advertising”. Despite this frequent referencing of the term, its definition was vague. ‘Word of mouth’ can range from casual personal contact with a foster carer to intentional and incentivised conversations about fostering with a foster carer. Another recruiter in the survey put it this way: “We also use our current foster carers to do community-based recruitment where they are out and about in their communities talking to people about fostering and we find this to be very effective too.” In the survey, ‘word of mouth’ recruitment was also referred to as ‘foster carer referrals’, ‘community engagement with foster carers’ and ‘community-based recruitment using foster carers’. The survey did not provide an opportunity to explore this concept. However, one case study provided greater detail on how it can be undertaken.

A case study of community-based recruitment
The case study with an N&C revealed how the method is applied and how effective it was for them. The N&C in the case study is a Christian network that works with Local Authorities and Charity IFAs to recruit foster carers in churches and other faith-based communities. Although it also runs online national campaigns, it identifies its community-based approach as its core strength. The organisation takes advantage of the wide network of churches and the elements of the Christian faith that overlap with values and qualities of a good foster carer. The N&C was launched in 2013 with the aim of “making fostering and adoption a significant part of the life and ministry of the Church in the UK”. Considering the presence of over 15,000 churches within the church network in the UK, the charity was founded on the idea
that if one person from each church fostered, it would be a solution to the shortage of carers. The N&C operates by recruiting and equipping churches to recruit and support foster carers.

I interviewed Mark, the head of partnerships and innovation to get an understanding on how they work. Mark leads teams that approach church leaders and engages them in conversations about fostering. When engaging church leaders, Mark and his colleagues present local statistics on fostering as well as personal stories of their fostering experience, often partnering with local authorities in the area. The N&C operates using a wide network of volunteers, recruited from the churches, who use the network’s resources to raise awareness about fostering within their social circles. The aim is for anyone who is interested in fostering to have the opportunity to have conversations about this with a foster carer within their community/church who shares the same faith values. Mark suggested that this method gives potential foster carers the opportunity to better understand the fostering task. The quote below presents his view on how elaborate the decision to become a foster carer is:

“If you can understand, you’re more likely to be able to respond because as well as being a rational decision to be a foster carer, it is also emotional. It’s a wholistic decision that’s going to take every life effort. Therefore, it does incorporate all of your decision-making things, both emotional and cerebral, to come to that decision.” (Mark, N&C Recruiter)

In working with volunteers within local churches, the N&C primes a community for engagement with the fostering services within their area. Although the relationships with churches are informal, the N&C has formal contracts with the local authorities it works with. This can involve them delivering an already primed community to the authority, or the authority inviting them to come in and do community-based recruitment. Mark gave an example of how this worked in Bristol where they had been working in the community before they were invited by the council to help in a recruitment campaign. Mark describes the campaign below:

“I think that the story for Bristol. In 18 months or so of working with them to the point when the call for temporary foster carers came through, we saw a marked difference in the response that we got and tried getting through churches, and what the city did for themselves in trying to find carers. Whilst we didn’t have the same numbers in attracting through those two routes, we had about 17. 16/17 people enquired with us. We had a number of events with our social workers, etc. And the city themselves had
around 200 or so people respond to that initial call. Our people were 2 ½ more times as likely to start the assessment process than anyone that they were getting. And where people were in the assessment process, the people that started the assessment process with us were—the conversion rate was about 80% of people who started the process went on to be approved. And actually, approved across the board for some actually then looking to be long term carers and augmenting the assessment process that they’ve done. Some caring for unaccompanied minors, and some doing respite, some doing domestic—well indigenous children.” (Mark, N&C recruiter)

As the quote above describes, this community-based recruitment was more effective than recruitment through an ad campaign. In this case, the efficacy of the method was based on its ability to produce referrals that were more likely to start assessment and be approved. These ‘quality’ referrals were a concept that recurred in my research process. In conversations with recruiters, there was an evident need to not just attract people, but to use methods that produced ‘quality’ referrals. This will be explored and expounded upon throughout this thesis.

Based on the survey and the case study with the N&C, interactions within the social circle have the potential to impact on people’s decision to foster. This is true for both intentional and unintentional exposure to fostering. This invites discussions on why this is the case and how recruiters can use this knowledge to influence practice. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

2. The Public Structures System
The Public Structures System contains fostering organisations and campaigning organisations who might influence a person’s decision to foster through recruitment activities. This can be through direct contact with potential carers or indirect contact through advertisements. Ecological models often highlight the relationships within systems, and I do this too with the recruitment model. I found very complex relationships between the main stakeholder organisations in fostering recruitment. Stakeholders within the system are competing for the same resource. This produces confusion and competition which is juxtaposed with the unity brought about by having a shared brand and sometimes having to work with each other. This section will present findings within this system.

As mentioned above, all stakeholders in the Public Structures Systems are united by the fostering brand. As will be disclosed later in the section, a message by one agency can affect the public perception of fostering, thus affecting all stakeholders under the fostering
umbrella. Every stakeholder has the same goal which is to recruit foster carers. However, this is complicated by one thing: profits. The operations of Local Authorities (LAs) are based on their geographical jurisdiction thus they do not tend to be in competition with each other. Similarly, Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) that are charities often aim to work alongside LAs to improve their care and are thus not seen as competition but as complementary partners. On the other hand, profit making IFAs operate across multiple geographical areas, competing with LAs and charity IFAs for foster carers. This creates a highly competitive market. Despite this, IFAs, whether charities or profit making, have to have a relationship with their local authority. The figure below illustrates the relationships between key stakeholders in fostering recruitment.

![Figure 10 Stakeholder Relationships (author's own)](image)

LAs oversee all fostering placements within their authorities, placing children in-house or with IFAs. N&Cs (networking and campaigning organisations) can have recruitment relationships with all three types of fostering agencies. However, not every N&C will have a relationship with every fostering organisation. As described earlier in the paper, some N&Cs only associate with IFAs while others such as The Fostering Network, have relationships with all types of fostering organisations. As mentioned earlier, a unique feature of fostering in England is the presence of profit-making fostering agencies. The next section will explore what the data revealed about this.
Profit Making Fostering Agencies?
The concept of making profits from foster care can be quite surprising to many people. An article by The Guardian reported that the 8 top IFAs made a combined profit of 41 million pounds in one year (Elvin, 2014). As the author put it, this profit was from public funds that had been assigned to caring for vulnerable children. Some people therefore feel negatively about IFAs that make profits. Notably, many charities and religious organisations do not want to be affiliated with profit making IFAs. As Kevin the IFA recruiter in the case study noted: “We had gone to different church groups before, and mosques, and tried to promote there as much as we can but because we’re not a charity, people are less inclined to go with us as well. We’re not really affiliated with a different kind of charity fostering group.”

During my data collection I searched over 300 websites of fostering organisations in England and the nature of profit-making agencies was not explicitly stated. It is difficult to ascertain if this is intentional deception or simply viewed as an unnecessary step. It is possible that IFAs assume that the general public understand the nature of their organisations. However, this was not the case for Mark the N&C recruiter. Mark is also a foster carer and he shared how he wasn’t always aware of the presence of profit-making IFAs. During the interview he related his own family’s experience of becoming a foster carer with an IFA:

“There is a very low level of understanding of what that means for people looking into the sector thinking ‘I’d like to foster’. Some of that is part of our own story. We initially were approved through an IFA. I remember finding out that they were a for-profit IFA probably 6 months or so after we’d been approved, and I remember finding that a little bit shocking.”

(Mark, foster carer and N&C recruiter)

Feeling that the IFA did not align with their personal values, Mark and his family moved to an LA soon after. It is difficult to ascertain how many other foster carers share Mark’s experience. However, this didn’t seem to be an issue for the three foster carers interviewed in the IFA. As later chapters will reveal, the nature of the IFA as being profit making did not factor in their decision to foster with the organisation. This finding fits into the greater conversation about monetary compensation for care. This will be discussed later in the chapter. The next section will present findings on one of the effects profit-making fostering agencies have on the market; competition.
Fierce Competition

Competition was a big theme that arose in the research. On one side are IFA charities and LAs, and on the other side are profit making IFAs. Even the data collection process was affected by this tense atmosphere. In the process of my data collection, I received a few emails and calls from IFAs and LAs who wanted to know who was involved in the research and how it was funded. The hostility and suspicion between the two sides was very evident as some organisations explicitly stated that they did not want to participate in the research if it involved organisations they perceived as being from ‘the other side’.

This competition is evident to all the stakeholders. As Mark, from an N&C put it: “We know that it’s full of competition. There’s lots of people working against each other.” In the survey 21 out of 51 organisations listed competition from other agencies as one of the top three issues they face in recruitment. The issue of competition was also cited by three recruiters as being the reason behind them not participating in joint campaigns such as Fostering Fortnight. It was apparent that this affected how fostering organisations interact with each other even within networks that are meant to unify them. This was iterated by Jenny, a co-founder of a small IFA:

“Do you know what I feel like when you’re saying that? I feel like there’s a whole thing around recruitment between local authorities and other agencies that is like, ‘this is what we do. This is secret. Let’s not share it because that’s what’s getting our foster carers and we need foster carers because it’s so competitive.’ And even like, I go to these Independent Fostering Agency meetings where we all get around and we talk about dilemmas and stuff, but we’re not allowed to talk about recruitment.”

(Jenny, co-founder of an IFA)

Within this competitive market the different sides appeared to have different advantages. These are discussed below.

The IFA Advantage

Recruitment of foster carers is a fiercely competitive landscape and in 2019-2020 LAs appeared to lose that competition. Although there were 12,585 new foster carers approved, LAs saw a 4% decrease in foster carers while IFAs saw a 2% increase (Department for Education, 2020c). Despite having been responsible for over 60% of the new carers, LAs had a decrease in carers. The same data set revealed that voluntary IFAs also saw a decrease in carers which means that the profit making IFAs benefited from carers moving between
agencies. Recruitment is thus not just about getting newly approved foster carers but enticing carers to move agencies. This can create a very hostile environment.

The competition also seems to be skewed when you consider the resources available to the different fostering organisations. The survey revealed a huge difference in annual recruitment budgets. The lowest recruitment budget quoted by a recruiter was £2,500 while the highest figure quoted was £100,000. A low recruitment budget was also identified as one the top three hinderances to the recruitment process. The success of IFAs in recruitment is often attributed to them having a large budget for it. IFAs can also have websites and social media pages dedicated solely to fostering while some LAs have to fit their fostering activities within the council’s website and social media pages. In the survey, 15 out of 51 recruiters identified the “long bureaucratic process of approval of any new methods/ changes in your recruitment” as a key challenge in their recruitment process. LAs sometimes find themselves restricted by council departments which hinder their progress. As one LA recruiter in the survey noted: “We are trying to use social media analytic tools, but our IT department are struggling to support this.”

The LA Advantage
Despite the observations above, the recruitment competition is not always skewed towards IFAs. As discussed previously, the nature of profit making IFAs makes it undesirable to some people and this gives LAs some inherent value in parts of the public sphere. LAs and charity IFAs can market themselves as being pure in intention, positioning profit making IFAs as being greedy and focused on money. The competition has also led to more cooperation between LAs as they are not in competition with each other. Such joint recruitment campaigns are perceived as beneficial and as a recruiter in the survey put it: “Working with other authorities is always newsworthy, and therefore generates lots of publicity.” One survey participant called for more joint ventures, recommending “a consistent marketing strategy for all local authorities to adhere to, to ensure we all promote our USP in light of fierce competition from IFAs.” Foster 4, which is a joint effort of 3 local authorities, is one example of councils pooling together resources to run successful campaigns that they wouldn’t be able to run individually. While IFAs are working alone and in competition with each other, some LAs and charity IFAs have good working relationships that are giving them a market advantage when they work together. During the course of my research, I was invited to and made aware of a few informal networks and even a Facebook group where LA recruiters shared advise on recruitment. This was a stark contrast to Jenny’s comment about how conversations of recruitment were avoided during IFA network meetings that she attended.
I would be remiss to end this section without noting that not all IFAs hold this tense, fierce view of recruitment. The IFA that participated in the case study is a small profit-making IFA, but it seems to have a different view of recruitment. They do not see it as a small market, and they do not feel the need to be secretive with their information. I discussed this with Jenny, the co-founder of the IFA in the case study:

“Yah, and I find that interesting. I understand coz I guess the way I see it; I mean, we’re doing this. We’re sharing what we’ve learned because there’ll be so many agencies out there that they could recruit foster carers that would be a good fit for us and we just hope that because of our reputation and who we are, means that we will still recruit. So, it is a funny one actually, coz recruitment, it’s like there’s a big secret around what people do.” (Jenny, co-founder of an IFA).

This agency approaches recruitment openly, recognising that not every carer will fit into their values, work culture and work ethic. This will be explored further in later chapters. As Jenny mentioned, their perspective means that they do not see themselves in competition with every agency in their area. As is evidenced by participation in my research, there are many other organisations who want to improve this field regardless of who else benefits from it. As the next section will prove, despite their competition, recruiters in the Public Structure System are bound together and affected by events in the Public Beliefs System.

3. The Public Beliefs System

Fostering recruitment doesn’t occur in a vacuum. It happens in an environment of stereotypes about fostering, fostered children, and foster carers. These beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes about fostering form the Public Beliefs System. Aside from raising awareness about fostering, recruitment materials and methods are also aimed at demystifying fostering and addressing some widely held misconceptions. When asked to select the top reasons why people do not foster, over half of the survey respondents selected two answers: “Fear of the safety of their own children, family or property” and “lack of understanding of what is involved”.

The following are some stereotypes about fostering that were identified in the research. In many instances these were identified in single interviews. In such instances, the evidence should, be appropriately measured. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent such narratives are pervasive in the general population, but it is also possible to posit that the respondents are not the only people who hold these views. It can thus be taken as an example of the many
narratives present within the Public Beliefs System. This will be discussed further in the discussion section of this chapter.

**Foster children are bad.**

During the interviews with the foster carers, we discussed what others thought about them fostering and it revealed some of the misconceptions that people have about fostering and children who are fostered. The theme of foster children being perceived as bad was present in two of the interviews with foster carers. In the quote below, Victoria describes conversations she’s had with friends:

> “You’re mad, how can you do that?” “How can you let some child into your house?” They think all the kids are gonna be bad, basically, and bad. Bad not just as in disruptive, but also, you know, running off, stealing, violent, you name all of the negative things that you think of a young person could be involved in. That’s a cared for child.” (Victoria, foster carer)

The research indicated that public conception of children can be quite harsh. In the survey one recruiter described people’s view of the children as “naughty kids’ and therefore difficult to care for”. Responding to the question about why people do not want to foster, another recruiter in the survey put it this way: “that looked after children are far harder to care for, that they are really badly behaved”. In the case study, Claire echoed this sentiment, saying: “You know, they have these visions that they’re really kind of like unruly, they cannot—they’re really bad sort of feral sort of kids”. According to Claire, not only are the children viewed as bad, but they’re also blamed for being in care. “I think there’s this primitive notion that children are in care because they’re naughty or they’re bad or they’ve done something really terrible.” This negative view of children then builds fear in people about how fostering would affect their homes. The foster carers described people being afraid of the impact fostering would have on their own children; that they would impact their children negatively. As Claire put it: “... and they wouldn’t touch fostering because they feel that they’re just bringing- it’s a whole lot of worms- they’re opening a can of worms.” This last sentiment was reflected in survey where 28 out of 51 recruiters identified the fear of safety of their own children and family as being one of the top reasons why people do not foster.

**The ‘saintly’ foster carer**

Although this belief was only represented by one foster carer, it seemed to be closely connected to the negative view of children reflected above. In contrast with the ‘bad
children’, foster carers come across as good. Fostering is seen as an impossible task that only a few exceptionally good people can undertake. Victoria articulated this:

“A lot of people seem to think you must be really, you’re almost a saint for doing it, or crazy… I was just thinking about a friend that I saw the other day and she was saying-she introduced me to another friend, and she said this is, you know, she’s a teacher and she’s a carer, a foster carer. The woman was like, ‘I take my hat off to you.” (Victoria, Foster Carer)

Fostering is for the old
Another stereotype identified in the research was that of fostering being for old empty nesters. This too was only articulated by one person in the research. Kevin, the recruiter for the IFA in the case study discussed this stereotype which he encounters in his recruitment:

“People think about fostering it’s that again, older people, empty nesters, people looking for something to do, they’re lonely. But actually, I want them to think, this is a career path. You need to be a really sharp person. The things we train our foster carers in, professionals are trained in, social workers, therapists. This is a vocation that is for edgy people. That’s the message I’d like to have, but no, it’s the other way.” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

Christians cannot foster
This stereotype was identified by one recruiter, Mark. As a person who recruits amongst Christian communities, he had encountered this stereotype and often had to address it. He talked about how this was fuelled by sensational and inaccurate newspaper reporting:

“We get fed up of seeing stuff within papers like ‘Christians not being allowed to foster or whatever because of our faith’. We’re like, no it’s not. We know that out of all the foster carers in the UK, a significant number report as being a Christian, over 50% according to The Fostering Network. Or 60%, I think.” (Mark, N&C recruiter)

As mentioned earlier, some of these specific misconceptions and stereotypes were only identified by single survey participants. However, they are some examples of some of the narratives present in the Public Beliefs System. Myths and stereotypes such as these are often birthed by misinformation. The research revealed how recruitment campaigns can impact this system through large scale campaigns. This will be reported in the next section.
Recruitment’s Effects on the Public Beliefs System

The research suggested that national campaigns that are targeted at large populations can impact the Public Beliefs System because they help to raise awareness on a large scale. N&Cs are key stakeholders in the initiation and running of joint recruitment campaigns. An example of this was Fostering Fortnight, an annual campaign by the Fostering Network, that raises awareness on foster care. In the survey, 86% (N=51) of recruiters indicated that they had taken part in Fostering Fortnight. However, some participants reported that this participation did not always achieve the desired results. When asked to rate their experience participating in Fostering Fortnight and other joint marketing ventures, 49% of the recruiters rated it as average while 21% indicated that they had had a poor experience. Recruiters noted that although such national campaigns raise awareness, they do not necessarily lead to an increase in inquiries. One recruiter in the survey noted: “Raises awareness but does not seem to affect numbers of people applying/enquiring.” Another recruiter in the survey felt that such campaigns favour IFAs, writing that: “Research has shown that raising awareness favours the IFAs with large budgets for ad-words etc.”

Despite the mixed experiences of participating in joint campaigns, 82% (N=51) of the recruiters in the survey indicated that they would participate in joint campaigns in the future. National campaigns can meet the need for accurate information about fostering, which is an integral part of recruitment. One survey participant echoed this, stating that: “In my view there needs to be a slight shift in the way we advertise fostering, as we receive a large number of enquiries from people that do not meet the minimum requirements to foster, or have no idea what is involved.” One recruiter in the survey simply said: “I feel a national information campaign would work well”.

A case study of a national campaign

The case study with the N&C revealed the important role that such organisations play in the Public Structures and Public Beliefs Systems. It showed how N&Cs can be a unifying factor, with access to funds and marketing tools that raise awareness in ways that small IFAs and LAs cannot always do. As mentioned earlier, the N&C in the case study identifies community-based recruitment as its core strength, but they occasionally run large scale recruitment campaigns. This section will describe one of those campaigns.

In 2015 the N&C in the case study ran a national campaign on social media to inspire people to foster unaccompanied asylum seekers. Mark described how the campaign was run during a time when there was a heightened awareness of refugees through things like the image of a three-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, washed up on the beach. Media coverage of refugees
created an awareness of the need, and the fostering campaign provided a way that people could respond to the need. Based on their internal tracking, over 15,000 people responded to the campaign and made inquiries about fostering. A large number of these did not proceed to become carers, but it showed how impactful a campaign can be. Although this N&C is Christian, they report it being shared widely by people of different faiths, with mosques participating in sharing the information too. This N&C often works with LAs and charity IFAs that by recommending that people go to their partner agencies for fostering. Mark reported that although campaigns such as this led to increased inquiries in their partner organisations, some people choose to foster with other organisations. From the information they were able to gather, 200 people reported becoming foster carers as a result of the campaign. To-date, Mark still runs into people that decided to foster because of this campaign:

“I have occasionally gone to meet with church leaders and say ‘I’m a foster carer. Yeah, I responded to a campaign around that... you know...’ ‘Oh! Our campaign! Who would’ve thought? But you’re not fostering with our partner who we suggested in your area.’ And that can be very good and complex reasons as to why that’s the case, but we still regularly meet people who say, ‘I became a foster carer’. Or ‘I saw that. I saw a campaign thing you did a while back.’ It’s funny. You cannot count everything, sadly. It would be lovely if you could but – and they’ll do what they want to do with it.” (Mark, N&C Recruiter)

This case study is an indication at how impactful large-scale campaigns can be. While some fostering organisations would feel that they wasted their resources participating in joint fostering campaigns that other organisations benefited from, N&Cs do not tend to see it that way. Their joint efforts are more focussed on the fostering brand and working to help raise awareness. N&Cs thus contribute to the overall fostering efforts that can benefit all organisations in fostering. As Mark the N&C recruiter noted: “You start raising the tide, and all the ships go up, isn’t it?”

4. The Life Events System
As mentioned earlier in the literature review, this system was not evident in recruitment literature. Evidence on the Life Events System came through the interviews with the three foster carers from the IFA case study. All three of the carers’ decisions to make an inquiry and start the process of becoming a carer were triggered by life events. While the discussion in the Social Circle System revealed that the carers linked their exposure to fostering to their decision to foster, the decision to actively pursue it came later. It took Gloria 5 years between
first wanting to foster and actually making an inquiry. According to her interview, two life events triggered this. The first was a potential redundancy at work and the second was her children leaving home. In the interview, Gloria described her internal process of figuring out what to do with the spare rooms in her house. She considered renting to college students but eventually settled on fostering because she was drawn to caring for children. Victoria’s trigger came in the form of bereavement. She had been considering fostering during her 20 years of teaching. The decision to finally foster was triggered by two life events; she moved to part-time work, and her father whom she had been caring for died.

For Claire, it took 10 years between her initial desire to foster and her first inquiry. She described how she had thought about it while growing up as a foster sibling, but when she had her own daughter, that desire became real. However, life circumstances were not suitable for fostering so she put the dream on hold. As described earlier in this chapter, seeing her sister’s foster child thrive reignited her passion. However, she still didn’t take action until she bought her home:

“When I bought my house; I recently bought my house in January. That’s when I began the process. Once I had bought my house, I felt a lot more settled and I thought, ‘ok. Now that I’ve got my house and I’ve got the space I can do it.”’ (Claire, Foster Carer)

Claire described how she felt settled in her career, home and parenting. She felt that she was better placed to be a carer than when she first considered fostering. When she had that meaningful lunch with her family and saw the progress of her sister’s foster child, she felt she was in a space to fulfil that strong desire to foster.

For all three foster carers in the case study, there was a report of exposure and of a triggering life event. Whether this is a coincidence or might be connected will be explored later in the discussion section of this chapter.

DISCUSSION
The first section of this chapter used a modified ecological model to present findings on the fostering recruitment ‘ecosystem’. This second half will discuss these findings. As mentioned at the beginning of the thesis, my research holds the practitioner’s perspective in mind. This section hopes to place my research within the context of current research. It also hopes to explore questions such as the ‘why’ and ‘so what’ behind these findings. In a field where there is sparse research, and in the context of exploratory research, these questions can be
powerful in drawing meaning from research. The discussion will follow the pattern of the first section, presenting discussions on each system.

1. **The Social Circle System**
   The research indicated that introduction to fostering, either by coincidental exposure or deliberate fostering activities, had an impact on people’s decision to foster. According to the research, recruitment activities in this system are sometimes voluntary and sometimes incentivised. It seemed to range from highly organised activities such as those of the N&G, to simple introductions by current foster carers. Regardless of how it was conducted, recruiters who used this method thought it was highly effective. This section will explore three reasons as to why recruitment activities in the Social Circle System might be effective.

*It Makes Fostering Relatable*
Relatability is an effective marketing strategy used by advertisers (Boyd, 2018). Marketers report that people are more likely to buy a product if the person advertising it is relatable (Whitlock, 2017). It is possible that recruiting within the Social Circle System increases relatability. Considering the stereotypes about who fosters and what fostering involves, it can be hard for potential foster carers to see themselves as a foster carer. If people think that foster carers are ‘extraordinary’ people, an ‘ordinary’ person might think they do not have that ‘magic component’ that would make them a good foster carer. However, when they see someone in their social circles doing it, it becomes an achievable task, something they might conceive themselves doing. Social Circle Systems are often homogenous; people within the inner circle have the similar values, socio-economic status and lifestyles. Seeing someone like you fostering makes fostering look relatable and achievable. In my research, Claire may have seen her mother and aunt fostering, but it was seeing her sister’s fostering success that really triggered her desire to foster. Could it be that her seeing her peer’s fostering success made the task more relatable and achievable to her?

*It Gives a Clearer understanding of the fostering task*
Another reason why recruitment in the Social Circle System might work is that it has the ability to better convey the complexities, joys, and challenges of fostering. This is something that cannot be achieved in a single static ad or even the most poignant of video advertisements. Seeing someone within your social circle go through the highs and lows of fostering gives a potential carer a deeper understanding of the fostering task. It also gives them time to fully consider whether or not they should foster. As Randle, Miller, Stirling, & Dolnicar, (2016) elaborated in their study, the decision to foster requires high cognitive elaboration. This means it takes time and deeper thought to consider fostering. Recruitment
within the Social Circle System allows for that to happen while providing triggers for that thought process to happen. This was echoed in the operations of the N&C. Mark and his N&C reported that exposing someone to fostering every Sunday gives them the opportunity to think about it and to have conversations that give them a deeper understanding of fostering. When compared to a simple ad, this form of recruitment provides longer periods of contact, more information, which likely results in a potential carer being better placed to decide to foster.

**It makes it easier to draw support from the Social Circle System**

The literature review revealed that fostering may be an individual decision, but it also requires support from the Social Circle System. Successful foster carers often look for support from their social circles more than from the fostering organisations (Oke et al., 2011). It is possible that when recruitment occurs within the Social Circle System, it serves the purpose of educating others within the Social Circle System to provide support for a foster carer. If people in the Social Circle System understand fostering better because they’ve witnessed it, they’re in a better position to support the decision to become a carer, as well as to provide support during fostering.

**Implications for Recruiters**

Although the information on the Social Circle System was limited, it holds some implications for recruiters. The N&C case study especially provided a useful example on how community-based recruitment can be executed. The case study showed that recruitment in the Social Circle System can go beyond incentivising foster carers to recruit from their social circles. Is this method feasible for other recruiters? For local authorities who are geographically tied to a location, this could be a viable method of recruitment. Communities are well connected and can be excellent places for recruitment. However, they are often closed and wary of outsiders. Recruiters would need to learn to invest in these communities and to understand their value systems to see how they overlap with those of fostering. The work that Mark does at the N&C involves educating social workers and fostering organisations about Christian values and principles so that when recruitment is occurring, unconscious bias has been addressed. This is similar to the study on recruitment of Hispanic foster carers in the US (Capello, 2013). In that study, recruiters used Spanish in the advertisements, had Spanish speakers in the Information Sessions, and placed the adverts within Spanish speaking areas. There is a link between such community-based recruitment methods and children’s experience of permanence and stability. As the literature review revealed, sometimes child placements breakdown or are interrupted because of cultural mismatches. Community based
recruitment would help recruiters target some of the demographics they struggle to reach. For example, recruiting within Muslim communities would increase carers available to care unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who match with that community.

2. The Public Structures System

Messy Recruitment or Normal Advertising Atmosphere?

The Public Structures System is perhaps one of the most complicated system in this ecological model. A potential carer might struggle to make sense of what options are available to them when it comes to choosing who to foster with. There is no concise and independent source of information about the nature of fostering organisations. But perhaps that is an unrealistic expectation. When it comes to products or services in any market, it is often up to the consumer or customer to do their due diligence in researching the market. The Department of England report described recruitment messaging to be confusing and inconsistent (Baginsky et al., 2017). However, that might be indicative of any field where advertising happens in a competitive market.

Marketers, advertisers and recruiters may be operating in a similar field, but their goal is firmly focused on distinguishing their brand and drawing people to it. As a result, the messaging in recruitment will not be consistent across the board. In addition to that, recruitment is driven by the needs of each fostering organisation. Recruiters will often target or draw people based on the organisational values, work ethic, specialisation and carer needs. Perhaps the ideal then, is not in having one clear and consistent message from all recruiters. Some agencies need white carers and others want to attract carers from ethnic minority groups. Some receive young children while others specialise in teenagers and the harder to place children. For Kevin and Jenny whose small IFA handles harder to place children and uses Systemic Family Fostering, the ideal foster carer needs to match those skills. As a small agency, they’re also able to take in foster carers that didn’t match the criteria of LAs. The expectation that such a myriad of organisations who are in competition with one another would somehow be united in their recruitment seems unrealistic. What I found was a market like any other, characterised by fierce competition. Debating about whether or not this market should even exist is beyond the scope of this research, but it is definitely a conversation worth having:

“And I think too if you spend a little time and think about it, it doesn’t feel that the whole way that the system works within the UK; you wouldn’t have designed it that way. And there are tensions where you have people working at the two. There’s a lot of spend for the same pool of people which
Profiting from Vulnerable Children
Perhaps one of the biggest themes that has cut across recruitment, is the aspect of people profiting from a system that protects and cares for vulnerable children who have faced abuse of some kind or another. There’s something about making money off vulnerable children that can be uncomfortable to process. This is why some people are uncomfortable with foster carers being paid. As discussed earlier in the paper, this stigma surrounding this concept is a huge debate and can be a big hinderance to people choosing to foster. This same concept is repeated when it comes to the presence of profit-making organisations in foster care. Some people, like Mark, are put off by the idea of working for a profit-making fostering organisation. Others are more interested in the fostering experience that they will get with the organisation. Although it will be presented in later chapters, it is worth noting that in all three of my interviews with foster carers, none mentioned money as a motivation for choosing their fostering organisation. They also didn’t seem to mind the fact that they were fostering with a profit-making IFA. What I did find, was that they were strongly motivated by making a difference in children’s lives and they chose an organisation that they felt would best enable them to do so. This small IFA with less than 20 carers is vastly different from some of the huge IFAs that exist. So perhaps I didn’t get a real glance of what ‘corporate fostering’ would look like. Regardless of this the market exists and foster carers do have options when it comes to considering whom to foster with. The ethics and morality of the privatisation of fostering is, as mentioned earlier, something worth considering, but within the context of my research it might not impact an individual’s decision to foster. Based on Mark’s story, it is evident that it might impact whom people choose to foster with, but there was no indication that the competition or the presence of profit-making agencies impacts whether or not a person would choose to foster.

Relationship between organisations in the Public Structures System may be complicated, but this did not seem to impact a person’s decision to foster. Rather, the research revealed how these relationships impact a recruiter’s job. The real impact of this system is felt through recruitment activities that can be aimed at the other systems within the ecological model.

3. The Public Beliefs System
As discussed earlier, the Public Beliefs System contains the wider culture’s attitudes and beliefs about fostering. My findings add to this wider research about the barriers to fostering. As identified in the literature review these barriers are tied to the public opinion of fostering.
and also include fears about the children. The research revealed a few examples of the misconceptions the public can have about children who are in foster care. One example linked negative views of the children with not wanting to foster. This can be explained using attribution theory. Attribution theory assumes that the mind makes assumptions about what causes an event (Heider, 1958). These assumptions can be linked to internal or external factors, or a combination of both (Heider, 1958). When it comes to fostering, people who assume that life outcomes are as a result of internal factors alone may not be inclined to foster. They may assume that internal factors such as a child’s behaviour, family history or DNA may “doom” them to poor life outcomes. Therefore, an already problematic child would not be worth the effort of fostering. However, if a person assumes that external factors contribute to life outcomes, they would be more inclined to foster. In fostering, attribution of child difficulties to their past forms a protective function for the carer-child relationship (Taylor et al., 2008). Recruiting foster carers who have an awareness of adverse childhood experiences and their effects on a child would therefore improve the fostering experience for children.

There is a need to improve public awareness of adverse childhood experiences (Davidson, Critchley-Morris, & Wright, 2020). While the public may view issues such as abuse and neglect seriously, they may not be aware about the extent to which these experiences affect the individuals who experience them, as well as the interventions needed to address them (Purtle, Nelson, & Gollust, 2021). If the public blame children for the circumstances that cause them to come into care, this can increase stigma for children in care (Purtle et al., 2021). While it is difficult to shape an entire nation’s attitudes and culture, we know that fostering recruitment can contribute to ongoing efforts to increase ace awareness in the public. Recruitment materials and efforts have the potential to shape how people view fostering. As discussed in Chapter 3, fostering recruitment can rebrand foster care. This would be best addressed through large scale campaigns such as the one by Clift (2011) in Australia. Awareness campaigns can address the misconceptions that people have of fostering, foster carers and children in foster care. While organisations such as The Fostering Network are spearheading national awareness raising efforts, more could be done by the Department of Education to support existing campaigning forums or to run national campaigns. Fostering recruitment on national levels would be better placed to purely focus on the fostering brand rather than trying to also include brand information for fostering organisations. This would provide more neutral information about fostering which would help reduce the confusion that potential carers face when entering the market. As the national
body that oversees all fostering, the Department of Education would be well placed to run national campaigns and create ‘neutral’ resources for potential foster carers to access as consider fostering.

Finally, I would be remiss to end this discussion without emphasising the importance of including the voices of children and young people in fostering in this conversation, allowing them to shape the image of children in foster care. Davidson et al. (2020) argue that the conversation on adverse childhood experiences can sometimes present children with these experiences as having a deficit or having something wrong with them. They go on to argue that there is a need for a more positive message about the children’s rights to services related to their experiences (Davidson et al., 2020). This echoes the argument presented in chapter 3 about how we view and frame motivations for fostering. I posited that social exchange model is appropriate as it moves away from the view of children in care as needing to be saved. Children and young people in foster care have a right to participate in the conversations that concern them. They should be involved in the shaping of recruitment material and how they are portrayed in them. This would present a more the complex realities they face as children with adverse childhood experiences (Davidson et al., 2020). This would address some of the damaging stereotypes present in the public beliefs system. The extent to which young people have been involved in foster carer recruitment is unknown. This would be an area well worth pursuing in future research.

It may be a daunting task, but recruiters need to understand the larger context of the conversation around fostering. What is the public opinion on fostering? Is there an awareness of why children need fostering? Events in the public sphere could give them an opportunity to piggyback on other conversations. For example, if there is a public health campaign to raise awareness on adverse childhood experiences can take advantage of the momentum of that movement and run recruitment campaigns. They could also take advantage of what is happening in the media. For example, in 2018 there was a film in cinemas about fostering. Recruiters could have taken advantage of the increased awareness in the public sphere and hosted screenings of the movie or set up information stands near a cinema. The public beliefs system, though large, is also impacted by numerous events and triggers that an adept recruiter can take advantage of for their recruitment practice.

4. The Life Events System

While there is not much that recruiters can do to cause life changes for potential carers, they can use this information to help in their targeting. Recruiters can be strategic about how they recruit, where, and when. Information on the life transitions that can trigger fostering or can
make people more available to foster can be used to make strategic targeting choices. This has great implications in this digital age where online marketing tools provide highly detailed and accurate ways of targeting. A well-known example of a life transition is the empty nest. This simple piece of information can be used in targeting in numerous ways. Recruiters can choose to run recruitment campaigns during universities’ orientation weeks as this is when a large number of people first move out of home. These campaigns can be targeted at individuals over a certain age who have googled universities. Similarly, recruiters can target ladies of a certain age who have googled things like “mother of the bride outfits” as this would indicate another life transition. Additionally, recruiters can target people who search for decorating ideas for a ‘spare room’ or ‘guest room’. Digital marketing will be explored further in the next chapter. The Life Events System seems like an unnecessary system to include when working on recruitment. Indeed, the information on this system only came from the three foster carers. However, such minimal knowledge can guide targeting decisions for recruiters, allowing them to ‘catch’ potential carers at the opportune time. This would be an area worth researching further.

CONCLUSION
The ‘ecosystem’ of fostering recruitment is quite a complex one, but the ecological model has been an effective tool for describing and understanding it. In the process of my research, I felt the pressure, internally and externally, to find this ‘magic formula’ that would be the answer to why people foster. The hope was that this magic formula could then be applied by recruiters to get more people to foster. Life, however, is a lot more complex than that. The literature review already indicated that people often have several motivations for fostering. Recruiters may have historically focused on the individual’s characteristics and circumstances, but the ecological system proves that this is limited way to understand how people decide to foster. My findings indicate that there’s even more to it than individual motivations. The decision to foster happens within an environment that is impacted by interactions with people, cultural beliefs and life events. Despite the complexity presented by this reality, there are many ways that recruiters can and are using this knowledge to influence their recruitment practice. This ecological model provides recruiters with numerous opportunities for application in practice from the micro to macro level.

The ecological model was only an introduction to the findings in my research, which focused on the landscape of fostering recruitment. It is, however, an insufficient tool for describing the process of fostering recruitment. The rest of my findings chapter take on a different focus by looking at the process of recruitment from the perspective of both the recruiter and
the potential cares. This is done using the three-phase model that I created for this purpose. The model will be introduced in the next chapter which will also present the findings and discussion for the first phase of foster carer recruitment.
CHAPTER SIX: PHASE ONE OF RECRUITMENT

The previous chapter served as the introduction to my findings. The ecological model of foster carer recruitment to provide a good description of the fostering recruitment ecosystem. This served to introduce some of the key factors and stakeholders involved in fostering recruitment. This chapter is the first of three chapters that will present findings and discussions on the process of fostering recruitment. For this purpose, I will use the three-phase model of fostering recruitment. During my research, I found that the process of recruitment can be described as occurring in 3 major phases: introduction/exposure, exploration and training & assessment. This chapter will begin by introducing the model. It will then focus on the first phase. Following a similar pattern to the previous chapter, findings will be presented in the first section of the chapter, with the discussion being presented in the second section.

INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE-PHASE MODEL

The three-phase model is a new way of understanding the recruitment process. Each phase in this model plays a unique and vital role in the journey to being an approved foster carer. To accomplish this each phase uses specific resources. Figure 11 below illustrates the recruitment process.

![Three Phase Model of Fostering Recruitment](image)

*Figure 11 Three Phase Model of Fostering Recruitment (author’s own)*

As shown in the illustration, the first phase is where the introduction to fostering happens. This, as described in the previous chapter, can happen naturally through exposure to fostering
and the care system, or through deliberate recruitment activities such as advertisements and community marketing. During this phase, the potential carer is often a passive consumer of information.

Recruitment activities in the first phase often trigger the exploration phase. In this phase the potential carer explores what fostering is and what it means to foster. This exploration can be curated and facilitated by fostering organisations when an inquiry is made. Additionally, exploration can happen without direct contact with the agency through things like conversations with a known foster carer, internet searches, watching vlogs, and reading books about fostering. During this phase, the potential carer can go through active and passive phases as they consider becoming a foster carer. This phase can take years until triggered by a life event. However, if a person’s physical and social circumstances are favourable for fostering, this phase can be short. People leave this phase by either deciding to not become a foster carer, shopping for agencies, or, if the exploration was guided by an agency, submitting a formal application to foster.

The final phase of fostering recruitment is the training and assessment phase. This phase happens within a fostering organisation once an inquiry has been made. The aim of this phase is to assess a candidate’s fitness to foster while also providing them with the skills needed to begin fostering. Conversations with a social worker as well as the “skills to foster” class provide training. Assessment is often an ongoing process and involves the home visit, paperwork and the final review by a panel. Interestingly, assessment is often two-way. Some potential carers also use this time to assess the agency. Carers can make multiple inquiries and go along with the process with more than one agency until they identify the one, they want to proceed with. This phase ends with the potential carer being approved as a carer, choosing to stop the assessment process, or receiving a formal rejection for their application.

**FINDINGS ON PHASE ONE**
The three-phase model focuses on a fostering agency’s process and output but also draws from the carer experience and behaviour during the three phases to provide a better understanding of recruitment. This chapter will focus on findings in first phase of recruitment, drawing on information from all three methodologies (case study interviews, survey and content analysis). It will then conclude with a discussion on these findings. As discussed earlier, the first phase is characterised by active recruitment efforts by fostering agencies. This chapter will not discuss exposure or community-based recruitment as they were covered in the previous chapter. Rather, it will focus on other more traditional marketing methods employed by fostering recruiters. Although the focus will be on the
recruitment methods, this chapter will also present findings on the recruiters. This is in keeping with the ecological approach that acknowledges that recruitment doesn’t happen within a vacuum.

1. Methods of Recruitment
The research revealed that recruiters use numerous marketing methods. These include but are not limited to bus ads, newspaper ads, bulletin boards, tv ads, radio ads, bus stop ads, shopping mall booths, Google ads, Facebook ads, Instagram ads, Street posters, stands at local events, leafleting houses, promotions in council communication and other forms of online advertisements. The survey of fostering recruiters provided an understanding on what methods are popular with recruiters, how recruiters choose their methods, and how they track their results. In the survey, Facebook ads came across as a top method for recruitment.

**Popular Methods**

![Bar chart showing popular methods of recruitment.]

- **Facebook Ads**: 40 (80%)
- **Information Sessions**: 31 (62%)
- **Google Ads**: 24 (48%)
- **Radio Ads**: 19 (38%)
- **Other**: 18 (36%)
- **Street Posters**: 17 (34%)
- **Instagram Ads**: 13 (26%)
- **Bulletin Boards**: 11 (22%)
- **Bus Ads**: 7 (14%)
- **TV Ads**: 3 (6%)

*Figure 12: Methods that recruiters had used within the last 12 months. Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g., 100% would represent that all this question’s respondents chose that option). N=51*

The chart above shows the methods recruiters had used within the last 12 months. Based on survey responses, Facebook ads were identified as the most popular form of advertisement, with 80% of the recruiters saying that they used it (N=51). Overall, digital marketing (Facebook ads and Google ads) made up for 35% of the methods used by respondents. When asked which form of advertisement they used most frequently, Facebook was again the option most selected by recruiters. When asked to identify what they found to be the most effective method, the most selected option was Facebook ads which was identified by 40% of the survey respondents. Coming in second was “word of mouth” which was selected by 17% of the respondents as the most effective method (N=51). Coincidentally, this wasn’t one of the response options, but was typed in by respondents who selected “other.” When asked
about the methods they used the least, TV ads, Radio ads and Bus ads were the top three choices identified by recruiters.

**Rationale for using methods.**

The research revealed that recruiters have a rationale for using certain methods. At the top of this rationale is cost effectiveness, results and the ability to target. When asked to identify why they used their most frequently used method, recruiters identified cost effectiveness, results and ease of use as the top three rationales. Although it wasn’t in the options provided, a few recruiters sited targeting as a rationale for using a method frequently. One recruiter who selected Facebook ads and Google ads as the most frequently used methods put it this way: “Nothing else gives you the ability to target exactly the right people.” The survey also asked recruiters to identify their rationale for considering a method effective.

![Chart showing reasons for using methods]

*Figure 13: Reasons why recruiters identified a method as being most effective. Multi answer: Percentage of selections across all answer options (adding up to 100% across all options). N=50*

When asked to consider why they identified a method as effective, results, cost effectiveness and ease of use were identified as the top reasons. Cost effectiveness and results thus appear as top factors in determining what methods to use and how frequently they are used. When asked why they might not choose a particular method, the top reason sited was it being too expensive. According to the survey, recruiters were also hesitant to use a method if other methods produced better results. This indicates that recruiters do not just want to find the cheapest method; they want one that gives value for money, balancing cost and effectiveness.

According to the survey of 51 fostering recruiters, recruiters seem to be interested in maximising results and are willing to pay for good results. Interestingly, results were measured differently by different recruiters. When asked how they tracked the effectiveness of their methods, the answers were almost evenly split between three options: number of inquiries about fostering (28.3%), number of successful applications to foster (27.5%) and number of successful applications to become a foster carer (25.4%). A small percentage (12.3%)
reported using social media analytics tools to measure a method’s results, with 2.9 %
admitting that they did not use any method to track their activities. The case study with the
IFA revealed a bit more of one recruiter’s process when it comes to selecting methods for
recruitment.

**Trial and Error: A case study of one Recruiter’s process**

Recruitment involves quite a bit of trial and error as the case study with an Independent
Fostering Agency revealed. In the excerpt below, Kevin*, the lead recruiter in the IFA, relays
his experience with one of the more traditional methods; advertising in a stand at an
event/mall. This was a method that 8 recruiters identified as having used within the last 12
months:

“\[quote\]So, we stopped going to shopping centres. We stopped going to fairs. We
stopped going to kind of community events because it was really costly. So,
a shopping centre might cost about 1500 pounds for a week. We’ve got
one of those little booths that you stand in... So, it would be Annie, Jenny
and I. So, it would be really intense in terms of labour. You’d be spending all
day there. You might get lots of names down, but I guess the quality of
people coming through is really low. So, people who just happen to see you.
So, motivation is quite low because they’re stumbling in front of you. And
generally meeting people afterwards or kinda getting in touch with them
was quite low\[quote\] (Kevin, IFA Recruiter)

In the interview Kevin went on to discuss his recruitment ‘misadventures’ involving other
methods of recruitment such as advertising in a college orientation pack which cost £1000
for two years. That method did not lead to any inquiries. The process he described was one of
“just trying things out” and tracking any inquiries that came from it. In this excerpt Kevin also
hints at something that is quite important to recruiters, quality inquiries. As discussed before,
recruiters are interested in value for their money and efforts. An effective method is thus one
that leads to quality inquiries and successful applications while being cost friendly. For Kevin,
that was Google ads. 48% of recruiters in the survey reported using this method within the
last three months but only 14% identified it as the most used method. For Kevin, a recruiter
for a small IFA, Google ads has been proving to be the method of choice as it gets more
people to the website. For that agency, the goal of their advertising is to draw people to the
website first. The significance of this will be discussed in the later in the chapter.
Given the fact that phase one recruitment involves marketing methods, I sought to understand the personnel behind fostering recruitment. What is their academic background? What resources do they have access to? Did they have any training available to them?

2. Recruiters

Recruiter Training

The findings in the above section paint a picture of recruiters being almost scientific in their process of selecting methods for recruitment. They apply rationale in the selection and continuously weigh the results against the effort and cost. However, I found that these choices are made by people who are not fully equipped for the task.

![Diagram showing educational background of recruiters in the survey, N=51]

The chart above shows the academic background of the fostering recruiters in the survey. In terms of academic training, 25 of the recruiters in the survey came from a social work background with only 10 and 9 coming from marketing and business backgrounds respectively (N=51). Those who selected “other” came from a wide variety of backgrounds including tourism, teaching and law, none of which were particularly relevant to the role. When asked if they had ever undertaken formal training in recruitment, 31 recruiters said they had not. Of those who had undergone training, 10 indicated that they had attended workshops on recruitment that were run internally or by network organisations like Coram BAAF, NAFP and The Fostering Network. Only two recruiters indicated that they had had formal marketing training. Some organisations made up for the lack of marketing expertise by working with marketing agencies. Twelve recruiters reported that they worked with marketing agencies (24%).

Responsibilities and support

Apart from not being well equipped in terms of education and training, the data also indicated that many recruiters had to juggle other responsibilities alongside recruitment. In the survey, 57% of recruiters indicated that recruitment was not their main responsibility (N=51). Some
of the competing responsibilities included carer retention, supervising and assessing foster carers, child placements and overall management. Despite this, majority had other staff members working with them in recruitment. Only 8 recruiters reported working in recruitment alone while 15 reported having volunteers help with recruitment.

For some recruiters, the recruitment process is hindered by colleagues. In a few cases, recruiters reported that they were not the key decision makers in the process of choosing what methods to use. Two recruiters in the survey said that the director made recruitment choices. In another instance, a recruiter reported wanting to use social media analytics tools for tracking their results, but their IT department was struggling to give support in that area. One recruiter in the survey ‘inherited’ the recruitment plan from the previous recruiter. The recruiter reported that: “This was done before I was in post - the belief being it would reach a wide audience. I feel it is not cost effective and going forward will not be using this method of advertising in the next 12 months.”

A case study of the recruiter’s experience
My case study with a small IFA helped me get a better understanding of how recruitment takes place within a fostering organisation. In this IFA, Kevin was the main recruiter. Initially the work of recruitment was spread between two co-founders and Kevin, but as the organisation grew, they had to shift roles and Kevin took the lead. In the quote below he describes that transition:

“I took on the recruitment role about 12 months ago. Coz it’s something I like. I guess I like the idea of meeting new people. I used to do that in a local authority years ago, that initial point of contact to suss out people, initial visits. And I like the online content and marketing stuff so it’s something that I’m actually drawn to. I took the lead about 12 months ago. From then I think about what the marketing might look like, the online content. I look after the online content company that we’ve got onboard to write the blogs. I look after our designer for the website and the different documents we have. I look after the IT person we’ve got who does the website and all that jazzy stuff. I guess that’s the process from there.” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

Despite the fact that he comes from a social work background, Kevin finds himself managing aspects of recruitment that are out of his educational background. Recruiters like Kevin find themselves having to have skills in IT, advertisement, content creation and much more. Even
if they work with contractors skilled in this area, they have to liaise with and supervise the contractors. Kevin described how he navigates that by trying to learn from the contractors he works with. He reported trying to be “instinctive” and “reflective” throughout the process, learning and experimenting as he goes, but with no access to formal training in the area. This might be representative of the experience of the 25 recruiters in the survey with social work backgrounds.

Having presented some background information on recruiters and how they select methods, the next section will explore one product of recruitment: ads.

3. Fostering Advertisements
Advertisements are used in majority of phase one recruitment methods. It is possible that ads have an impact on other phases of recruitment, but this section will focus on ads as a marketing tool that helps introduce potential foster carers to fostering. This section draws heavily on the content analysis to explore this important aspect of recruitment. It does so by exploring three key aspects of every ad: the targeting, messaging and the call to action. This section will present findings in these three main areas, focusing on the intentions of the recruiters and what is communicated through the ads. This gives a picture of the back-end process of creating the advertisements and offers room for comparison between the intentions and the outcomes which shall be discussed later in this chapter.

Targeting
Targeting is a key part of effective marketing. This is done through various ways including the selection of models on the ad. For social media advertising, it is also done through picking the target demographics for the advertisement. This section will explore findings from the survey about recruiter’s intended targets. It will also explore what the content analysis revealed about targeting in ads.

Intended Target: Who do the recruiters want to target?
In the survey, recruiters reported wanting to portray fostering as something that is “for everyone” and wanting to appeal to a diverse demographic. When asked about it, 93% of recruiters indicated that they wanted to reach more diverse demographics including Black carers (30%), Asian carers (27%), LGBTQ+ carers (10%), male carers (7%) and single carers (6%). When asked if there were any types of carers that they struggled to recruit, most recruiters mentioned the same BAME demographics (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities). In addition to this, a few mentioned that they were struggling to find Muslim carers and carers to take in sibling groups. Only 7% of recruiters indicated that they were trying to recruit white carers. Curiously, two recruiters were struggling to recruit white carers. One of
These two recruiters observed: “In my LA the demographics of the local population are minority white British, so it has been difficult to recruit white British foster carers.” Another 8 recruiters indicated that they did not have any demographics that they struggled to reach.

A conversation with Kevin an IFA recruiter helped reveal how recruiters go about their targeting. Here is Kevin’s process of targeting on google ads:

“So, I do like 25-60, the demographic. I put it all different locations that we want to work in and that we do work in around south and east London. I put in different things like foster care. I put in people who like parenting, childcare, all those kinds of different genres. I always put male and female. 75% of our enquiries are female but we’ve got 25% are male that come through as well.” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

Targeting Outcomes: Who do the ads really target?

Majority of the carers and children represented in the ads were white and able-bodied. In the ads included in the content analysis, 27 of the 62 ads contained children. Of these 84% were young children under the age of 13 and 82% of the children were white. There was no image of a child with a visible disability, nor was there any mention of the same. When it came to carers in the ads, 33 of the 62 ads had carers in them. Of these ads, 61% had only one carer. For ads with one carer, 86% were female and 71% were white. In the ads that had more than one carer, 69% presented a heterosexual couple and were mostly white (69%).

Another area of targeting revealed in the content analysis was regarding the types of fostering that are needed. As mentioned earlier, there are numerous types of fostering and recruiters can use targeting to recruit people for a specific type of fostering. This would be communicated in the ad messaging. Majority (77%) of the 62 ads in the content analysis did not explicitly or implicitly convey a specific type of fostering. In the minority ads that did convey a type of fostering, the types of fostering that were conveyed were: fostering teenagers (9%), sibling fostering (8%), short-term fostering (1.5%) and long-term fostering (1.5%).

While the ads in the content analysis did not give all the targeting information behind the ads, it revealed more about the gender and ages that were targeted and reached by the Facebook ads. Please refer to the image below which shows one of the Facebook ads included in the content analysis.
As the image shows, the ads also provided information about who was targeted or shown the ads. This is displayed in terms of gender and age groups. In the 62 ads analysed there was a small difference in gender targeting: all the ads targeted females while 97% of the ads also targeted males. Although both genders were targeted by a majority of the ads, this was not always done in equal measure. While most ads were shown to men, male audiences made up only about 30% of the target audience while women made up 70-100% of ad audiences. This means that women were the primary target audience for the ads.

When it comes to the age range of the audience, ad audiences ranged from 25-65+. The distribution across the ranges did not vary as much as that of gender. The most targeted age group for the ads was 35-44 which was targeted by 100% of the ads, followed closely by ages 45-54 (98%). Some ads (40%) also included the 65+ age group in their targeted demographics.
People’s perceptions of ads
While the content analysis reveals the latent and manifest communication in the ads, interviews helped to give an understanding of some people’s perception of the ads. Victoria, a foster carer in an IFA, shared her opinion of fostering advertisements that she had seen:

“They’re a bit sickly. I do not mean that in a nasty way. It’s just, you know, they have this child smiling away and the family, um, it’s just – it’s not real... Actually, it’s quite interesting. I do not think I’ve ever seen a single person doing it in the adverts. It’s always a couple, and I do not think I’ve seen same sex either. They’re quite interesting coz now they do do a black family or mixed race. So, they do do that. But yeah, it always seems to be a family and you know, the child’s like... happy. Which I suppose sometimes they are.” (Victoria, Foster Carer)

Victoria’s observation is not quite in line with the findings of the content analysis. However, it is important to note that as a single, black, foster carer, she hadn’t seen herself represented in fostering advertisements. This could be reflective of ads within her locality as 61% of the ads with carers had only one carer and of these, majority were women. This could also be an indication that recruiters are starting to appeal to more diverse demographics. This is something that Victoria recognised as she’d seen more black families represented in ads.

As mentioned before, Kevin the IFA recruiter, is also critical of the way fostering is currently advertised, labelling it as “old school” and “fuddy duddy”. To Kevin, the ads represent an old image of fostering being undertaken by an older white, heterosexual couple. Interestingly, only two of the ads in the content analysis had an older carer. This, again, might reflect the industry adjusting their ads to attract younger carers. Alternatively, ads on Facebook may reflect the younger demographic that uses the platform. This will be discussed further in the discussion section.

Ad messaging
Communication is primarily one-way during the first phase of recruitment. What is communicated is therefore critical to the success of the whole process. During this section we will explore the intention and execution of this part of the process. This involves understanding what recruiters hope to communicate and how they do so. This will be followed by an analysis of what is being communicated in the advertisements using the content analysis. In this case messaging isn’t referring to words alone but includes what is
communicated through the images too. This section will also cover the motivations for fostering and the way that advertisements are framed.

**Motivations for fostering: Why do recruiters think people choose to foster?**

Ads are created to encourage consumers to take certain actions such as buying a product or signing up for something. Intrinsically linked to this is the motivation for taking that action. This is communicated in various ways to entice, encourage or influence the consumer into making a certain decision. Marketers often do this by positioning the product, service or behaviour in a certain way (Philip Kotler & Lee, 2008). Positioning is done by presenting the merits or benefits of a product, service or behaviour for the consumer, or in presenting it as advantageous over other products, services, or behaviours. For fostering recruitment, the motivations, and deterrents for fostering serve as foundations for positioning fostering. I.e., the motivations of fostering that are communicated in an advertisement help make advertisements more effective in influencing the viewer. This section thus explores the motivations for fostering that were identified by recruiters.

The survey revealed what 51 recruiters found to be the top motivations for fostering. When asked the top three reasons why people foster, recruiters identified the following: They feel they have something to offer (84%), they want to help vulnerable people (57%) and they want to give back to society or contribute to a perceived need in the community (51%). Two other popular reasons selected by recruiters was being empty nesters (43%) and having been exposed to fostering (41%). When it came to identifying why people do not foster, the following were the top three reasons identified by the recruiters in the survey: fear for safety of their own children, family or property (55%), lack of understanding of what is involved (53%) and lack of confidence in themselves (37%). Interestingly, these motivations and deterrents were tied to the fostering task as well as being both carer-centric and child-centric. A marketer would use this information to position fostering in such a way as to address these deterrents or to appeal to these motivations. The content analysis revealed what motivations were conveyed in the ads.

**Motivations for fostering communicated in the ads.**

Given what recruiters identified as top motivations for fostering, what did the ads communicate as motivations for fostering? Motivations were conveyed in several ways including slogans, challenges, and testimonials. An example of a motivation conveyed in a slogan is the phrase “foster a future” which was used in a few ads by a local authority. Ads that contained testimonials from foster carers spoke of transformation, which was coded as helping a child or changing a child’s future depending on what was emphasised. Here’s an
example of one such testimonial that was coded as both helping a child and changing a child’s future. “When you see in the space of four months the difference in those two boys... the transformation has been amazing. Their confidence, their manners, and they look so healthy... it gives us that reward to show we’re doing well and that they’re happy”. The chart below shows the motivations for fostering that were revealed in the ads.

![Motivations for fostering chart]

*Figure 16 Motivations for fostering in the ads. Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g., 100% would represent that all this question’s respondents chose that option) N=51*

The ads presented three major reasons for fostering. The top motivation conveyed by the ads was that fostering would help a child. This was found in 46.2% of the ads. Another child-centred motivation that was popular in the ads was that fostering would change a child’s future (36.5%). Another top motivation identified in the ads was that of provision of training and support to carers. This was conveyed in 36.5% of the ads.

**Message Framing**

This section explores findings from the content analysis about how advertisements were framed. Message framing, as described in the literature review, refers to the marketing techniques used to induce particular feelings from the viewers with the assumption that these feelings influence the ad viewer’s behaviours or actions. Framing involves both the images and text used in a particular ad. It is worth noting again, that the content analysis was done by one reviewer and thus cannot be viewed as entirely objective. However, as discussed in the methodology section, this did not negate the efficacy of the model in exploring the message framing and its impact on viewers. At best, this section can be viewed as representative of a segment of ad viewers.
Overall, 82% of the ads were positively framed or induced positive emotions. If considered in isolation of the rest of the ad, 82% of the images were positively framed while 86% of the text was positively framed. Interestingly, the overall feeling that the ad induced was not always congruent across the board, i.e., positive image + positive text = positive ad. In some cases, an ad could be viewed as being positively framed but have one negatively framed element. For example, one ad gave an overall positive feeling (of empowerment), but the image included in the ad was a guilt-inducing one. In this case the text was so well framed it improved the impact of the ad on the reviewer despite the negative image accompanying it. In another example, one ad had a positively framed picture, but the text evoked a negative emotion that it made the whole ad negative. The next section will discuss that ad further.

Advertising mishaps: When messaging goes wrong.
The image below presents an ad that was coded as being negatively framed despite having a positively framed image.

As you can see in the image, the picture evokes positive feelings such as happiness and compassion. However, the text evoked the negative feeling of annoyance because it was problematic. The problematic element was the phrase “Could you tame a cheeky chap?” This played on two very sensitive topics; stereotypes about children who are fostered, and stereotypes about black children. As mentioned in the previous chapter, children who are fostered are viewed by society as being bad or even feral. This text played into that stereotype, disregarding the fact that children in care have a lot of behavioural problems that are caused by their past experiences. They’re not simply ‘cheeky children who need taming’; they are vulnerable children in need of care. Secondly, a well-known racial slur used against black people is that of them being unruly or uncivilised. The particular use of the word “tame”
could thus come off very offensively to black people and paints black children in care negatively. It is possible that the use of black models was to help the ad a black audience, but the wording may have put off that target audience. As a black person, I found the ad offensive.

During my case study interview with Kevin the IFA recruiter, I came across an advertising mishap that caused a lot of controversy. This conversation with Kevin gave an understanding of how these advertising mistakes can occur. He described wanting to present modern image of fostering. “And I’m like, can we be a bit more modern? Can we be a bit more edgy? Can we get a younger demographic of people through? Can we connect to them a different way? Can we find some humour in fostering?” Kevin also discussed how finding new and edgy ways to appeal to larger demographics can be difficult because of the sensitive nature of fostering. He reported that marketers weren’t always able to achieve the delicate balance that is needed in fostering recruitment. To illustrate this, he shared an example of how a different IFA had found itself in the middle of a scandal because of a poor advertising choice. The “swap the mop” campaign drew a lot of criticism from the public and marketers for portraying a foster child as a mop (Jacobs, 2020). In the infamous advertisement, a young couple cared for a mop, going through significant life moments such as school visits and graduation. At the end of the campaign, the slogan “swap the mop” was shown (Murray, 2020). The campaign was spearheaded by a marketing company but had gone a few steps too far in trying to be edgy, modern and funny. As Kevin put it, the stakes in fostering recruitment are high, and recruiters find themselves having to navigate this delicate balance:

“I’m all for advertising. I think it’s when sometimes brands put things out, you’re like, ‘aaw, that’s awful.’ Or ‘that’s really challenging’ or ‘that’s quite offensive’... We’re working with local authorities. We’re working with government money as well, and vulnerable children. We cannot afford to have bad advertising at all.” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

The research revealed an important aspect of recruitment advertising. There are many stakeholders in this field including foster carers and children who are fostered. Their portrayal in advertisements can impact people’s image of them, and if not handled properly, can offend people. The content analysis showed the interesting interplay between two key aspects of messaging in an ad and how together they affect the overall feel of the ad. An ad communicates a lot more than recruiters may be aware of. Another key feature of ads is the behaviour or action they invite a viewer to take. This is explored in the next section.
Calls to Action.
A call to action is a word of phrase that invites the viewer of an ad to make a specific response to the ad. Although every recruiter has the overall goal of getting more people to become foster carers with their agency, not all advertisements invite people to do so. Some aim to lead a person further down the fostering journey through their call to action. Calls to action in the content analysis ranged from thought processes, such as asking someone to “consider fostering”, to real actions such as calling a phone number. The call to action can thus be divided into two categories: the thought-provoking invitation/challenge, and the action. The action was either implied or explicitly mentioned. For example, the presence of a phone number implied that the call to action was to phone that number. The research also revealed that ads can have more than one call to action. For example, the text might invite the reader to consider fostering while also providing a button link that leads to the organisation’s website. This section will explore what recruiters want ad viewers to do, as well as what the ads communicate in their calls to action.

Intentions: What do recruiters want you to do?
As discussed earlier in the chapter, recruiters indicated that they want quality inquiries. The top three ways of measuring the effectiveness of a method were related to inquiries, applications, and new carers. This would indicate that making an inquiry is the main call to action of up to 80% of recruiters in the survey (N=51). A small number of recruiters (12%) reported that they use social media analytics to measure their methods. These measure things like hits to a website, likes on a Facebook page, or direct messages to an inbox. This indicates that for a minority of the recruiters in the survey, the calls to action were not inquiries, but smaller steps towards inquiries such as visiting the website or liking a Facebook page.

The thought-provoking calls to action were quite an interesting aspect of fostering recruitment. The interview with Kevin uncovered some of these:

“We’re always like ‘be the difference’ #betheifference. We’re like, ‘create a difference in a kid’s life’. We talk about journey a lot. So ‘is this your year to start you journey?’” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

As you can see in this quote, the invitations and challenges can be in the form of questions or phrases. In this case, they can be tied to motivations for fostering such as the invitation to “create a difference in a kid’s life”. The invitations are also a way to communicate the organisations view of fostering. In this case, this IFA sees it as a journey.
Call to Action in the Facebook Ads: What do the recruiters invite you to do?
The chart below shows the use of calls to action in the 62 ads that were analysed. (Ads can contain more than one call to action.) In the content analysis, 95% of the ads had an explicit call to action. The most frequently used call to action was to contact the fostering organisation through an email or phone number provided. This was explicitly mentioned in 44% of the ads. A small proportion of ads used thought provoking invitations to consider fostering (16.9%) or consider a specific type of fostering (6.8%).

![Chart showing call to action types]

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**Figure 17. Explicit Calls to Action in the ads.** Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g., 100% would represent that all this question’s respondents chose that option) N=62

Some ads had an implied call to action. For example, they had contact information present in the ad but did not explicitly direct the viewer to a specific action. In some cases, an explicit call to action was accompanied by an implied call to action. For example, an invitation to consider fostering accompanied by the organisation’s contact information. Only 11% of the ads lacked contact information such as a website, phone number, email address, physical address or social media page handles.

**DISCUSSION**
The content analysis, survey and case studies provided a detailed understanding of both the back-end process in advertisement and the ads. This, as mentioned before, lends itself to discussions about whether recruiters are achieving what they want to in their ads. It also invites discussion on the efficacy of the ads to meet the industry’s needs. The data findings hinted at some discrepancies in the intention and execution, but also gave some nuance to the data that leads away from the path of oversimplification of the results. This steers the discussion away from a simple ‘good or bad’ conversation, towards discovering the complexity and nuance revealed by this data. The section will first focus on the recruiters and their methods while the second part will focus on the ads.
1. Recruiters and Recruitment Methods
For a field that involves a lot of marketing practice, the survey indicated that recruiters may be lacking in that expertise. A small percentage of recruiters (16%) had backgrounds in marketing and a few others worked with marketing companies. However, most recruiters, like Kevin, seemed to get by through trial and error. No matter how methodical their approach is, their efficacy must certainly be hindered by a lack of training and expertise. One recruiter in the survey put it simply: “a formal recruitment qualification should be required”. The survey also suggested that there is a lack of training opportunities available to recruiters, with a little training being offered by membership organisations such as The Fostering Network. The discrepancies identified by the research may be linked to this lack of training and expertise. The first of these discrepancies was identified in the most popular marketing method.

Do recruiters understand Facebook Marketing?
The first apparent discrepancy between the survey reporting and the reality was revealed through the content analysis. It was found in the most popular and reportedly, most effective marketing method for recruitment, Facebook ads. In the survey, 80% of recruiters (40 organisations) reported having used Facebook ads within the last 12 months. This statistic was contradictory to the findings of the content analysis. The content analysis searched the Facebook ad library covering two years’ worth of advertising content (2018-2020) but only 17 organisations were identified in the ads revealed by the search. Although a few video ads were excluded from the final analysis, this does not make up for the huge difference in both figures. The ad library is run by Facebook and is comprehensive, indicating that the issue might lie in the reporting by recruiters. A search on Facebook revealed that many fostering organisations do have Facebook pages. This suggests that recruiters might not know the difference between paid advertising on Facebook and normal organic posts. Indeed, fostering pages put up ads on their pages, but these are done as normal posts.

The Facebook platform allows anyone to create a page and to post on that page. Posts to a page are often shown to people who have chosen to follow that page by liking the page. This forms a regular audience to whom a page administrator can show content. This is referred to as owned media as the recruiter owns the page and the content on it (Dodson, 2016). However, because of the algorithm that chooses whom to show content, there is no guarantee that 100% of a page’s audience will see that page’s content each time a post is made. To increase the people in the audience that see that post, page administrators can pay a fee to “boost” each post. This ensures that the post is shown to more people in the audience. Any post made to the Facebook page is an organic post, even if it is boosted, as it is
shown to the audience that likes the page (Stelzner, 2020b). Facebook advertising, however, is quite different from posting to a page. It is done through the Facebook business suite (formerly known as the Facebook business manager). The business suite allows page administrators and marketers to run paid ad campaigns that are targeted to an audience of the recruiter’s choosing (Facebook, 2020). Ads can be put through A-B testing and come with detailed analysis and tracking data (Stelzner, 2020c). Paid ads do not appear on a page’s timeline and are often showed to an audience outside of the page’s following.

The discrepancy in the recruiter’s reports and the ad library indicate that some recruiters might not understand the very platform that they deem to be the best tool for recruitment. There are a few who identified the platform’s targeting potential as a reason why they use it often, which shows that some recruiters can distinguish between the two major features of the platform. However, it seems that a majority may not understand the platform. This would be disadvantageous to recruiters who fail to take advantage of the sophisticated and advanced marketing features available through Facebook business suite. Recruiters who do not have a marketing background but work with marketing companies may not struggle with this issue, but for the majority of recruiters who lack the academic background and marketing expertise, this would put them at a competitive disadvantage in a time when digital marketing is so critical.

These findings are in line with the findings of Stringfellow, Keegan, & Rowley, (2019) whose study found that local authorities were not realising the full potential of Facebook. The UK study, focused on the use of Facebook pages, but did not explore the use of advertisements on Facebook. However, out of 39 LA participants, 37 of the recruiters in this study indicated that they had access to professional support from an in-house marketing expert. If such a high percentage of recruiters in LAs have access to marketing expertise, why the low use of Facebook ads? Advertising on Facebook is a digital marketing method, one of many methods that fostering recruiters in the UK have been accused of being slow to participate in (Narey & Owens, 2018). Perhaps exploring the larger field will provide more insight into this issue.

Are recruiters maximising the benefits of digital marketing?
The majority of my data collection took place during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The content analysis covered data from January 2018-October 2020, and the survey was administered in January-May 2020. The case study interviews were conducted in March-August 2020. This is important to note because during the lockdown and subsequent restrictions, much of daily life, work and interactions was moved online. According to the survey, digital marketing methods accounted for only 35% of marketing methods used by recruiters. This number was
unexpectedly low given the societal changes caused by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown and restrictions.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the average time that people spent online increased. For example people aged 25-54 years spent an average of 3 hours and 4 minutes online in January 2020 but this rose to 4 hours and 15 minutes in April 2020 (Fisher, 2020). This age group makes up the large portion of potential foster carers. With this increase in time spent online came an increase in digital ad spending. In 2020, Facebook and Google ads accounted for 68.5% of the digital ad market in the UK, an increase from 65.8% in 2019 (He, 2019). In 2020, Facebook usage by older users also rose (Fisher, 2020).

With older people spending more time online, and on platforms such as Facebook, it would be prudent for recruiters to increase their use of digital marketing methods. Even though some recruiters reported using digital methods, the overall numbers indicate that the usage is still quite low. While the data does not definitively measure the increase in use of digital methods, it does hint at a shortfall in usage as reported by recruiters in the survey, and observations from collection of the ads. Recruiters could very well be increasing their use of digital marketing methods, but the current data suggests that current usage is low compared to current digital marketing trends. This is in line with previous research and reports that indicated that fostering organisations have been slow on the uptake of digital marketing methods (Narey & Owers, 2018; Stringfellow et al., 2019).

Digital marketing methods are providing recruiters and marketers with targeting and tracking benefits at an unprecedented level. With more people being online and that trend likely to continue as the pandemic rolls into the second year, recruiters have an opportunity to move their recruitment strategies online. Perhaps this slow uptake on digital marketing can be connected to the academic background of recruiters. A glance at the previous marketing methods indicates the use of methods that took advantage of the skills of social workers. Methods such as leafleting, stalls in events and malls, and information sessions, were very people-focused and can be seen to have thrived on interpersonal skills that social workers have. However, the move to digital marketing will require a different set of skills and training, something that fostering agencies may not have realised yet.

**Internal hinderances to recruiter activities**

So far, the discussion has focused on recruiter’s limited abilities and skills. This section will discuss other organisational issues that may affect recruitment. This will be a brief discussion as the issue was not prevalent in the research, but it did provide a bit of insight into the
internal structure and processes that may affect recruitment. Of the 50 recruiters surveyed in the research, 22 (43.1%) had recruitment as their main responsibility. The survey invitation email was addressed to the head of recruitment/lead recruiter in fostering organisations. This would indicate that a little over half of the fostering organisations’ lead recruiters did not have recruitment as their main responsibility. National reports indicate that there is a shortage of foster carers and as discussed earlier in this paper, the number of foster carers needed continues to rise. Recruitment is thus an essential part of the fostering system, yet the research indicates that fostering organisations may not be structured in a way that reflects this, with over 50% of recruiters having other main responsibilities. As this chapter has revealed, marketing is a large part of recruitment and would require a different set of skills from some of the social work responsibilities that recruiters reported having alongside recruitment.

In addition to this, some recruiter’s work was hampered by other members of the fostering organisation. One recruiter reported that the IT department struggled to support their digital marketing. This was echoed in the findings of the Facebook study which found that in some LAs where social media use was controlled by a main council page, recruiters struggled with engaging freely on the platform (Stringfellow et al., 2019). Two other recruiters also reported that decisions on recruitment methods were handled by the director. Both recruiters reported dissatisfaction in the recruitment method of choice, and one indicated that they would not be proceeding with it in the next 12 months. Although organisational structure is vastly beyond the purpose of this thesis, it is worth noting that the data indicates that the way that fostering organisations structure their recruitment department may be affecting the recruitment process. I conservatively hazard a guess that having recruiters without marketing skills, operating in a role that is heavily reliant on marketing expertise, while also navigating competing responsibilities, may not lead to optimal recruitment practice. This is an area that future research could explore.

This findings chapter explored findings on advertisements from the backend of the recruiter’s process looking at recruiter intentions. It also explored advertisements and through the content analysis, teased out the latent and manifest communication in the ads. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the data lends itself towards discussions about the efficacy of advertisements in aiding the recruitment process. The next sections aim to discuss this, starting with targeting.
2. Fostering Advertisements
Who is represented in the ads and why does it matter?

As mentioned earlier, majority of the ads presented white carers taking care of white young children. Given that England is a majority white country and majority of carers are white, is this problematic? In this case, it can potentially be problematic if it does not match the recruiter’s needs. The goal of an advertisement is to attract potential foster carers who suit the needs of recruiters, not to represent the current demographic of carers or even the general population. Some of the major areas to discuss in terms of representation are the age and race of carers and children.

According to the latest report on fostering in England, majority of foster carers are over 50 years old and the older the carer, the more likely they are to have limited availability for placements (Department for Education, 2020c). The 2020 report by the Department for Education found that while older carers are more likely to have fewer placements, younger carers have a higher occupancy rate. It would thus be prudent to attract young carers who can care for more children and, can have a longer fostering career. This was reflected positively in the Facebook advertisements as only two ads had older carers. This would indicate that the ads in the content analysis could attract the younger carers who are needed. This finding is also representative of national trends as 52% of newly recruited carers in 2020 were under the age of 50, with a quarter of new recruits being in their 20s and 30s (Department for Education, 2020c). While age representation of carers was positively handled in the advertisements reviewed, the ads did not achieve the same result in other areas.

Older children make up 63% of children who are looked after (Department for Education, 2020b). Teenagers are amongst the group of children that take long to be placed in foster care (Home for Good, 2020; Narey & Owers, 2018; Williams, 2020). Teenagers are also more likely to experience disruptions in placements (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Along with teenagers, other types of placements that fostering organisations struggle to place are sibling groups, children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum seekers and children from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups (Home for Good, 2020). There is thus a need to attract foster carers who can take in these types of placements and to represent these children in the adverts. Ads play an important role in recruitment for these types of placements but the current ads in the content analysis did not facilitate this. Only 9% of ads in the content analysis covered teenage fostering, while 8% covered fostering sibling groups. Failure to represent these demographics and types of fostering in the ads can undermine
recruiter’s goals by attracting carers who do not match the agency’s needs. Matching is a key part of placements which is why fostering organisations are seeking to recruit carers from ethnic minority groups who can be matched to care for children from ethnic minority groups. This was iterated in the survey, but these groups were largely under-represented in the ads in both carers and children. This indicates the low efficacy of the ads to attract the types of carers that the industry needs.

It is worth noting that the ads in the analysis were fairly representative of carers when it came to showing single carers, heterosexual couples, and LGBTQ+ carers. This contrasts with statements by one recruiter and one carer who both complained that ads only showed heterosexual couples. While the survey did not reveal any specific need for carers based on their sexuality or relationship status, the findings from the content analysis show that there is some diversity represented in these areas. Single carers account for 18% of all foster carers in England (Department for Education, 2020c). The findings in the analysis indicate that recruiters may be expanding their recruitment to reach this demographic as over half of the ads with carers in them had single carers. Curiously, where the ads had a male carer, majority were presented within the context of a relationship. Only two ads had single male carers. This too cannot be matched or compared to recruiter needs but it could indicate a neglected demographic that recruiters do not market to. The representation and targeting of men in the ads will be discussed further in the next section.

**Gender stereotyping in ads**

When it came to gender distribution of ad reach, most ads (97%) were shown to men, but men made up only 30% of the audience reached. This means that although most recruiters included men in their target audience, women were the primary targets for advertising. When you consider this finding and the low representation of men in the ads, this could be indicative of gender stereotyping that occurs commonly in marketing (Thorson & Rodgers, 2019). Gender stereotyping occurs when advertisers depict people of a certain gender performing in roles that are stereotypically associated with that gender. Historically gender stereotyping worked in advertising as it reflected societal norms. Thorson & Rodgers (2019) found that research was split in determining if this is still the case as counter-stereotypical roles can elicit positive feelings from viewers. Historically, caregiving roles have been associated with women and fostering is no exception to this. Marketing trends are moving away from gender stereotyping and in some countries it is discouraged in policies (Macdonald, 2021; Sng & Castle, 2019). The findings indicate that this stereotyping is present in fostering recruitment. This could alienate an entire gender who could help meet
the need for foster carers. The experience of male foster carers in recruitment and fostering practice is an area that further research could investigate.

How effective were the ads at targeting?
Targeting is an essential part of advertising as it increases the probability of the viewer engaging in the desired behaviour, which in this case is fostering (Kox, Straathof, & Zwart, 2017). Recruiters can target through their content by representing target demographics in the ads as discussed in the previous section. Recruiters can also target a specific audience through selection of the advertising platform and, for Facebook advertisements, through selecting specific audience demographics (Stelzner, 2020a). While Facebook has a wide array of parameters that recruiters can use for targeting, the ad library only reports on age and gender. The ads in the Facebook ad library report on demographics based on who was shown the ad (it’s reach) rather than the specific parameters chosen by recruiters. However, the reach of the ads is based on recruiters’ targeting choices. The findings of the content analysis based on the reach of the ads is therefore only indicative of recruiter’s targeting choices rather than being a report on their actual targeting choice.

Ads can be shown to more than one age group. The most popular age groups that were reached by the ads were ages 35-44 (reached by 100% of the ads) and 45-54 (reached by 98% of the ads). This matches with the age demographics of carers represented in the ad as well as the need to recruit younger carers. However, up to 40% of ads were shown to people in the 65+ age group. Given the benefits of recruiting younger carers that were stated earlier, recruiting from this age group is not an optimal use of recruitment resources. New carers in this age group would have fewer placements and a shorter fostering career due to age-related health problems. Carers at the 65+ age group had the top de-registration rate of 14% in 2020 (Department for Education, 2020c). With Facebook advertising, recruiters pay for each person who is shown an ad and as mentioned before, advertisers can be specific with their settings for their target audience including the age groups that the ads should reach. It is therefore likely that recruiters included this age group in their audience settings. It is difficult to know why, but there are two possible things that this would indicate. The first is linked to my previous argument about recruiters’ inexperience with the Facebook advertising platform. The 65+ age group is included automatically in Facebook ads so recruiters may have left that option on unintentionally by going with the pre-set audience. Alternatively, recruiters may intentionally be including this age group indicating a lack of refinement when it comes to targeting which could be linked with lack of marketing experience and knowledge.
Overall, the findings imply that the ads in the review were effective at reaching and targeting young white female carers. However, the findings indicate a need for better refinement in selecting target audiences' age. The research also identified a neglected demographic; male carers who were under-represented in both ads and targeting. Finally, the research suggests that there is a need to better represent sibling groups, older children, children with disabilities and children and carers from ethnic minority groups. This would make the ads more effective at helping meet the needs of agencies for placements that are more difficult to find matches for. In doing so, it would improve such children’s experience of permanence and stability within care.

**Motivations for fostering.**

The perceived barriers and benefits of a product service or behaviour are often addressed by marketers in advertisements (Philip Kotler & Lee, 2008). This is referred to as positioning. For foster carer recruiters, positioning is done using knowledge about the motivations and fears for fostering. This section is aimed at exploring the positioning of fostering in the ads that were analysed. The findings revealed the top three motivations for fostering found in the adverts, two of which were child-focused motivations. Child focused motivations were found in 43 of the 62 ads included in the analysis. The third most frequent motivation mentioned focused on the carers receiving training and support. For a few ads (9), fostering was positioned as meeting a need in the community. In 3 ads fostering was positioned as being an opportunity to share love, resources and parenting skills. Research has revealed that are many benefits to fostering for both the carers, their families and the children but none of the fostering advertisements mentioned any benefits for the foster carers. Similarly, known motivations for fostering also include carer-centred motivations. Did these enhance or hamper the ads’ ability to recruit the right carers?

Research has revealed that some motivations for fostering are associated with better or worse outcomes while others are regarded more highly by social workers and family placement workers. A foster carer’s own experience of childhood deprivation, and the caregiver’s inability to have children were both linked with positive outcomes for fostered children (Cole, 2005). On the other hand, foster parents who are motivated by their own needs for companionship or love from a child, experience fewer placements and have more placement disruptions (De Maeyer et al., 2014). Both intrinsic and child-centred motivations for fostering are associated with successful placements, positive outcomes for foster children, secure attachments between the foster child and foster carer, and higher performance
ratings for foster carers (De Maeyer et al., 2014). This would indicate that the ads’ use of child-centred motivations enhanced their ability to attract the right kind of foster carers.

Interestingly, fostering motivations can also be associated with what types of placements the foster carers are likely to take. Rhodes et al (2006) found that foster carers were more likely to have children with special needs if they were motivated by having formerly been fostered or abused or wanted to help a child with special needs. Additionally, foster parents who wanted a large family were more likely to foster multiple racial groups. A study on 46 infant foster carers in the US found that motivation for fostering was linked with attachment, which is a significant factor in stability. Foster carers who were motivated by increasing their family size were three times more likely to have secure attachments, while those who were motivated by a specific need in their community were six times more likely to have secure attachments with their infants (Cole, 2005). As mentioned before, these types of placements are harder to find matches for. The findings indicate that this is another way that recruiters have limited the efficacy of their ads by not including these motivations.

This discussion has found that two of the top three motivations for fostering found in the ads were beneficial to the recruitment process as these motivations have been linked with good outcomes. The third of the top three motivations was carer focused but was aimed at addressing a barrier to fostering related to carer experience, skill, and sense of efficacy. A focus on barriers to fostering helps the viewers of the ad to overcome or minimise their fears (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). This indicates that the use of these motivations in the ads helps improve their efficacy. Overall, the top three motivations for fostering identified by the ads improved the ability of the ads to attract the right types of carers that would improve children’s experience of permanence and stability in care.

**Message framing**

As mentioned earlier, communication often contains a latent and a manifest message. As discussed earlier in the thesis, the way that advertisements are framed can induce certain feelings which can either help or hinder the effectiveness of an advertisement in leading the viewer towards the desired action. There is no indication in the research that recruiters are not intentionally framing their ads to maximise their effectiveness. However, with little marketing expertise, recruiters may not fully understand the intricacies of effective advertising or how messages can be framed to induce feelings that influence the desired behaviour or action. The research did not uncover whether recruiters have this knowledge or the extent to which they apply it in advertisements. However, the interview with Kevin the IFA recruiter revealed that he did know that advertisements could be framed to induce a
feeling. “I guess generally we’re like, ‘curious to know more?’ We’ve got an ad which is a big “curious” and a big question mark. Coz curiosity is a systemic idea that we love, and we promote.” This indicates a very basic understanding of message framing. In this case, the theme of curiosity was explicitly mentioned in the text but there isn’t any mention of trying to induce that feeling through the images. Despite the possible limits in the understanding of the recruiters, the findings revealed that majority of the ads were positively framed. As discussed in the findings chapter, there was congruence in the framing of text and ads for a majority of the advertisements (i.e., positive images were matched with positive texts and negative images being matched with negative text). Based on the findings of Randle, Miller, Stirling, & Dolnicar (2016) this positive framing enhances the ads’ ability to recruit foster carers. However, the content analysis also revealed that in a few cases text and images were framed differently and this affected the overall feeling that the ad induced. In some cases, the ad could induce a positive emotion despite having one negatively framed element. This has not been explored in previous research, but the data did not lend itself towards deeper analysis of the relationship between the framing of text and images and how these affect the complete effect of the advert. However, this would be an area worth exploring in future research.

The findings also indicated how important it is for recruiters to be cognisant of the various ways their messaging might be perceived by audiences. As revealed in the two examples of advertising mishaps, ads have the potential to perpetuate stereotypes and/or to offend and alienate the very audiences they are trying to reach. Ironically, such ‘mishaps’ may be as a result of marketers who are trying to be modern and edgy but are unaware of the sensitive nature of their market. By virtue of their academic background, recruiters with a social work background would likely be more aware of conversations about how children in care are represented in media. While I have pointed out the need for recruiters to have marketing expertise, I must also recognise the important contribution that a social work background plays in recruitment. I suggest that in an ideal situation, a recruitment team would have both these skill sets present.

3. Calls to Action
The aim of recruitment advertisements is to increase the number of foster carers by attracting and recruiting people with high fostering potential. Calls to action are an invitation to the viewer of an ad to take a step towards becoming a foster carer. The findings revealed a range of calls to action and this section aims to discuss their ability to hamper or hinder the recruitment process.
The first category of calls to action to consider is those that are thought-provoking challenges which were identified in 14 of the 62 ads. Traditional marketing calls to action are often linked to measurable consumer behaviours. This is evidenced in Facebook’s array of call to action buttons that include: “Book Now”: “Contact Us”; “Use App”; “Play Game”; “Shop Now”; “Sign up”, and “Watch Video” (Sophy, 2015). Social marketing, on the other hand, traditionally incorporates calls to action that are linked with behaviours and thought processes (Phillip Kotler & Lee, 2019). This is because social marketing campaigns are often focused on addressing social issues by encouraging or discouraging certain behaviours. Fostering recruitment shares characteristics with social marketing campaigns in this aspect. A study exploring why people do not foster found that some categories of people are waiting for the right circumstances in order to be able to foster (Randle et al., 2014). This is in line with other findings and this research that revealed that people can consider fostering for several years and that the decision to foster is triggered by a life event. The Australian study suggested that recruitment campaigns aimed at this category need not have direct calls to action (Randle et al., 2014). The invitation to “consider fostering” can thus be considered to be an effective call to action even though it may not contribute to immediate inquiries. There is no indication that this long-term strategy is valuable to recruiters who are under pressure to bring in new foster carers, but it does represent a more realistic understanding of the internal process of becoming a foster carer.

In the content analysis, 62% of the 62 ads analysed invited viewers to the exploration phase of the recruitment journey. This included invitations to contact the agency through a phone, email or direct message (30%), visit a website (21%) or to attend an information session (10%). Each of these options leads to deeper engagement with the topic by exploring readily available information and resources or through direct contact with professionals. The exploration phase is a vital part of the recruitment process that will be covered in the next chapter. However, these findings indicate that over half of the ads effectively included explicit calls to actions that enhance the ads’ ability to recruit foster carers. A small minority of the ads (3) did not make use of the Facebook call to action buttons, which would hamper their recruitment process. Facebook buttons were designed to help pages achieve their goals and they also improve the recruiter’s ability to track and evaluate the success of their ad. Overall, the findings from the research indicate that majority of the calls to action in the ads contribute to the ads’ short term and long-term ability to recruit foster carers.
CONCLUSION
This chapter introduced the three-phase model of fostering recruitment and explored the first phase in detail. The findings gave insight on recruiters, indicating possible issues in their training and expertise. Using the data from the survey and the content analysis, this chapter explored the intentions of recruiters and weighed them against the execution revealed in the advertisements from the content analysis. By analysing important marketing elements such as the targeting, message framing and calls to action, the ads revealed some advertising choices that hampered the very goals of recruiters to attract the right type of foster carers. Some of these gaps could be linked to the limited knowledge and expertise of fostering recruiters identified at the beginning of the chapter. The chapter ended with a discussion of calls to action and found that most calls to action in the ads led viewers into the exploration phase of recruitment. The next chapter will focus on the next phase of the recruitment process, exploration and inquiry.
CHAPTER SEVEN: PHASE TWO OF RECRUITMENT

The previous chapter introduced the three-phase model that I designed to describe the process of foster carer recruitment. It also presented and discussed the findings of the first phase of recruitment, focusing on recruiters, recruitment methods, and advertisements. The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss findings in the next phase of the model: exploration and inquiry. While the previous chapter utilised data from the content analysis, this chapter will draw heavily from the two case studies in this research. The first case study was with an N&C (Network and Campaigning organisation). For this case study I interviewed the head of partnerships and innovation, Mark (all names in this research are pseudonyms). The second case study was with a small London-based IFA (Independent Fostering Agency). The for-profit agency has under 20 foster carers and is 6 years old. For this case study I interviewed two staff members: Jenny, a cofounder, and Kevin, the head of recruitment. I also interviewed three newly recruited foster carers: Gloria, Claire, and Victoria. Using data from the interviews, this chapter will explore the recruitment process after initial introduction and exposure to fostering. The case studies provide rich detail and nuance to a complex process, picking up from phase one recruitment.

FINDINGS
1. Exploration
The exploration phase was an unexpected finding revealed by the research. Kevin, the IFA recruiter, placed inquiries into two categories that he called the “grow-ers” and the “show-
ers”. Through the course of my research, I found another category of potential carers: the “do not know-ers”. This category of people seemed to be curious about fostering but were not ready to go into the training and assessment phase. This section aims to explore how the “do not know-ers”, people who are new to fostering, explore fostering, and how the N&C and IFA guided this process. Both the N&C and the IFA facilitated exploration in two major ways: community-based exploration and agency-guided exploration.

**Community-based exploration**

The research revealed this type of exploration which occurs in the Social Circle System. This type of exploration was most evident in the N&C which recruits within churches. The exploration is facilitated by “champions”, volunteer members of church who are passionate about fostering. The champions are trained and equipped by the N&C to help recruit and support fostering within that church. One of their tasks is “simply being available for people to talk to about caring for vulnerable children.” These champions are often foster carers themselves. The N&C provides free resources that the champions can use for helping people explore fostering. These resources will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the context of IFAs and LAs, community-based exploration can be part of the “word of mouth” recruitment process. While this form of exploration can be guided or initiated by volunteers and foster carers, the research also revealed that it was also initiated by the potential carers talking to professionals or friends who know about foster care. Victoria, a newly recruited foster carer, described talking to her friends who are social workers about fostering during her exploration phase. Exploration is therefore not unique to the “do not know-ers” but the findings indicate that it could be something that different types of potential carers undertake in some form or another.

**Agency guided exploration**

Whereas community-based exploration is undertaken by foster carers and other members of the general community, agency-guided exploration takes place within the fostering organisation or the campaigning organisation. The research revealed how staff members guided potential carers as they explored fostering. A common form of agency-guided exploration is the information session which 62.7% of the 51 recruiters in the survey reported using as part of their recruitment process. Information sessions also formed 10% of the calls to action in the content analysis of 62 ads. The two case studies revealed other ways that organisations guide exploration.
The IFA facilitated exploration in bespoke ways that were suited to each inquirer. Kevin, the IFA recruiter, reported that he would start this during the inquiry process. He described how they ensured they had good content on their website that they could refer inquirers to. “If someone inquires with us then we can say, look at this blog, look at this blog. In a week’s time, let’s come back. You tell me about what you’ve taken from there. So, we use it as a learning tool as well. We always want to have good quality content and, on the website, now we’ve started doing videos.” As a social worker, Kevin described drawing from his experience and using the resources to help potential carers explore fostering.

Foster carers are another resource that the IFA uses to help potential carers explore specific aspects of fostering. Jenny the IFA cofounder described how she would connect inquirers to foster carers that had experience in a particular fear/question that a foster carer had. “Our foster carers are used quite regularly now, especially the experienced ones. When you’re getting inquiries, people might have a specific worry, ‘can I manage fostering and still work part time?’ We’ve got a carer who did that very successfully so she would maybe be the person that we get them to speak to.”

The N&C’s exploration strategies are different to the IFA’s. They are suited to their target demographic, Christians. It has a free, six-week foundations course that they use to help potential carers explore fostering. Although framed in the context of the Christian faith, this course aims to “give a better understanding the needs of vulnerable children.” The course is run by staff members or by trained champions.

**Resourcing Exploration**

The research revealed that a key aspect of exploration was in the provision of a variety of resources that potential carers could use. Both organisations used resources available on their websites including blogs, carer stories and videos. In addition to this, the N&C has a book while the IFA also uses a newsletter. These resources were referenced during interactions with potential foster carers but also used by people who may not make direct contact with the organisation as they’re freely available on the website. In this way, online resources could be seen as tools that facilitate a more passive form of exploration where the recruiter makes resources available, and the potential carers access them in their own time.

Kevin described how the IFA used a newsletter to facilitate exploration. Their mailing list, which has 8,600 contacts, connects readers to internal and external resources. “We try and do one of those every three weeks and that’s where we have lots of links throughout the newsletter, again, just to get people back to the website. We have the new blog on there,
maybe one of those little vignettes that’s for about a minute on there, might be like, a book that we think people might enjoy. Just a way to keep people connected with us.” The IFA also involves their foster carers in the creation of their resources, with some carers writing blogs. They also ask foster carers about what information would have been useful to have when they were exploring fostering.

The research revealed a key characteristic of resources provided by N&Cs which is that they can be used by people outside the organisation. One foster carer, Gloria, reported that she used a magazine by the Fostering Network to learn more about fostering. In addition to this, she described using other resources including YouTube videos, social media, and books. The N&C in the case study encourages the use of its free resources by people outside the organisation to support their own campaigns. Mark gave an example of how they resourced a local initiative in Nottingham.

“An example of that would be 100 homes campaign in Nottingham which is seeking, over three years, to try and find 100 foster homes within the city of Nottingham. Whilst we’re not formally engaged, we’ve delivered faith literacy training to social workers, we’ve done children and youth training to children and youth leaders in Nottingham as part of that. We’ve supported all the meetings they’ve set up and spoken at them. We’ve engaged the project manager into wider conversations with us and shared resources. They’ve had our books, all sorts of stuff.” (Mark, N&C recruiter)

**Conclusion on exploration**

The aim of the exploration phase, as revealed in the data, is to help curious people to find out more about fostering. This helped them make informed decisions about fostering. One of the benefits identified by Mark in the N&C was that it led to better quality inquiries. In one campaign in Bristol, the N&C’s recruits were two and half times more likely to start the assessment process than those recruited through ad campaigns by the city. Additionally, they found that of those who started the assessment process, their recruits were 80% more likely to be approved than the city’s recruits.

Although exploration sometimes occurs after making an inquiry, some people make the inquiry with fostering organisations after they’ve explored fostering and are ready to start the journey of becoming a foster carer. The next section will explore inquiries from the perspective of both carers and recruiters.
2. Inquiries
The data provided insight into inquiries both from the carer and recruiter perspective. This section aims to discuss the various aspects of inquiring that unfolded in the interviews with the case study with the IFA. It will first explore the carer perspective and experience, then it will explore how the IFA handles inquiries.

Shopping (the potential carer perspective)
Shopping is a key aspect of the inquiry process that was revealed in the data. It is used to describe the process that potential carers go through in inquiring with and selecting an organisation to foster with. This section will discuss the shopping process for the three newly recruited carers in the case study. It will explore the negative experiences that made them keep shopping as well as the positive experiences that helped them decide on the IFA.

All three carers in the case study indicated that they made multiple initial inquiries, with Claire reporting that she made 11 inquiries. All three carers live in the same London borough and had all made an inquiry with their borough’s fostering service. For the three carers, geographical location was a major factor in deciding whom to contact. Another factor that was revealed by the research was the input of trusted friends in the inquiry phase. Two of the carers reported consulting friends in the process. For Victoria, it was two friends who were social workers. She was advised strongly by both to go to the Local Authority (LA) but when she had a bad experience with the LA, one friend accompanied her to an information session with the IFA, asking questions and eventually advising Victoria to go with them.

Negative Experiences
Inquiries were made via call or email after an online search. For Claire and Gloria, websites made an impact on their initial thoughts about the agencies. Claire described shoddy websites as the “ultimate no-no”. She felt that the website was an indicator of the agency’s quality. “Because I feel like that’s the first thing prospective carers see. So, if you haven’t invested in a good website to make it user-friendly and attractive, then it kind of makes me question how good you are as an agency.” Curiously, although she was put-off by bad websites, this didn’t affect her decision to make inquiries with a fostering organisation that had a bad website. She reported giving a local authority a call despite feeling that their website was “something a ten-year-old had made”. Although she had given the LA a chance, Claire was disappointed with their response to her inquiry. This was a recurring theme with all three carers who described bad experiences with LAs which led them to continue shopping for a fostering agency.
The interviews were able to uncover some of the things that cause a carer to reject an agency or local authority. The common complaint that the three carers had about the LAs that they visited was that they were impersonal, unfriendly and lacked flexibility. Claire described how she made an inquiry and was told that they would call her back because they were “very busy at the moment”. However, they never called back. Victoria reported being dismissed very quickly on her first call with a local authority because she worked part-time. The same local authority was then very rigid, insisting on her getting a reference from a relative with whom she had no relationship. Here’s her report on the exchange:

“They said, ‘Your father passed away so there must have been family members at the funeral.’ And I said, ‘Well, yeah, there was one; she’s in America.’ ‘Why cannot she give you a reference?’ and I said ‘She doesn’t know me. So, you want a complete stranger, just because she happens to be a relative, to write a reference for me when I’ve got countless other people who’ve known me for years?’ ‘Yes, it says that in the application.’” (Claire, Foster Carer)

Claire decided not to go with that local authority because she felt that to them it was a “tick–box exercise” rather than properly looking into her ability to foster. She commented that for an agency that was working with estranged and complex family relationships, they were showing a complete lack of understanding of such situations.

Positive Experiences
There were a few things that the carers identified as having influenced their decision to foster with the IFA. These included the geographic location, website, support, the fostering style of the organisation and positive interactions with the staff. The most common factor for all three carers was the personal and friendly interactions they had with the staff of the IFA. The carers reported them as being friendly, professional, personal, welcoming, and caring. This was in stark contrast to the impersonal and unfriendly interactions they had had with the LAs in their area. Kevin, the recruiter played a key role in the carer’s decision to go with the IFA. As Claire reported: “I just knew from when I spoke to Kevin, that this is the agency that I want to go with. And then Kevin did a visit, and I was like, ‘yeah’. I was even more convinced that I wanted to go with the agency.” Interactions with Kevin were described as being warm, friendly and open. This characteristic was not solely attributable to one staff member of the IFA but was also reported as being present with other staff members too. Gloria described how she felt that this IFA was able to respond to her fears about support for carers, something she had not felt that the LA had responded to adequately. When Kevin was
unavailable to respond to her questions, another staff member had stepped in and addressed her problems swiftly. This continuity of care had made her feel that she would be supported during the fostering journey. Claire too described support as being a key factor in her decision to go with the IFA. For Victoria, the continuity of care was important too as she had felt that with one LA there were too many people involved in the process, causing it to feel impersonal.

The website of the IFA also played an important role in two of the carers’ decisions to pick it. It was described as being user-friendly, professional and having good materials. In addition to this, the therapeutic fostering offered by the IFA appealed to two of the carers. This was articulated clearly on the website but was also emphasised in their training. One interesting aspect of shopping that was revealed by the case study, was that shopping went on until the carers were satisfied with a particular agency. It extended beyond initial inquiries and sometimes into the training phase. The carers remained open and thorough in the process, making multiple inquiries and even scheduling multiple home visits. Gloria reported having multiple phone conversations with local authorities and even visiting the office of one of the LAs to get to know the team. She even attended “Skills to Foster” training sessions with one LA before choosing to go with the IFA. Although the training will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, it is worth noting that two of the carers indicated that the training influenced their decision to go with the IFA they were with.

The findings indicate that the carers were not quick to shut out a particular fostering organisation but pushed beyond initial negative aspects such as shoddy websites or negative interactions. This, however, may not be the experience of other carers. Jenny, a cofounder of the IFA in the case study reflected on this, acknowledging that some people continue searching, but others may give up on the idea of fostering all together, based on a bad experience. “Thankfully, some of those people do not give up there, they’re just put off by the local authority and then they do go to independent agencies. But I do imagine that there’s a lot that we lose as foster carers because of these initial processes.” For the three carers in the case study, their decision to foster was not easily deterred by negative interactions in the shopping phase. The findings indicate that the biggest factor in making the decision was based on positive, personal and friendly interactions with the staff. The next section will discuss this phase of the recruitment process from the perspective of the staff.

Inquiries (the recruiter perspective and response to shopping)
This section will explore the strategies the IFA employ when responding to inquiries. This would hopefully uncover some promising practices. In exploring the recruiters’ experiences
Inquiry Response Strategies

The case study with the IFA revealed four key recruitment strategies that the IFA employs in responding to inquiries. Interviews with Jenny, a cofounder of the IFA, and Kevin, the lead recruiter, shed light on the agencies’ response strategies.

The first of these strategies revealed by the interviews was linked to the response and an initial visit. The research indicated that the IFA was intentional about responding quickly to book an initial visit. As Jenny put it: “we have learnt at times to get the initial visit in as quickly as possible before another agency because people will book in initial visits with everybody but then once they’ve had an initial visit, if that has gone well, they will not necessarily allow the next one”. In their interviews, the carers indicated that they had had positive initial visits with the IFA, which in turn influenced their decision to pick the IFA. This positive experience in the home visit and in initial phone calls was intentionally cultivated:

“That first phone call and that energy you bring to it will also help a person feel connected, listened to, understood, that you have thoroughly answered your questions, that you’re professional, you know what you’re talking about, that you’re not making assumptions about them, you’re asking about them as well and interested in who they are. Those are all just really important elements of building relationships. That’s what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to build a relationship with somebody, for them to feel a connection with you, that they feel yes, this is an agency that has what I need or what I want.” (Jenny, IFA co-founder)

The positive interactions in the first strategy were closely linked to personnel choices that formed the second response strategy which was to have one key person handling recruitment. The IFA is 6 years old but had only implemented the strategy for 12 months during the time of the interview. Prior to this, three staff members had been addressing inquiries but they found that they needed to bring structure to the organisation by having more clearly defined roles. Recruitment is the main responsibility for Kevin, the recruiter. This was similar to 22 out of 51 recruiters in the survey who indicated that recruitment was their main responsibility. In the IFA, Kevin had been identified for the job based on his interests in the various aspects of the role as well as his personality as a warm and friendly person. As mentioned earlier, this was reflected in the experience of the three carers who
indicated that positive conversations and interactions with Kevin had influenced their decision
to go with the agency. The findings indicate that having one person handle the recruitment
provides connection and continuity of care. Victoria felt that this was important and
contrasted it with her experience at a local authority saying: “...there was one person that
contacted me about the inquiry, somebody else came to visit me to interview me, somebody
else used to call to find out if I’d got the forms, somebody else had to check whether or not
what I’d written, you know, there were loads of people.” Despite being the key recruiter,
Kevin did not work in isolation, but would include other staff members in the recruitment
process. This is linked to the third strategy of the IFA.

The IFA dealt with inquiries on an individual basis, creating bespoke experiences and paths for
each inquirer based on their needs. Jenny expounded on this saying: “You really want to be
answering with things that are specific to the individual. ‘Well, this is what I am interested in.
This is what I’ve got questions about.’ So ok, how can we answer that for you? And we need to
think creatively about that.” The interviews revealed that the IFA utilize various resources to
respond to inquiries. These include blogs, a welcome booklet, statement of purpose and a
guide for children. As mentioned in the exploration section, this might involve Kevin
signposting blog posts that the inquirer can read and discuss with him. It also involves
connecting inquirers to other staff members or foster carers who can help address specific
questions the inquirer has. Jenny explained this: “There is something about knowing the right
person for somebody to talk to. I can remember there was a carer that called through... I was
talking to her and just the way she was talking and her values, I was like, ‘You need to speak to
Mary.’ And Mary then did the initial visit, and it went really well.” This careful curation of
interactions to suit individual inquirers reflects a flexibility and intentionality in the IFA that
makes the recruitment process cohesive.

Intentionality is a key characteristic of the fourth strategy employed by the IFA in the
recruitment process. The case study indicated that the IFA is intentional about filtering out
inquirers. Kevin, the recruiter, used the inquiry stage to filter out inquirers that he felt may
not have fit into the culture and values of the organisation. This included filtering out
motivations for fostering such as being focused on money or wanting a sibling for the
biological child. Jenny reflected on this: “Kevin does not like people who their first question is
“what’s the money?” And I think he’s right in a sense like, why is that the first question?” For
Kevin, having a money being the main motivation for fostering indicates that the person
would not make a good foster carer. Jenny indicated that they had had conversations about
how he discerned this issue, inviting him to exercise empathy and openness about the
circumstances that might lead to the question. She reasoned: “But then also, there’s been a few people that he turned down because the money was the big thing. But then we spoke about it later and were like, if you do not already earn a lot of money, you do have a mortgage to cover and you really want to help a young person but then you’re thinking, ‘actually, I couldn’t afford it’. You do want to know about the money and actually that might be, at the moment, the biggest thing that’s influencing you. So just trying to – it’s hard to try and not make assumptions”.

One thing that the case study revealed was that the filtering was tied to the experience of the children who are fostered under the agency. The agency was keen to ensure that the carers fit into their values and approach to fostering in order to benefit the children they look after. Kevin explained this:

“But we know that if you’ve got a carer that doesn’t fit the way you work it just doesn’t- it’s terrible for the kids. You’ve got carers who cannot work in the way that we’re promoting, and we need them to be if they’re not interventive or they’re not reflective enough. So, I find that when I’m talking to people, within a really short phone call, I know what I’m listening out for. I’m listening out for motivation. I’m listening out for how reflective they are. I’m listening out for going to other people or not as well. What are they seeing about us that they’re connecting for?” (Kevin, IFA recruiter)

The research indicated that for this agency, recruitment was not just about getting any carer, but about getting the right carers for the agency based on their approach to fostering. One important aspect of the filtering was that it was done in such a way that inquirers who didn’t match the criteria were directed to other fostering organisations or the local authority. Filtering is a larger part of the assessment process which begins with the inquiry. This will be discussed later in the next chapter alongside the qualities that the agency looks for in potential foster carers.

The final and fifth response strategy revealed by the case study, was being open and flexible when dealing with inquiries. This may seem to contrast with the previous strategy, but it seemed to work alongside the filtering. Although there was discernment applied to inquiries, there was a willingness to explore conversations further to allow a full assessment of the inquirer. Jenny gave an example of one Somali carer who was rejected by a local authority but ended up being a good cultural match for a Somali child placed in care:
“I feel like the local authority had made an assumption and not actually fully explored it. We have a foster carer who has an older aunty living with them and she’s got mobility issues. So, she has a bed that she sleeps in in the living room. She doesn’t have a bedroom. But it’s quite a big living room and, you could imagine what it’s set up like and the local authority turned her down because of this. Even though there was a spare room up there and the aunty wasn’t going to be using it. And we thought differently. Because we were thinking that, actually, in some families, culturally, that stuff happens and it’s normal. And, again, maybe this is some of our own biases about what a family looks like but actually, as long as the person is safe and there is a space to have a living place. And an older aunty and how that would then seem to a younger child – but then – so we have a child placed there- culturally, it’s a cultural match – Somali child with a Somali carer and he’s just doing so well and so why would you not think the bigger picture to know that he’s actually now got a really well-matched placement and very happy even though auntie is in the living room.” Jenny (IFA co-founder)

Recruiter challenges
The interviews revealed that despite their intentionality when it came to responding to inquiries, the IFA faced some challenges. The first of these was regarding a lack of response from inquirers that they got back to. Kevin the recruiter reported that they never heard back from 75% of inquiries that they responded to. This was despite having made attempts at improving their speed of response and other strategies mentioned above.

The second challenge was linked with the heavy competition that they faced. Competition was a common theme in the survey and is evidenced by the findings from foster carer interviews about how they shop for agencies. Kevin explained: “That’s a really big obstacle because I might respond to them in 5 minutes, I might try and call them straight away or be really clear with their response or upbeat and try to be informative, I’m trying not to be too sales-y or pushy. All those things. So, trying to get them and trying to get them before lots of other people get them as well. Coz I’ll be on the phone to somebody, and they’ll be like ‘I’ve spoken to so lots of other agencies, so who are you?’” The case study indicated that this competition necessitated the use of various tactics to try to attract the inquirer.

The third challenge the IFA faced in terms of inquiries was related to the pace and nature of inquiries. Kevin noted that sometimes they got inquiries from other parts of the country or in
Conclusion on Shopping & Inquiries
The findings from the case study indicate that during the initial inquiry phase, both carers and organisations are assessing each other. Although some decisions are made during the initial conversations, the research suggested that this assessment continues during the training and assessment phase until both parties are satisfied with the relationship and the carer is approved for fostering. As Victoria put it: “... [The LA] did me a favour. Let’s put it that way.” This part of recruitment is essential and sets the pace for the rest of the process. The next section of this chapter will provide the discussion on the findings from this chapter.

DISCUSSION
The nature of the findings in the previous chapter lent itself towards discussions of the efficacy of recruitment methods in achieving their goals. However, this chapter’s data draws from case study material which lends itself more towards discussions on why the practices revealed in the findings work for the organisations. It also invites discussions on implications for practice by exploring how recruiters can apply these findings. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the weakness of case studies is that it is difficult to draw generalisations from their data as they represent a small portion of the population. There may also be a bias if the organisations that volunteered did so because they have better practices in place than organisations who didn’t. However, the advantage of case studies is that they reveal detail and nuance that can be used to identify promising practice. In addition to this, I included discussions about the challenges they face during the interviews. This section aims at discussing the findings outlined earlier in this chapter, with the intention of teasing out the meaning and implications of the data. The findings on exploration and inquiry were quite unexpected but these seemingly small processes affect the recruitment process. This discussion will follow the pattern laid out in the first section of the chapter by discussing exploration then inquiries.
1. Exploration

Understanding Exploration

Earlier chapters discussed how the decision to foster is a complex one, not a simple altruistic decision such as the decision to donate money to a charity. It requires high cognitive elaboration. This understanding can help shape how recruiters engage in their work. Earlier chapters presented the delicate conversation on the foster carer identity as career or parent. I also discussed motivations for fostering which included desires to expand the family. Each of those motivations to foster involve a decision-making process in which the potential carer explores the fostering. As Mark the recruiter said, it is an emotional, mental, and sometimes spiritual choice. It is a choice that affects a person’s very immediate and personal life and because it is practiced within the intimate setting of the home, fostering is unique to any other life decision or career. There are, as discussed previously, some arguments about whether or not fostering should be viewed as a career, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. For this section of my thesis, fostering will be considered a career due to its shared similarities with other professions. Viewing fostering as a career presents an opportunity to explore the decision to foster as a career choice and how the recruitment process engages potential carers as they explore this choice. As I present the discussion on fostering as a career, it is done with full acknowledgement that fostering is unique amongst other professions and would therefore not fall neatly into this category. However, as with many other aspects of this thesis, fostering recruitment can benefit from theories in other fields, and this case, the field of career exploration.

The process by which people explore their career options and make a commitment to a specific career path is called career identity formation (Batool & Ghayas, 2020). This area of research has primarily been focused on adolescents as that is the stage during which young people begin the process of choosing careers. However, it is possible to draw some parallels between this process and that of potential foster carers choosing to become foster carers. In order to do so we first have to consider what an identity is, and the role of exploration in career identity formation.

Identity can be defined as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013). A person’s identity is fluid and changes throughout the lifetime. Rather than having one identity, individuals often hold multiple identities (A. Sen, 2005). Factors such as a person’s history, family, cultural context, and education can influence their identities (Sachs, 2005). For example, some of the identities I
hold include being a woman, Kenyan, researcher, Christian and mother. A. Sen (2005) suggests that not only do people hold multiple identities, but these identities exist without being in conflict. This suggests that the formation of a career identity would have to be harmonious with the other identities that a potential carer has. A career identity would thus need to fit into the way a person understands their relationship with the world, and how they understand possibilities for the future. There is, of course, a wide range of literature on the issue of identity, but this section shall focus on the career identity formation as it is most relevant to fostering recruitment.

In their study on the factors and components that affect career identity formation, Batool & Ghayas (2020) drew on James Marcia’s identity status theory. This theory suggests that career identity formation is a product of exploration and commitment (Marcia, 1980). The research by Batool & Ghayas (2020) identified 8 components that feed into exploration during career identity formation. These include family, peers, religion, media, economic factors, personal preference, nationalism and teachers. While this study was conducted on adolescents, these factors match the factors contributing to people’s identities as identified by Sachs (2005) above. They also match the known factors that affect the decision to foster as described in the literature review. Indeed, a number of these factors, such as family, peers and religion fall within the social circles system of the ecological model of fostering recruitment. Applying these factors to Norton’s definition of identity, it is possible to see how the 8 factors could impact how a person understands their relationship with the world. When this is connected with Sen’s suggestion that identities aren’t in conflict with each other, one can posit that a potential foster carer’s exploration process would involve assessing how fostering matches their current understanding of their relationship with the world. This provides a new way of understanding exploration in fostering recruitment. I suggest that exploration is the process by which a potential foster carer develops an understanding of the fostering identity and assesses whether or not it matches with their existing identities. In this process a potential foster carer compares how foster carers’ relationship with the world to their own relationship with the world. This relationship with the world is often influenced by factors such as family, peers, religious organisation, history and education. The process involves a high level of self-awareness and self-assessment. It also requires an understanding of the foster carer identity.

The second factor in Marcia’s identity status theory is commitment (Marcia, 1980). The study on career identity formation found that commitment is influenced by the expected outcomes of entering into a specific career (Batool & Ghayas, 2020). The study identified
economic benefits, religious benefits, social standards and functional gains as the main components used to determine expected outcomes. I.e., a person’s commitment to a career is linked to the perceived economic benefits, religious/cultural benefits, social standards and functional gains. This, again, links to Norton’s definition of identity, as the expected outcomes can be seen as future possibilities. Expected outcomes can also be linked to the known motivations and benefits of fostering. Fostering does indeed have potential beneficial outcomes in terms of economic, religious and functional gains. An example of a functional gain of fostering is improved parenting skills. Fostering can also be compared to social standards which may be found within the Public Beliefs System of the ecological model. As mentioned before, career identity formation requires both commitment and exploration. When high levels of both are engaged, a person is considered as having identity achievement. In foster carer recruitment this would be an ideal outcome as it would enable an inquirer to proceed with their application.

Considering the role of exploration and commitment in the career identity formation, the exploration stage of the second phase of fostering is thus a necessary component of fostering recruitment. If carried out well, exploration during this phase empowers a potential foster carer to assess the foster carer identity with their own identities. It also encourages a potential carer to commit to the foster carer identity by providing evidence of the expected outcomes of fostering. It is worth noting that career identity formation takes place over a period of time. Indeed, the third phase of fostering continues to facilitate this. It would thus be fairer to suggest that the levels of exploration and commitment expected during the second phase of recruitment should be sufficient to allow the potential carer to continue into the next phase. It would be unreasonable to expect that a potential carer’s fostering identity would be formed within a short period. However, exploration should encourage exploration and commitment. The 2020 report on fostering in England found that out of 137,200 inquiries made, 8,805 applications were made (Department for Education, 2020c). It is clear from these figures that the number of people curious about fostering is large. They may have responded to the emotional pull of a marketing campaign, indicating low levels of exploration and/or commitment. Facilitating exploration would potentially improve the applicant’s commitment to the journey. It would also possibly cushion potential carers against the more unpleasant and difficult aspects of the assessment phase that will be discussed in the next chapter.
Having established this working understanding of the exploration phase, the next section of this discussion will explore the extent to which the exploration activities identified in the findings section facilitate career identity formation in potential foster carers.

**Community based exploration**

There are several reasons why community-based exploration such as the model used by the N&C is a viable method of recruitment. The first is that it provides an opportunity for potential carers to see, first-hand, the potential outcomes of fostering. In doing so, this form of recruitment encourages commitment to the foster carer identity formation process. Secondly, community-based recruitment encourages exploration. Homophily or the “birds-of-a-feather” phenomenon can explain why community-based recruitment and exploration is worthy of the investment of time and resources. Homophily is the tendency of individuals who are socially connected to share certain similarities including character traits, beliefs and values (American Psychology Association, 2021). If an individual has the characteristics and values of a good foster carer, it is likely that those within their circle or community have similar traits and values. A community where a successful foster carer is from is thus more likely to have other individuals with high fostering potential. In the process of career identity formation, a potential carer would see how fostering matches with the cultural identity he/she shares with the people in their social circles that they see fostering.

The findings suggest that the N&C had a well-established plan for community-based recruitment which involves facilitating exploration. There is a need for research on community-based recruitment that could identify promising practice and provide guidance for how fostering organisations can participate in it. The N&C’s practice does however provide some insight on how this is being carried out in England and could potentially be replicated by other fostering recruiters. As mentioned in earlier chapters, fostering organisations report that “word of mouth” is one of the most effective methods of recruitment. The survey applicants echoed this too, but there doesn’t seem to be a working definition of what “word of mouth” recruitment is. Indeed, there’s not much detail provided about how this happens beyond mentions of paid incentives for introducing a carer to a fostering organisation. There’s no indication that fostering organisations provide training, support and/or resources for their “word of mouth” recruiters and this could be a gap in how this form of recruitment is carried out. The N&C findings provided a clearer and more intentional way on how to engage foster carers and others who are passionate about fostering, in recruitment. If this were replicated by other fostering organisations it may lead to a better structured, better resourced and more effective form of “word of mouth” recruitment.
Resourced Exploration

The findings revealed that both organisations in the case study utilized multiple resources for exploration. Some of these resources, such as blogs and videos on their websites, were easily accessible to inquirers. These resources ranged from basic introductory information to stories from foster carers. The research revealed a benefit of having these resources, which is that they could be referenced throughout the recruitment journey, from advertising to exploration, inquiry to training and assessment. The research showed them being used by staff members, community recruiters, and individuals. Fostering organisations would potentially benefit from investing in such resources for recruitment. Additionally, they can benefit from incorporating the resources they do have in their recruitment process to help inquirers explore fostering.

The research also revealed the unique role that N&C’s play in providing neutral resources that were utilised by fostering agencies and those interested in fostering. These resources can cut through the competitive market, providing an understanding of fostering that is not tainted by branding. They are not focused on selling one agency’s approach to fostering but are more geared towards introducing and explaining fostering as a concept. Fostering organisations who have limited expertise and limited time to invest in their own resources can take advantage of these resources and utilise them in their own recruitment process. The survey revealed that some fostering organisations use materials from The Fostering Network in their recruitment. While there is no indication that fostering organisations use such neutral resources to facilitate exploration, this could be worth incorporating into current recruitment practice. Furthermore, as the overseeing body, The Department for Education, can invest in the creation of such neutral resources which can be accessed by fostering organisations.

2. Inquiries

The findings from the case studies gave insight into the shopping experience of potential carers. This gives the opportunity to discuss practices of recruiters that possibly attract or deter carers from choosing to foster with them. This will be the subject of discussion in this section.

 Websites

The research indicated that websites could be an essential part of the shopping phase. Inquirers made judgements about the efficacy of the fostering organisations based on the website. Specifically, one carer mentioned issues of their attractiveness and how user-friendly they were. In my own experience collecting the contact information, I visited over 300 websites and found it difficult to navigate majority of the websites to find the contact
information. In a few instances I never found any contact details. Today a website is particularly important to any organisation. Indeed, with the research taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions, majority of interactions were moved online. Websites should be designed in a way that is intuitive to use and presents comprehensive information (Tselios, Platis, & Vouros, 2000). While one carer revealed that she went ahead to make an inquiry despite her poor appraisal of the website, this may not be the same for other inquirers. In the content analysis, 21 of 62 ads directed viewers to a website. If the website connected to the call to action of an advertisement is not presentable or easy to navigate it can potentially put off the inquirer all together. The resources spent on the ad would thus have been wasted if the website they directed people to led to them ending their inquiry process. Not only are websites essential before the inquiry, but as the research revealed, they can be referenced during the exploration process. The research indicates that websites that are well designed, user-friendly, and well-resourced can be a big asset in recruitment.

Responding to Inquiries
The case study revealed both negative and positive experiences that the carers had when inquiring with fostering organisations. The main themes that arose from these interactions had to do with how welcome and supported they felt. It was evident from both the positive and negative interactions that the inquiries were affected deeply by the relational aspects of the interactions. Carers were put off by unfriendly and inflexible interactions, and were attracted by warmth, being listened to, openness, and understanding. The systematic review conducted in the literature review section of this thesis revealed that the act of fostering was highly relational, personal, and required support. Interestingly, these same aspects were a common theme in the recruitment process. There are vast amounts of research that have been conducted on training front desk personnel to handle inquiries but a discussion on this would be beyond the scope of this research. I will only iterate the apparent need to have people who have great inter-personal skills, and enough knowledge on fostering and the application process to help a potential inquirer along the journey. While the three foster carers endured some negative experiences in the inquiry process, it is possible that they might have had higher levels of commitment to the foster carer identity. Inquirers who are responding to the emotional pull of an advert are likely to have lower levels of commitment and are thus more likely to be put off fostering completely, based on a single negative interaction.
Filtering

An issue that naturally proceeds from the findings about filtering is that this could be a privilege for small IFAs and something that is unreasonable to expect from larger fostering organisations. One may argue that larger fostering organisations such as LAs may have bigger needs for carers and cannot afford to turn away potential carers based on organisational culture. However, a deeper look into the way that the IFA in the case study filtered inquirers revealed two key learnings that could be worth replicating in other fostering organisations regardless of size.

The first key learning was linked to why the IFA filtered out inquirers. The findings revealed that this was done based on things such as the motivation to foster as well as the fit to the organisational culture. As described earlier in this paper, motivations to foster can be linked with outcomes of fostering placements and certain motivations have been linked with better placement outcomes. While there is no evidence that the IFA used such research to form the basis of their decisions, there is some indication that they had seen that certain motivations affected the quality of placements. It would be prudent for recruiters in all organisations to use such knowledge from research in their evaluation of potential foster carers. As demonstrated earlier in this thesis, this information can be used to identify carers who match certain placement needs in the organisation.

The second key learning was linked with how the filtering was done. Inquirers whom the recruiter felt didn’t match the organisation’s needs were directed to other fostering organisations. It is possible that filtering done in a kind manner could benefit the organisation whilst also encouraging the inquirer’s shopping experience. There is a need to recognise that even though a person might not fit a particular agency’s they may be a good fit for another agency. Affirming their interest in fostering and directing them to other agencies or resources about fostering would help encourage their exploration.

If recruitment is truly about getting the right carers into fostering, then filtering during the inquiry phase might be an essential part of that process. The potential benefits of filtering are that they could lead to better quality placements for foster carers and foster children. Additionally, it can lead to a better fostering experience for the fostering organisations. It can also lead to better allocation of resources during training and assessment. According to the findings, filtering considers the organisation’s needs but should be done in such a way that it does not put inquirers off of fostering by directing them to other fostering organisations. If added into the recruitment process, filtering during recruitment could potentially bring various benefits to fostering organisations.
Recruiter Challenges

The challenges that the IFA mentioned revolved around competition and inquiries. Competition has been a common theme in the research and is as a result of the current market. Just like in any other market, competitors have to employ various strategies to compete. While I was initially sceptical of the presence of profit making IFAs, the research revealed one aspect of this unique market. The research indicated that IFAs meet needs in the market. IFAs can specialise in specific types of fostering and sometimes have a unique approach to foster. The IFA in this case study use systemic therapy as part of their fostering model. As a result of this, they are able to take on children who are more challenging. It is possible that the specialisation of IFAs can lead to improvement of fostering technique and thus better fostering experience for the children placed with them. Aside from this, the research revealed that IFAs are also able to take in foster carers that Local Authorities do not want to take in. The shopping and filtering experience revealed that foster carers may not just be looking for any fostering organisation and some fostering organisations might also not be looking to recruit any carer. Both parties search for situations that fit their personal or organisational goals. What is then revealed is not just a harsh competitive market where every organisation is competing for every carer, but one where each is matched to the right carers. This was a perspective that Kevin the recruiter held which is why he was willing to help inquirers with information even if they didn’t fit his organisation geographically. Although described as a competitive market, the research suggested there may be symbiotic aspects to the relationships between fostering organisations. It has been iterated many times in this thesis that recruitment is focused on finding the right carers and this perspective can potentially help organisations face issues of competition better. It is possible to consider that holding this perspective can lead to an easier way of facing competition because recruitment is a more targeted and measured process rather than being an attempt at ‘trying everything to attract everyone’. Targeting and filtering during the recruitment practice might thus help enhance the recruitment process and reduce the sense of intense competition felt by recruiters.

The second challenge worth discussing is regarding inquiries. The IFA reported a low conversion rate of inquiries to applications; 75% of inquirers didn’t engage when the agency responded to their initial inquiry. The national figures quoted earlier proves that this is similar to national trends. It is possible that these inquirers chose to engage with other fostering organisations who responded before the agency. They could also have been responding emotionally to an advert but changed their minds after making the inquiry. The IFA also reported experiencing fluctuations in their inquiries that they could not match to their
CONCLUSION
This chapter focused on the second phase of fostering which involves exploration, shopping and inquiries. This was an area of recruitment that was neglected by research. However, the findings indicate that it is a crucial part of the recruitment process. Facilitated exploration, as undertaken by the two case studies can help potential carers in their career identity formation. The chapter also explored the shopping and inquiry experience from the perspective of both carers and recruiters. In doing so, it revealed elements of the experience that recruiters can address in order to improve their recruitment technique and capture the attention of people who are right for the organisation. A key theme in this chapter was that of having the right people in recruitment as well as bringing in the right kind of carers. The chapter uncovered some practices that might be promising as they can lead to higher quality applications and better fostering experiences for carers, the organisation, and children in care. The next chapter will cover the next steps in the recruitment process.
CHAPTER EIGHT: PHASE THREE OF RECRUITMENT

This chapter picks up from the exploration and inquiry phase. Unlike other elements of the recruitment process that can sometimes take place outside of the fostering organisation, the training and assessment process must take place within fostering organisations. This chapter will present findings from the case studies with a major focus on the IFA interviews as they were the primary source of data in this area. The interviews were conducted with two staff members (Jenny the co-founder and Kevin the recruiter) and three recently approved foster carers (Gloria, Victoria, and Claire). All names are pseudonyms. The chapter will begin by introducing the processes that take place within this phase. It will then present the findings from the training and assessment, from both the recruiters’ and the foster carers’ perspectives. The third section of findings will explore how the N&C is involved in the training and assessment phase. The findings section will end with a brief reflection on the effects of the pandemic on recruitment as revealed in the survey and the case studies. The second half of this chapter will present discussions on all the findings in this chapter.

FINDINGS

As mentioned before, this phase of recruitment takes place within the fostering organisation and picks up from the initial inquiries as discussed in the previous chapter. The figure below displays the steps that foster carers go through from inquiry to approval. Due to industry requirements, the main components of this stage are the similar in each agency. However, the order in which the components are undertaken varies from agency to agency.

*Figure 19 Journey to becoming a foster carer (Family Care, 2020)*

PhD in Education, The University of Edinburgh, 2021
Although the diagram describes the process in three phases, this chapter organises the process in two major components, training, and assessment. Some fostering organisations choose to go through these steps sequentially. However, in this case study training and assessment occurred concurrently. The two components will be presented separately. It is also worth noting that while there are elements of initial assessment that occur from the first contact during the initial inquiry phase, assessment in the third phase is more structured. As the findings will display, assessment during this phase has different goals and is executed differently from the filtering that occurs during inquiry. This will be demonstrated after presenting the findings on training.

For the IFA, the aim of the training and assessment phase was to produce quality candidates for the panel assessment who would be approved. To Jenny, anything less was not a ‘win’. She explained: “When somebody gets through panel. That’s your win. Because we have had a foster carer who went through the process and was very close to going to panel and at the end something came up and these things happen. And then yeah, her application had to be withdrawn and it was disappointing. But that’s not a win because you do not want to waste people’s time.” This is a key finding as this attitude informed the way that the IFA conducted training and assessment. Rather than being adversarial, and aimed at ‘catching people out’, the process was designed to be supportive for applicants. Although there was a real and felt need to ensure that the people who were approved were indeed fit to foster, the training and assessment phase was also designed to ensure that candidates who were fit were supported and well equipped. The rest of this section will display how this was undertaken.

1. Training

“High quality foster care requires a wide range of skills to be developed. New recruits need to be aware of the complexity and have confidence that the fostering service is going to enable them to gain these skills.” (Recruiter in the Survey)

The biggest component of training in this phase is the “Skills to Foster” course. However, the findings revealed that with the IFA, training incorporated other less structured interactions that were tailored to each prospective foster carer. The aim of training is to impart the foster carer with the skills they need to begin fostering. As described in the literature review, it is the beginning of ongoing training that they receive throughout their fostering career. Interestingly, the systematic review did not reveal any research on this initial training. This
section will begin by presenting the IFA’s approach to training followed by the foster carers’ reports on their experience of training.

**Formal/Structured Training**

**The Recruitment Perspective**

“Skills to Foster” is the name given to the foundational training course developed by The Fostering Network. All fostering organisations provide some foundational training for potential foster carers. However, the programme components, and execution may vary with each organisation. In the IFA, potential carers attend the training regardless of where they are in their formal application. Some people attend before they feel ready to submit a formal application to foster while others submit their application before attending the course. Based on the interviews, there were three key features to the agency’s training process. The first is that it was focused on the children’s needs and training foster carers to meet those needs through the agency’s approach to fostering. The second, was that it was a journey of growth for the applicants and thus it extended over a long period of time. The final feature is that the training course was tweaked over the years to improve it, with feedback being sought along the way.

The findings from the case study revealed that in the IFA the course is aimed at giving applicants a good foundation for their fostering career. This includes giving them the skills and tools that will help the carers deal with the type of the children that the agency takes in. Kevin explained how important this was, saying: “We’re drawn to some of those kids that are a bit more complex as well. We feel that we’ve got some level of skill to help out. We’ve got some good training and post training of our foster carers and we know that if we’ve got good training, good support, good knowledge, we’ll do well. When OFSTED came, they said, ‘Your kids are thriving, they’re doing really well. You’re beyond just looking after them. They’re excelling in your care.’ So, we know that if you have a good foundation, good things will happen.” In this quote, Kevin credits some of the positive outcomes of children in their care to the foundations set in the training sessions.

With the outcome of the children in mind, the IFA craft their training sessions to suit this. Their “Skills to Foster” course takes place over the course of 4 months with several full day trainings offered. The IFA uses their own tweaked version of the Fostering Network’s “Skills to Foster” training. They modified it to include systemic therapy which is their main approach to fostering. The training sessions are interactive and incorporate real stories of fostering situations, group discussions and quizzes to gauge the carers’ understanding of what was taught. The IFA tried to incorporate care leavers in the training too, but one who attended a
training session found it “nerve-wracking”. As a result, the IFA incorporates care leaver stories into the training. The training also includes input from current foster carers. The IFA reported that the results of these changes had been felt by Panel members during the assessment. Jenny reported this: “Panel have commented on the new carers coming through saying ‘It’s very clear your training is helping people.’ Because even how they’re talking at panel, the language that they’re using, is replicating some of the language that we’re using. And these are people that have never been in social care or fostering systems before that are already absorbing the language and understanding what it is that they will be doing.” This observation by the panel was an affirmation of the IFA’s iterative process of assessing the course and adjusting it to improve it.

Another finding revealed in this case study is about how the IFA views the training process. The interviews revealed that the recruiters consider training to be a journey of growth and change for foster carers. In Jenny’s words: “They not only give that realistic picture of what fostering is, you’re also at that point starting to help people learn, develop, grow and change. They’re already on a journey once they start attending your training and getting new ideas. So, it’s really important and I think that somebody attending the training, mostly they leave feeling excited, inspired.” The findings indicate that this growth was achieved by the training, as reflected by both foster carers. During their interviews, foster carers also noted how much they had developed during the training process. This will be expounded in the next section which will present the carers’ experience of the training in greater detail.

The case study also revealed that in addition to being a course for the carers, the course is also designed to train and equip carers’ children. This is done closer to the end of the training and assessment period, and it involves a one-day training for the children.

The Carer Experience of Structured Training

All three foster carers in the interviews gave positive feedback about the training, using words such as “good”: “fantastic” and “necessary”. Their key feedback was based on how the course was delivered and their perceived benefits from the course.

When asked to reflect on the training, the three carers felt that the IFA’s four-month “Skills to Foster” course was intense and thorough. This was considered a good thing, and well worth the amount of time it took. Gloria, who had experienced the same training in a different fostering agency, provided a comparison between the two experiences. Reflecting on this she said: “... look, this is so thorough. They do group discussions, they do little quizzes just to, you know, test your knowledge on what you’ve just seen on the screen and what you’ve been
hearing. Whereas the first fostering agency, you were just spoken to. You would just watch the slides on the screen, and they give you the certificate. And I thought, I’m sure there’s supposed to be more into this. You’re watching the video; you go for the two half-day sessions. And then you get given a certificate. I thought that wasn’t enough.” Victoria also compared the IFA sessions to others that she knew took place over two days. She had initially felt that the IFA’s course was long. She reflected: “At first I thought that ‘this feels a little drawn out’. But looking back, I feel like it was a really good. It was good to do it that way because I was constantly reflecting.” Claire too felt that the length of the course allowed time for reflection. Victoria noted that her initial assessment of the course being ‘drawn out’ was due to her own background working with children. She therefore reported feeling that some of the information was basic. However, she also noted that she had seen how important and beneficial the “basic information” was to some of the people on the course with her. For Victoria, this further cemented her view of the course’s intensity and length being necessary.

The second theme in the carers’ feedback on the course was linked to the reflection mentioned above and the personal growth mentioned by Jenny. The carers reported that the training allowed them to reflect on their personal perceptions, and their approaches to parenting. For Victoria, the exposure to different types of people from varied backgrounds helped her address her unconscious biases. She said: “It’s about the fact that we’ve all gone down different roads, but we’ve all got back together to this common goal and purpose. For me it was really nice to see that. I suppose it opened my mind a little bit and it made me realise that anybody can be a good person; it’s not restricted to one group of people or one type of person.” For Claire, the training not only equipped her to foster, but it also impacted her approach to parenting her daughter. In her words: “I think it’s my own sort of looking at my own parenting for the past ten years. I’m looking at how I raised her, how I am with her, looking at strategies and the things that work and the things that do not work and I feel like therapeutic model is really effective, not just for children that have suffered trauma and those sorts of things. It’s a really effective model for children across the whole.” Gloria too felt that her “life and thinking” had changed because of the training. For all the carers there was a perception of personal growth as a result of the training. Aside from the structured training, the foster carers also received support through various interactions and conversations throughout the training and assessment period. The next section will present how the recruiters facilitate this as well as the carers’ feedback on this process.
Customized Support

As mentioned earlier, the IFA is intentional about helping carers feel supported and equipped throughout the training and assessment period. The interviews provided some insight on how this is undertaken outside of the structured training course. This type of support is aimed at helping applicants move further along the process. In Jenny’s words: “On the fostering journey you really want people at each stage to feel reassured and be able to move forward. Because really the journey needs to feel right. It needs to feel, ‘Yes this is where I want to go’. But if somebody is really wobbly then it’s really thinking, ‘What is that wobbliness? What is it that might be holding you back? What is it that you need to know of? What is it that you need to do that might help reassure it?’ So again, very much being in connection with what it is that they’re thinking and feeling.” This aspect of the training phase bears quite some similarities to the exploration and inquiry phase as it is based on responding to the individual applicant’s needs.

The findings also indicated that a lot of the support offered during this area was aimed at addressing the fears of applicants. As Jenny explained: “It’s talking, it’s working through, it’s understanding that people are worried and scared and offering reassurance and stories and examples but also not painting a rosy picture that it’s the easiest thing in the world when it’s not because you’re setting people up to fail.” Jenny reported that some of these fears and apprehensions about fostering were rooted in myths perpetuated by media and movies. She thus felt the need to give the applicants a realistic view of fostering. Another area that the IFA found themselves addressing often is the issue of support. To address this, Jenny reported that they used real examples of how the agency had dealt with certain issues in the past, what caused the issue, how they supported the carer(s) through it and what type of support was available to foster carers. She explained: “People like to know that you’ve got a 24/7 duty service that isn’t just to answer a call or to report something. It’s interventional. It’s there to reassure and offer advice and support, knowing that in terms of our team, there’s always somebody to respond even when you are on leave.” Other fears had to do with the more practical aspects of fostering, such as fostering as a social worker or the impact of fostering on a person’s career.

One big issue that carers needed addressed was that of the personal impact of fostering on themselves and/or their families. Jenny reported that potential carers were worried about their children being harmed or exposed to certain behaviours too early. During the training for biological children, the IFA also addressed the biological children’s fears and questions. Claire the foster carer held some of these fears. She reported being worried about her
children being physically harmed. She was especially worried about her son who was 18 months. She discussed these fears with the agency and felt reassured by their response. She said: “But I suppose it’s like physical violence, sexualized behaviour, those sorts of things can worry me a little bit with my children. They made it very clear that they would look out for those things very carefully and any child that has those things or perhaps has exhibited those sorts of behaviours would never be placed with me.” In this case the reassurance offered involved the agency taking practical steps. This was not always how the agency responded to fears. Victoria reported feeling fearful of having teenage boys placed with her. She explained that as a single lady, she was afraid of physical harm coming to her and she chatted to Kevin about this. She reported that Kevin helped her walk through that fear considering that girls also exhibited violent behaviour. In the end, Victoria reported feeling reassured about fostering and was open to taking in teenage boys.

The interviews revealed a variety of strategies being used by the IFA to support carers along their journey. Staff used practical examples from their experience or connected the applicants with foster carers who had navigated similar issues. They provided reassurance for some, but helped others change their perspective. They also referenced books, videos and other materials that the applicants could use to help them along the journey. The findings indicate that this customised support helped the carers along the journey especially as they went through the assessment. The next section will discuss assessment from the perspective of both carers and recruiters.

2. Assessment

In the three-phase model assessment is used to describe the formal and legal processes that are used by fostering agencies to determine if a person is fit to foster. There are a few possible outcomes of the application process. These include the approval of an applicant as a foster carer allowing them to take in foster placements, the denial of their application, or the decision to not progress the application further. The main components of the assessment period involve a home visit, medical, DBS & finance checks, personal & employment references, and assessments by the supervising social worker and panel. The checks and references involve a lot of paperwork while the home visit and assessments by the supervising social worker are more interactive and personal. The final decision is made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). This section aims to explore assessment. It will begin by presenting findings about the person specifications the agency looks for in a carer. It will then describe the attitude and approach that recruiters and carers have towards this process. It will finally conclude by presenting findings on the people involved in assessment.
Person Specifications: What is the agency looking for in a foster carer?

This section is not aimed at discussing the regulatory requirements for becoming a foster carer. Instead, this findings section hopes to tease out the nuances of character traits that recruiters look for in a foster carer. Four key themes arose during conversations with the two staff members at the IFA. The character traits they looked for were centred on the applicants’ capacity to learn, how they dealt with difficulty, their attitude towards fostering, and how they would interact with the children.

When it comes to learning, the recruiters in this case study want people who have the desire to learn. This includes things like being flexible enough to adjust their parenting strategies as well as being willing to confront their biases and grow. The recruiters noted that they look for people who can show that they were reflective, receive feedback well and work towards making positive changes. For the recruiters, learning is a big part of the fostering journey. This particular trait could be observed in conversations and as the applicants participated in the training course.

The second theme of character traits that was revealed in the research was connected to how the applicants deal with difficulty. This was evident in the use of terms such as “resilience” and “commitment”. Jenny reflected on carers she had assessed and how their resilience had developed as a result of their life experiences. She said: “There’s just some life experiences that they’ve worked through. They were so difficult and so intense, but they worked through them and actually came out the other side, better people, stronger people. So, there’s a value base there. The difficulty, they do not just shut down, they do not run away from it.” She noted that this sense of resilience helped foster carers deal with difficulties during placements.

The third theme was connected to the applicants’ intentions/motivations. This is connected to the agency’s approach to fostering. As Kevin said: “We really promote the fact that you’re the intervention. You’re the one that creates change. We’re here to boost you up. Without amazing support and knowledge, you cannot do the good stuff. But the job that you’re gonna go into - we have really high expectations of you. So, if you’re looking to bed and board, do not come to us.” For this agency, applicants need to be ready to be active in fostering.

Unsurprisingly, the final theme in character traits revealed in the interviews linked to how the applicant would interact with the children placed with them. The recruiters indicated that they wanted people who could show empathy for the children and had the ability to hold multiple perspectives. They also look for people who would keep the child’s needs central.
Jenny expounded on this saying: “Also being able to put a child before their own needs. Because that can be quite a big one in foster care when parents feel rejected or whatever that is but actually it’s not. It what’s going on with the child. It’s not a personal thing to you. It’s their experiences and their trauma.”

Quite interestingly, the recruiters felt that the learning trait was quite foundational because, with proper training, the others could be instilled. However, an unwillingness to learn would hinder the fostering experience. Kevin described how he assessed applicants as being “grow-ers” or “show-ers” and how he ensured that there was a balance of foster carers in each category:

“They’ve got a really great motivation. They’ve got a really good network around them. They’re really reflective. They’re intelligent people. They can really hold other people in mind. Giving them a complex child to start with, it would just break them. But you can see that over time with thoughtfulness, they’re gonna be outstanding. So, we think about, how many of those can we have in the organisation because they’re going to take a long time to place with? But we need to have a good chunk of people who come through who are already really quite resilient and good to go. And they’re the kind of people who show what they’ve got off the bat.”
Kevin, IFA recruiter.

Experiences during Assessment

Constant assessment

This section will explore how the carers and agency approach assessment and how these impacted the assessment experience of both. One key finding in this area is that assessment is an ongoing process. The agency reported that there is constant feedback between the assessing social worker and other recruiters interacting with the potential carers. For example, trainers took notes of the interactions they had with applicants during the “skills to foster” course and this was shared with the social worker assigned to the applicant. This ongoing sharing of information made two of the carers uncomfortable. Victoria identified it as being the worst part of the assessment period. She said: “The only thing that I didn’t like because I hadn’t realised, was when we went to ‘skills for fostering’, they were actually watching us and making notes and I didn’t like that. I didn’t know that was happening and when I did find out, that put me off a bit. Because I suppose I just felt- I suppose at least I didn’t know, so I was natural, but it just made me feel- I do not know, it just unnerved me.”

Victoria described how she went on to tell a social worker friend about it and the social
worker told her that it was standard procedure. This put her at ease, but at the time of the interview she was still uneasy with the concept of constantly being watched and assessed. Gloria was also upset about the open sharing of information and constant assessment. She recalled two incidences that gave her pause for concern. The first was seeing her personal information being shared in a closed WhatsApp group between the staff members. She was part of that group, but she felt that the platform was an inappropriate place to share confidential information. She also mentioned that she had seen one note from a “skills to foster” session that was put in her file that she felt was inaccurate. She brought up the former to the agency but did not do the same with her latter complaint. Based on the findings, the carers seemed to be uncomfortable with situations where assessment was not always explicitly labelled as such. This did not however indicate a discomfort with the vulnerability of assessment, as findings later in this chapter will reveal an openness and vulnerability on the part of the carer.

**Attitudes toward assessment**

Another finding in this area was in regard to the attitude that recruiters and carers had towards assessment. The findings revealed that the agency views assessment, not as an opportunity to “catch someone out” but rather as a building opportunity. For Jenny, who discussed this part of their corporate culture, it affected how their applicants felt during assessment. In her words: “If you approached every assessment with the idea of ‘I’m going to catch you out’ or ‘I’m gonna find out what’s wrong with you’ then people would pick that up. I do think some people maybe do approach assessments in that way.” Rather than holding an adversarial approach to assessment, the agency reported using the assessments to identify weaknesses in the applicant that may affect their fostering. Steps are then made to help the applicant find ways to address the weakness. Jenny gave an example of how she worked through a weakness with an applicant:

> “We had a foster who, she, in her family life, and it worked very well in family life. If arguments or difficult times happened, her response in those moments, because she felt the emotions quite intensely, was to remove herself from the situation. And sometimes that could take a day or two days till she just processed it to then return and then have the conversation. But thinking about for some children, that removing herself would be quite painful or rejecting. So then bringing that awareness to her of saying that it’s not a problem in terms of this is how your family-and your family understand what that is, but if we were to think about that with a new child...”
moving in and not knowing that this is what you’re doing and what that means, what do we need to think about that would maybe need to change with that? And she was fantastic. She was totally able to explore that and has still been practicing that.” (Jenny, IFA co-founder)

As Jenny described in the scenario above, the weakness was identified and put to the applicant to work through. Although the weakness had a potential to negatively impact the applicant’s fostering, it was not used as an excuse to dismiss, but as an opportunity to learn and grow. This ties in with the earlier finding about the agency looking for people who can learn.

Perhaps the agency’s attitude towards assessment contributed to the positive experiences the carers had during assessment. Claire described her fortnightly visits with the social worker as being “therapeutic” while Victoria described it as “reflective”. The two carers’ approach to assessment may have also contributed to their positive experience. Victoria reported that the assessment had the potential to feel “triggering” and “intrusive”, but she considered it to be a necessary part of the journey. Claire echoed this too and felt that it had the potential to be “upsetting” to people. However, for Claire, it was about how the person approached the assessment. She reflected on this saying: “I had to be very honest, like brutally honest about my own situation, my own life experiences and it was really- I think for a lot of people they say that it’s intrusive and I think it can feel like that if you’re not ready to – if you haven’t come to terms with certain things and you’re still kind of hiding... You know when you just do not want people to know certain things, or you feel a bit guarded with information because you’re not quite ready yet to share it. I think it can feel very very intrusive if you’re at that point. But for me I’m at point where I’m very open and I’ve come to accept a lot of things in my life and my circumstance and how I’ve got into certain situations.” During the interviews, all three carers described a willingness to be honest and vulnerable during the assessment process. Gloria described it as putting her life in their hands.

**Paperwork & Panel**

When asked to describe the worst parts of the assessment process, paperwork and panel were mentioned by the three carers.

As mentioned earlier, assessment involves performing numerous checks and this creates a lot of paperwork. Two of the three carers reported feeling that the paperwork was cumbersome although they recognised that it was a necessary part of the process. The two carers referenced it when asked about the worst part of the assessment process. Claire described it
as a “long” and “tedious” process. Gloria too felt it was tedious and felt that it could be done in a more organised manner. She described having to run up the stairs during visits, in order to get paperwork, an issue that she felt could be mitigated by providing carers with a checklist of the paperwork that would be needed.

Claire was the only carer to describe Panel as stressful. She reported feeling apprehensive and scared of the thought of being “judged by strangers”. She mentioned this to Kevin the recruiter who reassured her about it. She explained: “He was like, ‘If you weren’t going to pass, then the assessment would have been terminated a long time ago.’ He was like, ‘You do not get to panel and fail. That wouldn’t happen.’ I do not know why I had this idea in my head that it was like some sort of test. It felt like a test and Jamie was like, ‘It’s not like that. It’s more of a formality and they have to be sure that [the Assessing Social Worker] has done his job properly.’” This conversation echoes Jenny’s point about wanting to present well equipped and vetted applicants to the Panel. This suggests that the agency views Panel as an indicator of the success of their training and assessment process, rather than a test for the applicant. Claire described feeling supported during Panel and reported that many questions had indeed been addressed to her Assessing Social Worker. When asked to reflect on her anxiety about Panel, she confessed that it had been unwarranted as she had a good experience during the Panel meeting, but she still cried when they gave her positive feedback.

**People involved in the Assessment Process**

Although assessment is a formal process guided by industry regulations, one theme that arose in the findings was that the people involved in the process affected how it was undertaken. This section aims to explore whom the recruiters engaged in the assessment process and how this impacted the carers’ experience. The second part of this section will explore how bias can affect this phase and how the N&C works to reduce unconscious bias in both applicants and recruiters.

**How does personnel choice impact assessment?**

The findings on phase 3 are quite similar to the findings to phase 2 in indicating that the IFA was intentional about who they involved in this phase. The interview with Jenny the Co-founder of the IFA revealed that there was a deliberate attempt at ensuring the personnel enhanced the assessment process. In her words: “But again this is why having the right people on the team is important because you have to have confidence that no matter who it is who goes out to meet your potential foster carers, they’re going to give a good sense of all those things I spoke about; professionalism, knowledge, expertise, understanding of fostering, to be able to answer any questions that’s thrown at you.” Based on the reports by the carers, there
was congruence in how the IFA staff interacted with the carers during the assessment process. When asked about what the IFA did that other fostering organisations could benefit from, Claire talked about having the right personnel. She felt that “It’s really important that the face of the company, the faces, are friendly faces, they are experienced, they are knowledgeable. I feel that these things are really important, and you have to be accessible.” She went on to describe how she had a good relationship with her assessing social worker. Victoria, who had a different assessing social worker, also indicated that she had a good relationship with hers.

Jenny also described how the Panel members were key to the success of the assessment process. The IFA panel members included 2 care leavers and experienced foster carers. Jenny recounted how the chair of the IFA’s panel had previously sat on a panel that had been so disparaging to applicants that one carer had left that fostering organisation after being approved by the Panel. She reflected on this incident saying: “Even though they continued to be approved, they handed in their notice because they had such a bad experience at panel. And I do not know that people always recognise how the different parts of your system can influence people and how they’re thinking or just end up – I guess that panel probably was the tip of the iceberg for her – she’d maybe had experiences with the actual support from social work. But our panel, I feel, is very supportive and really do think about and reflect on what’s influencing them and what they’re interested in assessing and trying to get a balance of asking questions that are very strength based alongside the questions that are more challenging and are maybe more personal so that people get that balance.” Jenny went on to point out that it was tough to balance between challenging a person and supporting them. This, perhaps, summarises the incredible nuance of the assessment process. The findings indicate that both carers and recruiters had to navigate this balance. For the carers, the process required vulnerability and openness and a willingness to endure the tedious and sometimes very intrusive aspects of the assessment process. Interestingly, both recruiters and carers mentioned the need to confront their unconscious bias during the assessment process. The next section will explore this, focusing on how the N&C work to reduce unconscious bias during assessment.

**How is unconscious bias addressed in assessment?**

Unconscious or implicit bias primarily refers to attitudes and stereotypes that people hold towards certain people or groups. Unconscious bias is impacted by societal attitudes and beliefs held within the Public Beliefs System. Unconscious bias was referenced several times in the case studies. Claire the foster carer talked about having unconscious bias saying:
“When you’re going into any situation or you meet somebody, you naturally have a bias. It’s very natural but you have to learn to continually check yourself and think, ‘No, just because they’re like this and like that doesn’t mean that we cannot move forward, and we cannot get on.’” In this instance she was referring to her bias against the assessing social worker who was a young white male that she initially thought she wouldn’t connect with as an older black woman. She later described having a very positive relationship with the social worker. Victoria too, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, reported having her biases confronted when she met people from different sexualities and backgrounds who were drawn to fostering. Jenny, the IFA co-founder, considered that bias may have led to the Somali carer being rejected by a local authority. The findings indicate that bias can be held by applicants and recruiters and that these biases can impact the assessment process. There seemed to be a deliberate attempt at addressing these biases in the IFA. The case study with the N&C however uncovered a structured way in which the agency helps both applicants and partnering agencies to address bias.

As mentioned earlier, the N&C is a Christian non-profit, and its main focus is on recruiting carers within the Christian community. An interview with Mark revealed that part of this work was achieved by addressing unconscious bias in both recruiters and applicants. Mark explained that potential carers in “faith groups could have biases towards themselves”. Expounding on this, he said that some of these biases were influenced by sensational media headlines which perpetuate myths about Christians not being allowed to foster. Mark mentioned that this can deter people from applying or cause them to think that they were discriminated against during assessment. In his words: “Because if assessment doesn’t go well, they can interpret that as being because of their faith. Whenever we perceive that there’s a difference in ourselves to what we consider to be the prevailing norm, and something goes wrong, we can go like, ‘I wasn’t approved to become a foster carer because I’m a Christian.’ There can be victim mentality because it’s part of human experience, isn’t it? It’s how people process. We know that’s not the case. I know plenty of Christian foster carers so it’s not because they’re Christian. Their life is probably not suited to being foster careers.” As this quote mentions, the organisation recognises that bias isn’t always at play. Through “faith literacy training” and the exploration course, the N&C aims to help carers understand how to overcome their own bias and to understand how their faith values may overlap well or clash with fostering values.

When it comes to the fostering organisations, the N&C also conducts “faith literacy training” with recruiters to help them address their unconscious bias. Mark described one of the
activities they undertake: “You know, if you ask somebody to think of three words to do with a Christian, they would say ‘happy clappy’, ‘do-gooder’ and ‘socially conservative’. Ask three things about a Muslim: ‘jihadi’, ‘terrorist’, ‘community minded’. Ask about an atheist: ‘rational’, ‘intelligent’, ‘normal’. And think about, whether those words are positive, negative, or neutral.” Mark described how such exercises help recruiters identify their bias. Educating them about faith practices helps create “faith-friendly pathways”. Based on the interview, there was a need to help both applicants and recruiters remove their bias and focus on whether the person was suited to foster. The findings in both case studies indicate that bias can impact the assessment process. It also indicated that there are ways to address this internally or through external assistance.

3. The Pandemic

As mentioned earlier in this paper, majority of the data collection of this research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions and measures used to address it. This created a unique opportunity to collect information about how the recruitment field was impacted by the changes. Recruiters were invited to reflect on this in the survey and both case studies. This section aims to present the recruiters’ reflections on the effects of the pandemic on their recruitment practice.

The pandemic affected recruiters differently with three indicating that they had had an increase in inquiries, and one receiving fewer inquiries. Recruiters speculated about the increase in inquiries with one indicating that: “If I’m honest I’ve not seen a decline in leads in fact the opposite. People are on social way more than they used to be and are having time to reflect on their own life and what they can offer others.” Another recruiter thought that the pandemic had led to a rise in “community spirit” while two speculated that the loss of jobs may have freed and motivated people to foster.

When it comes to recruitment activities, most recruiters reported going virtual at varying levels. One recruiter indicated that they had stopped recruiting altogether, but the majority of recruiters reported that they had moved some or all their recruitment activities online. Three recruiters reported that they were not conducting home visits. One explained why: “I am aware that some other agencies are now doing this in a virtual way. We are being pushed by directors also to do this. However, myself and the Recruitment Officer feel that this will lead to a lowering of standards and hence an impact on the safeguarding of children”. This worry about the quality of virtual home visits was echoed by four other recruiters who were carrying out home visits albeit reluctantly. One such recruiter was worried that virtual visits might cause them to miss nuances in body language. A recruiter chose to continue ongoing
assessments online, reporting: “We have managed to successfully conclude assessments when we already had a working relationship built through face-to-face contact. It remains to be seen whether this can be done with new applicants. Delivering the preparation training is our biggest challenge.” Other recruiters were, however, positive about virtual home visits. Kevin in the IFA case study indicated that going virtual had allowed him to meet and interact with partners and biological children more than before.

Responses from 21 recruiters indicate that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown forced the fostering agencies to shift their activities online. The findings also indicate that this was done in varying degrees. Recruiters in the survey were generally positive about moving certain activities such as advertising and information sessions online. However, the findings indicate that majority preferred in-person home visits and felt that conducting them online affected the quality of the assessment. As a result, some chose to halt this part of recruitment.

**DISCUSSION**

This chapter began by presenting findings on training and assessment, the final phase of recruitment. This section aims to provide a discussion on these findings and will follow the pattern of the first section. Findings from the Department of England indicate that phase three experiences a high dropout rate. Figure 20 below presents national figures from 2020 and shows that only 24% of the total applications that were initiated were approved (Department for Education, 2020c).

![Figure 20. Fostering applications and approvals in England. (Department for Education, 2020c)](image-url)
The aim of the third phase of recruitment is to assess foster carers and to provide foundational training to equip them for the fostering journey. The figures indicate that 11% of applications received were withdrawn by the agency or rejected. This can be viewed as a positive outcome and was likely as a result of the agency determining that the applicants were not fit to foster. However, that leaves a further 28% of applicants who withdrew their applications. The reason behind these withdrawals is not given. Some may have withdrawn their applications. It is possible to speculate that some of the withdrawn and incomplete applications may have been the result of bad practice in the training and assessment phase. Findings from the previous chapter indicated that bad experiences with fostering agencies can cause an applicant to keep shopping and to move to another agency at any time from inquiry through to approval. Findings from the previous chapter also indicated that certain recruitment practices during introduction and exploration can lead to quality inquiries and applications that are more likely to be approved. It is therefore not improbable that practices within the training and assessment phase can impact the applicant’s application journey and affect the dropout/withdrawal rates. This section hopes to explore this by discussing the practices revealed in the findings section.

1. Training
What are the industry standards for training?
The findings on the training phase provide new insight into this part of recruitment, contributing to a gap identified in the literature review. As mentioned earlier, the systematic review identified 11 studies about the ongoing training that foster carers receive, but none referenced the initial training. This indicates that this may be a neglected area in research. While training is one of the essential elements of recruitment, the research indicated that there may be great variance in how this training is conducted. The IFA in the case study conducted the training over a four-month period, using a variety of resources and exercises, whereas one agency covered the training over the course of two half-day sessions in one weekend. The discrepancies between these two organisations’ training practice may be indicative of the situation in the field. This variance can be problematic in the light of the potential impact that this training has on the assessment phase and fostering placements. The findings indicate that the training is meant to give foundational skills and knowledge to foster carers. However, the way that the training is conducted may affect this goal. One carer reported feeling ill-prepared to foster after the short weekend training she received in another agency. This is a potential issue as a carer’s self-efficacy impacts their fostering practice and their ability to cope with/respond to challenging behaviour in children (Morgan}
& Baron, 2011). On the other hand, the IFA attributed certain positive outcomes to the training course including positive fostering experiences and positive feedback from the panel.

There is a need for further research to be conducted in this area, perhaps similar to the studies conducted on other training programmes and courses that foster carers receive during their fostering journey. The findings from such research can be used to refine industry standards and define best practice on how to conduct these foundational trainings. The findings from the IFA indicate that carrying out the course for a long period of time and including a variety of interactive sessions and activities contributed to the perceived success of the course in preparing potential carers for fostering. Training also provides an opportunity for agencies to build relationships with the carers. The way that training is conducted can either enhance this or limit it. The next section will discuss the elements of the training that may have contributed to its perceived success.

What is the IFA doing right?
The 2017 report on fostering in England criticised the training and assessment part of recruitment for being lengthy and failing to produce carers that meet the needs of the agency (Baginsky et al., 2017). However, the findings indicate that the training conducted by the IFA was viewed as a success by carers, staff and panel members. This was just one case study, and the interviews were conducted with a small sample of staff and carers, but it suggests that length may not be the appropriate measure of the success of training. Based on the carers’ reports, the length of course and assessment period was justifiable and necessary. It is possible to attribute this perceived success to two aspects of how the training was conducted. The training was customized to both the carers and the organisation’s needs and goals. This section will explore both.

Customized Training
The first noticeable aspect of the training, as revealed in the findings, was that it was customized to suit the organisation’s needs and approach to fostering. The IFA customised a training course by The Fostering Network. This was done to include the agency’s systemic approach to fostering. Rather than offering a generic course, the agency chose to continuously review and adjust their course to suit the end goal of preparing carers to foster with them. This could be viewed as an attempt at imparting the corporate culture early in the process and indeed this may have been one of the goals and outcomes of the customised training. Understanding how the organisation approaches fostering would likely improve the carers’ relationship with staff members such as their supervising social worker. As the literature review revealed, the carer’s relationship with the fostering organisation is important.
and can affect placement stability. Furthermore, this customised training might better prepare the carers to handle the type of placements the agency receives. A common theme that has run throughout this thesis, is the need to have the right type of carers that match both the organisation’s and children’s needs and this customised training contributes to that.

Another key finding in this area was that the IFA sought feedback from a variety of stakeholders in order to assess the training. This included feedback from applicants undertaking the training and panel members. In addition to this, there was an indication that outcomes of placements and OFSTED reports were used to gauge the effectiveness of their training. The outcomes of the children fostered in the agency were noted as an indicator of the success of the training. Fostering agencies can create similar internal systems to measure the effectiveness of their training courses. In addition to this, the literature review revealed that there are numerous measures that can be used to evaluate training given to foster carers. Future research can customise and apply such measures to the foundational training courses, providing a more rigorous evaluation of the trainings.

**Customized Support**

The second key aspect of the training conducted by the IFA is that it was also customised to the needs of the carer both within the structured course and in other interactions. The findings indicated that the growth and support of carers was considered throughout this phase. Carers reported experiencing personal growth as a result of the course. In addition to this, the customised support offered to carers helped address their fears and misconceptions about fostering. The literature review revealed that fears and myths about fostering can be barriers to fostering. Addressing this is thus an essential part of the recruitment process. The IFA did this through various ways that were relational and personalised to the carers’ needs. The fear of the assessment process is also a known barrier to fostering (McDermid et al., 2012). The findings revealed that the IFA provided support and reassurance about the process to carers. The findings indicated that there were some negative aspects of the assessment process which the carers identified as being lengthy, unpleasant, scary and potentially triggering. However, the carers were able to persevere through these less pleasant aspects and to change their perspective on them, partly due to the encouragement and support that they received throughout the process.

Jenny noted that the IFA sought to ensure that the carers felt supported and able to move forward in each part of the fostering journey. Based on the carers’ feedback, this was achieved. The findings indicate that the provision of customised training and support throughout the training and assessment phase can positively impact the carers’ journey. It is
possible that customised training and support has the potential to reduce withdrawals of applications, increase approvals and lead to a better fostering experience. Further research is needed to help identify best practices for this area.

2. Assessment
Is the IFA looking for the right traits?
The systematic review conducted earlier in this research revealed some of the traits that successful foster carers carry. The review revealed that successful carers draw on certain traits to help them endure the difficulties of fostering and to thrive, thus contributing to more stable placements. This section aims to explore how the findings from the IFA match up to these traits and the realities of fostering as disclosed earlier in this thesis. The interviews with the two staff members revealed that their criteria were largely based on their experience as social workers. This therefore provides an opportunity to explore how their experiential knowledge matches with knowledge from research.

The first trait to be explored will be that of learning. The IFA placed a large emphasis on learning and growth on the part of their carers. This matches one of the 6 traits of a foster carer identified in a US recruitment campaign (Berrick et al., 2011). It also matches known aspects of the fostering journey. The systematic review revealed that training is an integral part of the fostering journey. The skills for fostering differ from those required to parent. This is especially true when dealing with children with developmental or behavioural issues. Agencies use training to impart skills necessary for dealing with the unique challenges of fostering. It is therefore logical that a fostering agency would seek to ensure that their carers are able to demonstrate an ability to take in information and make the necessary adjustments in their thinking and actions. Within this theme of learning was the trait of being reflective. Both carers and staff in the IFA referred to learning through reflection. One of the studies included in the review explored foster carers’ reflective understanding of foster children as it can impact their ability to form secure attachments with the child (Bunday et al., 2015). This in turn affects the stability of a placement. The ability to be reflective is therefore a beneficial trait/skill for potential foster carers.

The second trait revealed by the findings was that of resilience. Resilience theory in social work has been the subject of much debate (Michael Garrett, 2016; van Breda, 2019). Rather than engaging in a debate that is outside of the scope of this thesis, I shall rely on the definition from Hart et al. (2016) that best matches the description used by Jenny the recruiter. They describe resilience as “overcoming adversity, whilst also potentially subtly changing, or even dramatically transforming, (aspects of) that adversity” (Hart et al., 2016...
In the systematic review, resilience, tenacity and grit were highlighted as being key traits in successful foster carers. The review detailed how fostering can be a difficult and complex task that impact a foster carer personally. Resilience was identified as being key to helping foster carers to endure these negative experiences. Foster carers who show resilience can experience positive placements even when the children have challenging behaviour. It is therefore positive that the IFA looked for this trait in their foster carers. One of the ways the IFA identified this trait was in seeing how foster carers had handled hardship in their own past. As Jenny described, this was considered an indicator of how they would handle hardship during their fostering experience.

The third trait was linked to the motivations of the applicants. The previous chapter discussed how certain motivations can affect placement outcomes so this will not be discussed during this section.

The fourth and final trait the findings revealed was empathy. Even though empathy is an important skill in social work practice, there is not unified conceptualization of the term (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). Empathy stems from the German word “Einfühlung” which is translated as “feeling into” (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). Although scholars have failed to reach an agreement on the definition of the term, most definitions agree on the fact that empathy is based on the “other” and how an individual attempts to understand the feelings and behaviour of the “other”. This understanding affects how a person (social worker or foster carer) responds to the needs of a child (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). For this thesis, empathy shall thus be viewed as the process by which an individual forms an understanding of another’s feelings and behaviour from the perspective of that person. This finding and definition is in line with findings from the systematic review. Kevin the recruiter described it as the ability to hold multiple perspectives of the child. One study indicated that a carers’ understanding of a child’s behavioural problems affected how they responded to the child (Taylor et al., 2008). In the study, carer empathy towards the child’s history and hardship served as a motivator for their own efforts to engage with the child. Empathy is therefore a good trait to look for in prospective carers.

How can agencies address the discomfort of assessment?

The systematic review revealed that assessment is known to be a source of stress and discomfort for potential foster carers. Indeed, the fear of rejection during assessment has been documented as a barrier to fostering. The interviews with newly recruited foster carers supported this. Carers reported feeling stressed, anxious and upset during various parts of the assessment process. This included frustration with the endless paperwork as well as feeling
unnerved by the constant assessment. This section aims to explore how the IFA caused discomfort during the assessment process. It will also explore how their actions also helped carers cope with some of the uncomfortable aspects of the assessment.

**Better communication**

The constant assessment was one of the biggest sources of discomfort with two carers identifying it as one of the worst parts of the recruitment process. The carers reported feeling uneasy and unnerved when they discovered that they were monitored during training sessions and the staff discussed their observations. One can speculate that this uneasiness is inherently linked to assessments, but the interviews did not indicate this. The interviews revealed a sense of openness and a willingness to be vulnerable during other parts of the assessment process such as reference checks and social worker visits. This may be because these interactions were inherently explicit about their purpose as tools for assessment. However, training sessions were less likely to be perceived as tools or sources for assessment. For the carer there was a sense of being caught off-guard about being observed during interactions whose nature was not explicitly assessment based. One carer noted that this may have been mentioned early on and indeed, her social worker friend told her it was standard practice. Assessment during recruitment is not a one-off event but rather a continual process (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014a). It is possible that better communication of this fact would have helped reduce the carer’s discomfort. Communication is one of the core skills of assessment revealed in the literature review (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014a). It can influence a participant’s openness during the assessment process. The carers’ experiences suggest that there is a need to ensure that the constant assessment is communicated better. Increased communication and transparency about how assessment is conducted may help reduce carers’ discomfort during the process. The research practice of gaining informed consent and ensuring that research participants are giving continuous consent throughout the project helps put participants at ease during research. This demonstrates how clear communication and transparency can enhance interactions and reduce feelings of discomfort.

It is also possible that the use of the term “assessment” contributes to the discomfort felt by potential foster carers. I suggest that it may be more accurately described as the process of gathering information. In order for a fostering agency to accurately assess an applicant, they have to gather certain information from them. This information is based on both government regulations and standard practice (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014a). While some of that information is gathered through paperwork, a lot of the additional information is often gathered through observation and in interactions with the applicant. Every interaction with
the applicant provides deeper insight into who they are, which then helps the assessors make an informed decision on the applicant’s suitability for fostering. Communicating to an applicant that they are continually going to be assessed could put them on edge. However, explaining to them that every interaction with them helps the agency gain a better understanding of their suitability to foster may reduce the anxiety, discomfort and stress applicants feel during the process. I posit that it is therefore not just about what is communicated, but how that is communicated to the applicants.

Clear communication can also benefit recruiters when it comes to paperwork. As mentioned earlier, assessment involves conducting lots of different checks and these results in a tonne of paperwork. One carers’ frustration was not about the amount of paperwork, but the last-minute way it was requested of her. She suggested that having a checklist of what paperwork was needed and when would reduce that frustration and ease the process. This is a reasonable and feasible adjustment that agencies could make and perhaps some agencies are already doing so. Overall, clearer communication about the process of assessment, what it entails and what is expected can probably help mitigate some of the discomfort for carers during recruitment.

Being supportive and relational
Support has been a recurring theme when it comes to dealing with foster carers and is also necessary during the assessment phase. This finding is in line with the findings of a literature review conducted on the assessment of foster carers. The review revealed that assessment should always take place within the context of an ongoing relationship between the agency and the applicant (Luke & Sebba, 2013). This is echoed by H. C. Brown & Brown (2014) who describe assessment as being a ‘joint enterprise’ where the assessor and the potential foster carer work together. Support in this phase may be especially important in this phase due to the stress and anxiety that it can cause a potential carer. As mentioned in the previous chapter, carers associate the experience they have during the recruitment process with what they will experience as they foster. The support offered during assessment was closely linked with the final key to addressing discomfort that is discussed below.

Involving the right people
The findings revealed that the agency involved a number of people in the assessment process. This included recruiters, assessing social workers, foster carers and panel members. Based on the interviews with the carers, there was a consistency of care and support offered by everyone involved in the process. This enhanced the assessment process by reducing discomfort and anxiety. There was indication that the IFA was intentional about creating a
cultural environment that was supportive and ensuring that everyone involved in the process operated from this ethos.

Eliminating bias
The final finding revealed by the findings was the need to address and eliminate bias during the assessment process. An international literature review on assessment of foster carers found that bias from inadequately trained assessors can affect the assessment process (Luke & Sebba, 2013). The literature review also revealed the potential bias present in current assessors are vulnerable to being biased against people they perceive as being different (H. C. Brown & Brown, 2014b). Considering the need to recruit more diverse carers, this is an area that needs to be addressed. It would be superfluous to create advertising campaigns aimed at attracting carers from ethnic minority groups only to have them put off or rejected as a result of unconscious bias during the training and assessment phase. The two case studies presented examples of how bias is addressed both formally and informally. However, there is a real need for further research in this area.

CONCLUSION
This chapter presented the findings and discussion on the final phase of recruitment, focusing on the training and assessment processes. The chapter began by discussing foundational training courses, an area that has been neglected by research. Discrepancies in the way that training is conducted provided further evidence that this area of recruitment does not have an evidence base that can inform practice. The findings also indicated the potential that training has to influence drop-out rates amongst applicants. It also hinted at how the foundational training might influence fostering practice and with that, placement outcomes. The chapter also explored the experience of assessment and what agencies can do to address the discomfort and anxiety that often accompanies this part of recruitment. The findings were congruent to findings from previous chapters by highlighting the need for relational and supportive interactions with potential foster carers throughout the process. The next chapter will provide a summary of the findings and discussions from the research by highlighting key themes and learnings identified in all four findings chapters.
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION
This is the final chapter of my thesis. The chapter will begin by presenting my key findings. This will be followed by a reflexive discussion on the journey and the impact built into the process. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion on the implications it has for further research and practice.

KEY FINDINGS
This thesis set out to investigate possible ways that children’s experience of permanence and stability in foster care can be improved. Through my literature review I found evidence that foster carers are an integral factor in this experience of permanence and stability. Foster carer recruitment therefore could contribute to this by providing more foster carers who can meet the rising needs. Having established in my literature review how under-researched the field is, I conducted exploratory research on fostering recruitment in England. To the best of my knowledge, this innovative research was the first of its kind in this field. The combination of methods and the timing of the research taking place within a global pandemic also give the study a distinctiveness. The ecological model of fostering recruitment and the three-phase model are both novel conceptualisations of recruitment that have numerous implications on theory, research and practice. I can summarise my research findings with one statement. Foster carer recruitment might help improve children’s experience of permanence and stability in foster care if it is a concerted effort involving the right people applying the right methods to attract, identify, train and assess the right carers. The following sections will expand on each of the main elements in this statement.

Concerted Effort
Through my research I discovered that there are numerous organisations that participate in recruitment. These include fostering organisations and networking & campaigning organisations. The presence of profit-making fostering agencies in England produces high levels of competition. A report for the Department for Education reported the market as being one that causes confusion. However, my research found that this was a criticism founded on unreasonable expectations of a marketing environment. Indeed, my research indicated that the Department for Education contributed to confusion in the market by having inconsistent and incomplete information about fostering organisations. Despite the heavy competition in the field, the research found that each group of stakeholders served a unique purpose, contributing to the joint brand of fostering. LAs are the foundational element of the field who hold the biggest authority on placement decisions. IFAs complement the work of local authorities, attracting and recruiting foster carers that LAs
would reject or are unable to reach. IFAs are also able to specialise in the services they offer, thus improving their practice and the experience of children under their care. N&Cs play the unique role of complementing fostering organisations’ recruitment efforts. They create materials that are more neutral and can be used by numerous fostering organisations. Some N&Cs are also able to run joint campaigns that have a wider reach. Some N&Cs are also able to dedicate resources to forms of recruitment that are resource heavy and take longer to produce results. Whether they want to or not, fostering organisations are bound together by the fostering brand and any effort by one stakeholder can impact others in the field. As Mark the recruiter said: “You start raising the tide, all the ships go up…”

**Involving the Right People**

Another key finding in the research was connected to the people who participate in foster carer recruitment. The findings indicated that recruitment draws from several fields and requires recruiters to have these skills or have them represented in their teams. The research found that while recruitment draws heavily from marketing, most recruiters do not come from a marketing background neither do they have any training in marketing. The consequences of this were revealed in the content analysis which identified low participation in digital marketing and errors in the use of Facebook ads. Having well trained personnel responding to inquiries was also identified as vital to the recruitment process. Conducting bias training for recruiters was also identified as a beneficial to the recruitment process. Aside from the need for having recruiters who are well trained for their roles, the research also identified the need to ensure that internal structures supporting recruitment efforts. This includes reducing bureaucratic processes that hinder them and empowering to make key decisions about recruitment strategy. Finally, the research indicated the benefits of having a supportive team involved in recruitment. This involves ensuring that all participants in the recruitment process, from foster carers to social workers and panel members, take on a supportive and relational approach towards recruitment.

**Using the Right Methods**

Methods used in recruitment formed a major area of focus in the research. These fall into two main categories: methods aimed at attracting and targeting, and methods aimed at training & assessing.

The research revealed that foster carer recruitment involved methods that attract, target and impact multiple levels of the field, both macro and micro. One key finding revealed in the research was the use of community-based recruitment and exploration methods. The research suggested that this form of recruitment might contribute to having higher quality
inquiries. This is because community-based recruitment and exploration occurs within social circles where it is more relatable, accessible and can lead to a deeper understanding of fostering. Another key finding in the research was the ability of joint campaigns and national marketing methods to raise awareness, improve the fostering brand and shape public opinion of foster care. The research indicated that such ventures play an integral role in recruitment even though they are resource intensive and might not produce the direct results that recruiters want. Another key finding of the research was in identifying some flaws in current recruitment practice. The research indicated that advertising material did not adequately represent the very demographics of carers it was trying to reach, and the types of placements for which carers are needed. In addition to this, there was some gender stereotyping identified in the ads, which can alienate male carers. Moreover, this was evident in the under-representation of male audiences in the reach of ads. The research revealed a failure to target specific audiences as well as a lack of the desire to try and attract a specific audience even though the recruiters identified the need to attract specific demographics. Finally, the research indicated the importance of having methods that allow potential foster carers to explore fostering. This was seen as an essential step in improving the process of career identity formation.

When it comes to training and assessment, the research found there is an apparent lack of evidence-based practice in the area. One key finding was the variance in the way that initial training was carried out. There is an apparent lack of standardisation of the way that training is undertaken. The research indicated that foster carers appreciate and might prefer a rigorous training process that helps them feel adequately prepared to foster. The research also indicated that fostering agencies might also benefit from modifying training to suit the agency’s approach to fostering. Finally, the research indicated the importance of having an assessment process that was relational and supportive.

**To Get the Right Foster Carers**

A key finding of the research was that recruitment isn’t just about getting any carers; it’s about getting the right carers. The right carers meet the character traits and competency of successful foster carers. They also match the unique needs of the fostering agency. The needs of a fostering agency are based on the children within their care, the type of fostering the agency specialises in, and aspects of the corporate culture such as their approach to fostering. Recruitment efforts that fail to attract, train, and assess carers that meet the agency’s needs, would fail to improve the experience of permanence and stability for the children who are cared for by that agency. The research indicated that many recruiters were struggling to
reach carers who were from ethnic minorities to meet the needs of children from ethnic minorities.

**Improving permanence and stability**

There are opportunities, at every point of the recruitment process, to find attract, identify, train and assess people who are well suited to the fostering task. Recruiters draw from existing evidence on factors that improve the success of fostering placements at each stage. Fostering recruiters can do this by using their recruitment material to attract the types of carers that they need. This should be based on the needs of the agency in order to improve the matching process. While there is an overall recognition for the need of a diverse pool of carers to draw from when matching, it is important for agencies to be aware of the types of placements they get and the ones they struggle to find matches for. As discussed earlier, representation matters and the recruitment material should adequately represent the needs of agency based on numerous factors including but not limited to the age, gender, race, ability of both children and carers represented in ads. When agencies have an adequate pool of carers to choose from, the process of matching placements is easier and reduces the types of compromises that lead to placements breaking down or being interrupted when a better match is found. Reducing the occurrence of disruptions due to matching issues would improve permanence and stability for children in foster care.

Another way that recruiters can improve permanence and stability for children in foster care is by using current research evidence to identify foster carers with high fostering potential. Research has revealed the character traits and qualities found in successful foster carers. This includes (but is not limited to) individual traits such as compassion, tenacity and hope. During interactions with potential carers, recruiters can look for and identify individuals with such traits. In addition to this, recruiters can look at the successful carers they have and recruit from the social circles of these carers. Homogeneity of communities often results in individuals within the communities holding similar values and characteristics. A successful carer is therefore likely to know another individual who can become a successful foster carer.

In addition to attracting and identifying individuals with high fostering potential, recruitment can improve permanence and stability during their training process. The literature review revealed that training is an integral part of the fostering journey. This begins at the recruitment level, which provides an opportunity for recruiters to build a strong foundational knowledge base for foster carers. The initial training process can help give foster carers the skills and confidence needed for their fostering placements. For some carers in my research inadequate training left them feeling ill-equipped to start a placement. Research revealed
that a foster carers’ self-efficacy can impact the success of a placement. Training that is thorough and leaves potential carers feeling competent and confident in their parenting skills can therefore improve permanence and stability. My research found that training was not just about educating foster carers about fostering, but also an opportunity to introduce the agency’s corporate values and unique approach to fostering. The literature review revealed that fostering placements can be impacted by the relationship between the foster carer and the agency. Training can therefore provide an opportunity to build the carer-agency relationship to reduce breakdowns and improve permanence and stability.

Although recruitment is under researched, there is a large evidence base which recruiters can draw from. Recruiters should be guided by the goal of care, which is to provide stable placements that allow children who have had adverse experiences to thrive. I began this thesis by stating that permanence is a goal of care. Permanence itself is multifaceted, often involving legal, physical and relational aspects. Foster care, by its very nature, is temporal. However, even in this temporal space there is a need for a form of permanence. A stability of care that is not threatened by unnecessary changes or disruptions. This thesis has contributed to the larger conversation of permanence and stability by introducing ways in which recruitment can provide solutions.

REFLECTING ON THE RESEARCH
At this stage of the thesis, I must pause to reflect upon the journey. The task I set out to accomplish was grandiose and over ambitious. One PhD journey cannot solve the issue of instability in foster care. Throughout this process, I found myself having to narrow down the expectations I had of myself, my work and the impact of my research. I also sought to ensure that I wove impact into every step I took. This started with sharing my research on a blog and podcast by IRISS (Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) during my first year. The platform was intentionally chosen because it is designed to reach people working in social services. Over the course of my research, I’ve had a few people reach out to me to discuss my work after encountering it on the IRISS platform. This includes a national charity based with whose team of recruiters I met with to share my findings. This provided great some feedback (and a sense validation) as they engaged with my findings. Most interestingly, they deeply resonated with the ecological model and kept referring to it throughout the discussion. In addition to this I invited survey participants to indicate if they want to receive my research results. A number indicated interest in this, giving rise to ‘Fostering Recruitment Insights’. Eager to share my results as I was analysing them, I created this newsletter that sent a monthly brief on my findings. This evolved into a website, LinkedIn Page, Twitter account
and Instagram page where I share my findings. This has presented me with the opportunity to engage directly with recruiters and to have them provide feedback on my work. In the newsletter I invite recruiters to ask questions about the recruitment process and about half a dozen recruiters have taken the opportunity to ask for advice in specific issues they are facing in recruitment. In addition to this, I have been engaged in more in-depth and continuous consultation with two fostering organisations (a small charity IFA and a national N&C).

Continuous engagement with recruiters has helped to meet the desire for my research to be meaningful. However, it doesn’t stop me from wishing I had done more. While I tried to be as inclusive as I could in the design of my research and the selection of participants, I must recognise one weakness in this area. This was in the failure to include the voice of children in foster care or children who have been in foster care. I missed the opportunity to have them contribute to a field that has the potential to impact how they are perceived by the public. This could have been done by seeking their thoughts on how they are portrayed in public. Further to this, I had noted that the research on characteristics of successful carers failed to involve the opinion of children in foster care. I missed the opportunity to include their voices in this area too.

While I feel that my research helped present foundational knowledge by exploring as much of the field as I could, I cannot stop myself from wondering if my work would have been more impactful and rigorous if I had chosen a more traditional route. What if I had narrowed down on a very specific issue, created a hypothesis and used quantitative research methodology that would contribute to the evidence base of current practice? In this question, I recognise the same conundrum I had within my data analysis. Is hypothesis testing superior to or more valuable than exploratory research? I truly believe that in this case my approach was justified and met the needs of the field. The use of multiple methods helped me develop as a researcher, stretching my creativity and innovation. It is in my nature to explore and adventure off the beaten path, and that is reflected in my research choices. The consequential inter-disciplinary adventure resulted in a rich research process that is certainly more reflective of the needs and experience of the field than a traditional approach would have achieved. I believe that both my academic career and the field have been enriched by this journey so I wouldn’t have done it any other way. The next two sections will discuss the implications of my work for future research, policy and practice.

**FUTURE RESEARCH**

Throughout the research process I found myself thinking about a phrase that my history teacher used often when I was in secondary school. She would say: “The more I know, the
more that I know that I do not know.” Back then it was just a fun phrase that made us laugh, but now it is a reflection of the predicament I find myself in. With each step I’ve taken in my research I’ve uncovered even more areas that need investigating. Although my research provided some foundational knowledge upon which future research can build, it also failed to address some of the research gaps I identified during my literature review. The following is a list of some of these gaps in research that future research could focus on:

- Testing assessment instruments’ ability to predict future success in foster carers.
- Exploring bias in instruments used in the assessment of foster carers.
- Evaluation of the services and support offered to foster carers experiencing trauma and/or grief.
- Evaluation of services and support offered to foster carers who experience child-carer violence.
- Exploring whether the expectation of resilience and tenacity in foster carers affects the support and care they receive.

In addition to the research gaps identified above, my work also opens up the field to more areas worth researching. Exploration was the most unexpected finding in my research. There is an opportunity to understand the role it plays within foster carer recruitment and how recruiters can facilitate this to help potential carers in their career identity formation. I also identified very little research on the benefits that foster care has for the foster carer and their family. This would be valuable to the recruitment process and is an area worth investigating. Using exchange theory, such research would also contribute to the crucial discussion on why people foster. There is also a very apparent need to conduct further research that can identify effective recruitment practice. Finally, with each phase of my recruitment model comes opportunities for research aimed at refining the methods involved.

**FUTURE PRACTICE & POLICY**

As mentioned early in this thesis, I was strongly motivated by the desire to conduct research that could impact the field. While I have numerous recommendations for practitioners, the nature of my research requires that these recommendations are given in a measured way. My research was primarily exploratory, and the resulting data was highly descriptive. While this contributed to the knowledge base, many of the findings would need to be subjected to other research methods that create an evidence base for practice. This, however, does not discount the fact that practitioners can learn from the research and apply it to practice. The two models I introduced in my thesis are practitioner-oriented and have numerous implications for practice. My ecological model provides a new way for recruiters to understand recruitment and how engagement at the macro and micro levels can impact their efforts. Understanding the different spheres of influence in an individuals lives can lead to creative
ways of recruiters engaging in practice. While the ecological model provides an overview of the landscape of fostering, the three-phase model focuses on the different stages of the recruitment process. This helps recruiters understand what to expect from each phase and can help recruiters assign appropriate resources to each part of the process.

The first recommendation I would make for practitioners, is in ensuring that the people involved in the recruitment process are adequately trained and skilled for the role. This could involve hiring people who have appropriate academic backgrounds, or in ensuring that those within the roles get adequate training for their roles. Heads of recruitment would benefit from social marketing training as this would help fostering agencies in the designing and execution of recruitment campaigns and strategies. The team would also benefit from having people trained in digital marketing and someone with front desk training to handle inquiries. Social work skills are also essential in the training and assessment phase.

Another recommendation for practitioners is regarding targeting. There was a distinct reluctance by recruiters to target the very people that recruiters need. The desire to communicate that fostering ‘is for everyone’ seemed to be the dominant motivation behind this. However, there is evidence that this approach isn’t working as most recruiters noted that there were indeed demographics of carers that they were struggling to reach. The research identified how community-based methods can be used to target ethnic minority groups. While building relationships with a community can be time consuming, it has the potential to yield good results and create a long-term avenue for recruitment of carers and support for carers within that community.

Practitioners would also benefit from bias training. The research noted several opportunities for bias to hamper the recruitment process from the advertising to assessment. Recruiters would thus need some training and education on how to identify and eliminate bias in their recruitment process. This is bias against male carers, LGBTQ+ carers, carers with disabilities, single carers and carers from ethnic minority groups. N&Cs can help with reaching carers from specific groups.

A final recommendation for fostering organisations would be to invest in a good website and in resources that aid in exploration. While it might be a strain on limited human resources in the organisation to find people to facilitate exploration, directing inquirers to adequate accessible resources would be a good alternative. These resources could be used in digital marketing, community-based recruitment and exploration.
My recommendation for oversight organisations such as the Department for Education, is that it invests in resources that provide comprehensive, accessible and neutral information about fostering. There is also a need to invest in joint recruitment campaigns that raise awareness about fostering as it would impact the entire field. Finally, there is an apparent need for recommendations on best practice for training and assessing foster carers using evidence-based methods. Investing in this would be prudent.

**FINAL COMMENT**

The recruitment of foster carers is a neglected but necessary component of the care system which has great potential impact. It can help to rebrand foster care and to improve the image of both children in care as well as foster carers. It can help raise awareness of the need for foster carers and educate the public by addressing common misconceptions about fostering. When done well, it can improve the fostering experience for children in foster care, foster carers and fostering agencies. Most importantly, it can improve the experience of permanence and stability for children in foster care which in turn influences their future outcomes. My three-year experience of exploring this field has revealed how complicated it is and how successful recruitment needs to a multi-level strategy that draws from several fields. I am impressed by how much recruiters have accomplished with such a limited evidence base. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to bring new knowledge to such a vital and under-researched field. Indeed, my ecological model and three-phase model are an incredible contribution to the field, building up on the way we understand and engage with recruitment.

I come to the end of this thesis with more questions than I began with. The complex nature of fostering recruitment in England is one that cannot be understated. In the process of my research I interacted with recruiters, foster carers who all seemed to look at me with a bit of desperation. The need for more foster carers was apparent in each conversation, as was the heavy expectation that my PhD research would produce the magical solution. I may have found some answers, but they are far from the simple fix that many desire. Numerous parties have a stake in this conversation. For some it is deeply personal; for others it affects their professional lives; for others yet, there is a financial investment at stake. I have had to remind myself, as I write this thesis, that behind every number is an individual person with inherent dignity and worth who has had profoundly complex experiences in life. There are over 70,000 children who have had the sort of adverse childhood experiences that they need someone outside of their biological family to take care of them. One experiencing abuse or neglect is already one too many. The wonder of it all, is that there are individuals and families who have opened up their homes to care for each of these children right now. And therein
lies the problem; the fact that fostering is a public service occurring in a private situation. In a world that seeks to categorise things as being “either/or”, it is hard to understand things that fall in the “both/and” category. Is fostering a private matter or a public matter? The answer is both. Is fostering a career or a voluntary service? Both. Are foster carers professionals or parental figures? Both. Any conversation on fostering needs to step away from polarising arguments and to embrace nuance and complexity. Even I was guilty of holding bias against private fostering organisations. Like many I have encountered, I was unnerved by the thought of care and profits occupying the same space. Yet my case study with an IFA did not uncover the money-hungry opportunists my brain imagined them to be. Instead, I found deeply caring individuals with the means to accomplish something the government agency was struggling to accomplish. I suggest that like myself, the conversation on fostering and recruitment could benefit from expanding the vocabulary to include the word “and”. Foster care is a professional AND a parent. Fostering is a career AND a service. Fostering includes both care AND profit. Fostered children are in need of care and protection, AND active participants in the fostering relationship. Fostering recruitment needs to target the individual AND the community. Polarisation often occurs as a result of our efforts to simplify matters. However, simplicity is hard to come by in real life. Life is rich with complexity, depth and nuance. We are complex beings and, in my opinion, fully capable of encountering complex situations and coming up with complex solutions to solve them.
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# APPENDIX

## TABLE OF STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOCUMENT</th>
<th>KNOWLEDGE AREA / THEME</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Blackburn, C. (2016). The role of a national fostering helpline in the recruitment and retention of foster carers: implications for policy and fostering practice. Adoption &amp; Fostering, 40(2), 167–178.</td>
<td>Carer Support Foster Carer Recruitment</td>
<td>Online questionnaires sent to 685 participants, 57 were completed and follow up interviews were conducted with 12 participants.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Using the Adult Attachment Interview to inform foster carer assessment. Adoption &amp; Fostering, 37(3), 297–306.</td>
<td>5 foster carers and 2 members of the fostering panel also participated in the second phase.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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<td>Depression Inventory, Eyberg Child Behaviour Inventory and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. 46 foster carers from three local authorities in Wales participated. Analysis of Covariance, t-tests, and effect sizes were used to measure differences at baseline and at the follow up at 6 months. Thematic Content analysis was also used to assess carer and facilitator feedback.</td>
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<td>Carer Relationship</td>
<td>56 foster carers from the Midlands in the UK participated in the training. 4 pre and post measures were applied; Visual Analogue Scale, Alabama Parenting Questionnaire, Carer-Child Dysfunctional Interaction Scale and a ‘views from the training’ questionnaire. SPSS was used to conduct repeated measures ANOVA to analyse data from the ‘Views from the Training Questionnaire. Paired t-tests were used to analyse pre and post data from the other standardised tests.</td>
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<td><strong>12.</strong> Donachy, G. S. (2017). The caregiving relationship under stress: foster carers’ experience of loss of the sense of self. <em>Child Psychotherapy, 43</em>(2), 223–242.</td>
<td>Fostering Experience</td>
<td>Evaluation of the implementation of an internet fostering service in 3 English counties. Mixed methods were employed on 205 foster carers. This included a survey and focus groups using semi-structured interviews. SPSS and NVivo were used for analysis.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Gurney-Smith, B., Granger, C., Randle, A., &amp; Fletcher, J.</td>
<td>In Time and in tune: - The fostering attachments group: capturing sustained change in both caregiver and child</td>
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<td>Hannah, B., &amp; Woolgar, M.</td>
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</table>
FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT IN ENGLAND

You are being invited to take part in research on the recruitment of foster carers in England. Dorothy Neriah at the University of Edinburgh is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of the study is to explore the nature of foster carer recruitment in England. It also aims to assess marketing materials used for foster carer recruitment in order to generate new knowledge for enabling successful foster parent recruitment. Better recruitment practice improve matching, reduce placement instability and improve the fostering experience for foster carers.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You are invited to participate in this study because you work in the recruitment section of a local authority or independent agency.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the study will not affect your employment. Please note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g., journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to your withdrawal and so you are advised to contact the research team at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study.
If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?

You will be asked a number of questions regarding your experience and understanding of the recruitment process in your organization. The survey will be delivered online and can be undertaken at a place that is comfortable for you. The survey should take around 30 minutes to complete.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits, but by sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping Dorothy Neriah and the University to better understand foster carer recruitment in England by providing unique insight into foster carer recruitment, revealing patterns and highlighting promising practice. This information, and access to workshops based on the three-phase model of recruitment developed by the researcher, can be made available to interested participants.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?

There are no significant risks associated with participation.

WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your data will be processed in accordance with Data Protection Law. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Unless they are anonymised in our records, your data will be referred to by a unique participant number rather than by name. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file and all paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk.
WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. You will not be identifiable from any published results. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless we have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name. Anonymised information may also be kept for future research. A summary of the findings from the study will be made available to participants who indicate they would like to receive this. This summary will be sent to participants by email.

WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?
This study has been organised by Dorothy Neriah, a PhD student at the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?

The study proposal has been reviewed by The Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

WHO CAN I CONTACT?

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact the lead researcher, Dorothy Neriah, dorothy.neriah@ed.ac.uk.

If you would like to discuss this study with someone independent of the study please contact Debi Fry, debi.fry@ed.ac.uk.

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, please contact: Moray House Ethics, mhsethics@ed.ac.uk

Just to confirm that you've understood the above, please select all the statements below that you agree with
I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study.

I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided, ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at anytime without giving a reason and without my medical care or legal rights being affected.

I understand that my anonymized data will be stored for a minimum of 3 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.

2. Please sign your initials below

3. Please add the date below

Dates need to be in the format ‘DD/MM/YYYY’, for example 27/03/1980.

Thanks for agreeing to do this. It will take you about 30 minutes to complete. Just follow the instructions to the end.

Page 2: About You
Which type of Agency are you?

- Local Authority
- Independent Fostering Agency (For Profit) Independent
- Fostering Agency (Non-profit)

Which county or counties do you operate in? (Select all relevant answers)
Leicestershire
Lincolnshire
Merseyside
Norfolk
North Yorkshire
Northamptonshire
Northumberland
Nottinghamshire
Oxfordshire
Rutland
Shropshire
Somerset
South Yorkshire
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Do you specialise in a type of foster care?

- Yes
- No

Which of the following specializations does your organisation offer? (Select all relevant answers)

- Surrey
- Tyne and Wear
- Warwickshire
- West Midlands
- West Sussex
- West Yorkshire
- Wiltshire
- Worcestershire
If you selected Other, please specify:

What is your job title?

How many years have you held your current job position?

- 0 - 2 years
- 3 - 5 years
- 5 -10 years
- 10+ years
6.b. Including your current position, how many years' experience has you had in recruitment of foster carers?

- 15 - 20 years
- over 20 years

7. Is the recruitment of foster carers your main responsibility?

- Yes
- No

7.a. If foster carer recruitment is not your main responsibility, what other main responsibilities do you have?
8. What is your academic background?

☐ Social Work
☐ Marketing
☐ Social Policy
☐ Business Public
☐ Health Other

8.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

8.b. Have you undergone any formal training in foster carer recruitment? (This can be part of your academic course work, workshops, trainings, or short courses)

☐ Yes
☐ No

8.b.i. Please list any formal training such as workshops or online courses that you have had in foster carer recruitment

8.b.ii. If you had the opportunity, what training would you attend to equip you further in foster carer recruitment? (Select all relevant answers)
If you selected Other, please specify:

What content would you want in the trainings/workshops? (Select all relevant answers)

- How to determine your target demographic
- Social Media
- Training
- Involving current foster carers in recruitment
- Framing advertisements
- Setting, tracking and meeting recruitment targets
- The decision-making process

If you selected Other, please specify:
9. Aside from yourself, how many paid staff work with you on foster carer recruitment?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-10

10. How many volunteers work with you (and your team) in foster carer recruitment?

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-5
- 5-10
- over 10

11. Do you engage with a marketing agency for your foster carer recruitment?
Which Marketing Agency do you work with?

What is the nature of your relationship with the marketing agency?

- Paid contract
- per job
- Voluntary
- Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

What is your yearly budget for foster carer recruitment?

Do you have your own website for Foster Care?
11.d.i. Do you have a Facebook Page for Foster Care?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No, we are under the local council's website
- [ ] No, we share a website with other local authorities
- [ ] Other

Page 4: Your Foster Carers

12. How many foster carers does your organisation support/serve?

[ ]

12.a. How many foster carers left your organisation last year?

[ ]

12.b. How many foster carers does your organisation need to recruit this year?

[ ]

13. A key benefit of recruitment is to find better matches for children and foster carers.
This involves matching based on things like ethnicity, culture, faith, gender identity, geography, etc. Which of these demographics are you currently targeting in your recruitment to meet matching needs in your area?

- African carers Black
- British Carers
- Caribbean Carers
- Chinese Carers Indian
- Carers Pakistani
- Carers Other Asian
- Carers
- Middle Eastern Carers
- Eastern European Carers
- LGBTQ+ Spectrum Carers
- Single Parent Carers Male
- Carers
- Other

13.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

13.b. Is there a specific demographic need that you have found hard to reach? Kindly list

PhD in Education, The University of Edinburgh, 2021
In your experience what are the top three reasons why people choose to foster?

- They feel they have something to offer their faith motivates them
- They just love children
- They want to help vulnerable children
- Their parents fostered/someone they knew was fostered
- They want to extend their family
- They cannot have children of their own
- To give back to society or contribute to a perceived need in the community

If you selected Other, please specify:
14.b. In your experience what are some of the top three reasons why people do not want to foster?

- Fear of the biological parents
- Lack of confidence in themselves
- Lack of awareness of the need
- Lack of understanding of what is involved
- Fear of false accusations (e.g., false child abuse allegations)
- Fear of being thought as being “in it for the money”
- Mistrust of Social workers
- Being afraid of getting too attached
- Negative media coverage

14.b.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

Which of the following would you describe as your three biggest challenges in the process of foster carer recruitment?
16. Are you a member of any network, association, group or consortium of foster carer organisations?

☐ Yes

☐ No

15.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

[Blank space for specification]
16.a. Please list any network groups/ member organizations that you are a part of

- The Fostering Network
- Nationwide Association of Fostering ProvidersCoramBaaf
- Foster Talk
- Other
- The Fostering Group

16.a.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

[Blank space for input]

16.b. Do you participate in the Fostering Fortnight?

- Yes
- No

16.c. Do you participate in any other joint recruitment efforts with other fostering agencies/authorities?

- Yes
- No

16.d. What was your experience in participating in joint marketing campaigns with other agencies such as the Fostering Fortnight?
16.d.i. Why?

16.e. Would you participate in joint marketing campaigns in the future?

- Yes
- No

Page 5: Your Recruitment Methods

17. Which of the following are part of your foster carer recruitment process?
(Select all relevant answers)
18. In the last 12 months, what methods have you used for foster carer recruitment? (Select all relevant answers)

- [ ] Marketing Materials such as posters, tv ads,
- [ ] Websites
- [ ] Facebook Groups
- [ ] Page Instagram
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Information Sessions
- [ ] Applications
- [ ] Inquiries via email, text, or phone call
- [ ] Assessment of potential carers
- [ ] Approval of new foster carers
- [ ] Training of new foster carers
- [ ] Ongoing training of foster carers

17.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

[Blank field]
If you selected Other, please specify:

18.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18.b. Over the last 12 months, which of these methods did you use the most? (Select One)

Bus Ads Street
Posters TV Ads
Radio Ads
Facebook Ads
Instagram Ads Google
Ads Information
Sessions Bulletin Boards
Other
18.b.i. Why do you use the selected method the most? (Select all relevant answers)

- It is cost effective
- I am skilled in it
- It produces the best results
- It is the easiest method to use
- Other

18.b.i.a. If you selected Other, please specify:


18.c. Over the last 12 months, which of these methods have you used the least? (Select One)

- Bus Ads Street
- PostersTV Ads
- Radio Ads
- Facebook Ads
- Instagram Ads
- Google Ads Information
- SessionsBulletin Boards

18.c.i. Why do you use the selected method least? (Select all relevant answers)
18.d. If you selected Other, please specify:

- It is too expensive
- It is too time consuming
- Other methods produce better results
- I am more skilled in using other methods
- Other

18.c.i.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18.d. In your experience, which of the following methods is the most effective?
   (Select one answer)

- Bus Ads Street
- PostersTV Ads
- Radio Ads
- Facebook Ads
- Instagram Ads
- Google Ads
- Information
- Sessions Bulletin Boards
- Other

18.d.i. If you selected Other, please specify:
18.e. How often do you use this method in a year?

18.d.iii. What makes this method the most effective? (Select all relevant answers)

- It is cost effective
- It is easy to use
- It produces the best results
  - I am skilled in using this method
  - Other

18.d.iii.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18.e. How do you track the effectiveness of the methods you use for foster carer recruitment? (Select all relevant answers)
If you selected Other, please specify:

**18.e.i.**

Please take this opportunity to tell us anything else you would like to share/raise about the recruitment of foster carers.

**19.**

It would be remiss of me not to take a moment to reflect on the impact the Covid-19 crisis is having on this field. Please take this opportunity to leave a note or comment on how this pandemic has impacted your recruitment practice.
You can also include a comment on how you have adjusted your recruitment practice during this period.

Page 6: Future Interests

21. Before we finish, are you interested in any of the following? (Select all relevant answers)

- Receiving the results of the research when they are available
- Receiving information on any training workshops conducted by the researcher on foster carer recruitment
- Participating further in the research by submitting some of your marketing material such as a poster. NB This is only available to London based organisations
- Participating further in the research by being a Case Study. NB. This is only open to London based organisations

21.a. If you expressed interest in any of the above, kindly provide the email address that I can contact you with regarding your choice.
Hi again!

Congratulations on your valuable contribution to the field by participating in this research. You have helped open up the vital conversation that needs to be had on foster carer recruitment. As I mentioned earlier, better recruitment can improve permanence for vulnerable children and improve the experience of foster carers. If done well, it can improve the public opinion of foster care too. Thank you for being part of this process.

Should you have any follow up queries or concerns, feel free to contact me, theresearcher on dorothy.neriah@ed.ac.uk.

Kindest regards,

Dorothy Neriah

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Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ
CONTENT ANALYSIS
Coding Manual for Piloting Content Analysis Coding Scheme
The following is a guideline for how to undertake coding for the Content Analysis of Foster Carer Recruitment in England. The coders’ task will be to follow these guidelines as succinctly as possible to maintain uniformity and to test the reliability of this instrument. Where the instructions seem unclear or the categories seem inexhaustive, try your best to code based on the instructions given and make a note of the issue including the item number and the nature of the problem.

For this pilot you will be given several recruitment ads. These have been saved using a unique anonymised identity (e.g., Pilot 7). Use these anonymised identities when coding and when providing feedback. Your task, as a coder, will be to analyse the adverts and input the information as prompted by the coding scheme. This will include an analysis of both the image and the text present in the ads. In real life people interact with ads for only a few seconds to a minute so we recommend that you only view the images when you are filling in the coding scheme. There will be some questions that ask about the emotions induced by the image. Please go with the first emotion induced. Questions like these will be at the beginning therefore it is recommended that you follow the sequence of the questions in the coding scheme as they are presented and do not go back and forth between them. The codes have been created to be as exhaustive and exclusive as possible, therefore if you are unsure about a certain item, input the code that is the nearest match and make a note of the item and the issue for feedback. It is recommended that you have a pen and paper with you as you code to note any issues that come up. There will be a space at the bottom of the coding scheme to input this feedback.

Please follow this link to begin your coding.
Content Analysis Coding Scheme

Page 1: Image

1. Name of the Image (Anonymised Identity)

2. What type of organisation is the ad from?
   - Local Authority
   - Independent Fostering Agency

2.a. What organisation is the ad from?

3. Take a look at the whole ad. What emotion do you feel when you look at the whole ad? (Pick only one)
   - Happiness
   - Annoyance
   - Empowerment
   - Pity
   - Admiration
4. Focusing on the image in the ad, what does it make you feel? (Pick only one)

- Happiness
- Annoyance
- Empowerment
- Pity
- Admiration
- Sadness
- Compassion Guilt
- Pride

5. Is there a child/children in this ad?

- Yes, 1
- Yes, more than one
- No

5.a. Is the image of the child/children negative or positive? A negative image can be a child who is sad, afraid, cowering or injured. A positive image can be a
child who is playing, happy, smiling or walking.

- Positive
- Negative

5.b. What age group would you guess the child is?
- 0-3 years
- 4-12 years
- 13-18 years

5.c. What do you think is the primary racial identity or ethnicity of the child?
- Asian Black
- Caucasian
- Middle Eastern
- Mixed Race

5.d. Does the child have a visible disability? e.g., child is in a wheelchair
- Yes
- No

5.e. What age groups would you guess the children are? (Tick all appropriate answers)
5.f. What do you think is the primary racial identity or ethnicity of the children? (Tick all appropriate answers)

- [ ] Asian
- [ ] Black Caucasian
- [ ] Middle Eastern
- [ ] Mixed Race

5.g. Does any of the children have a visible disability? e.g., child is in a wheelchair

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

6. Is there a carer in the ad? (Any adult in the ad can be considered to be a carer unless it is explicitly or implicitly indicated as being another professional, e.g., a social worker, etc)

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
6.a. Is there more than one carer in the ad?

- Yes
- No

6.a.i. What is the gender of the carers in the ad?

- Two females
- One Male and One Female
- Two Males

6.a.ii. What do you think is the primary racial identity of the carers in the ad?

- Both Asian Both
- Black Both
- Caucasian
- Both Middle Eastern
- One Asian One Black
- One Asian One Caucasian One
- Asian One Middle Eastern One
- Black One Caucasian One Black

6.b. What is the gender of the carer in the ad?
6.c. What is the primary racial identity of the carer in the ad?
- Asian
- Black
- Caucasian
- Middle Eastern

6.d. Does any carer have a visible disability? e.g., carer is in a wheelchair
- Yes
- No

Page 2: Text

7. Focus on the text in the ad. What emotion does the text evoke? (Pick only one)
8. Which of the following contact details does the ad contain? (Tick all appropriate answers)

- [ ] Phone Number
- [ ] Email Address
- [ ] Website Facebook
- [ ] Page Twitter
- [ ] Handle
- [ ] Other social media contact
- [ ] Physical Address

9. Does the text explicitly invite the reader to do something?
9.a. Which of the following does the text explicitly invite the reader to do? (Tick all appropriate answers)

☐ Consider Fostering
☐ Consider a specific type of fostering (e.g., fostering teenagers) Apply to foster
☐ Contact the authority/agency via email or phone Visit a website
☐ Attend an information session Call a helpline

9.a.i. If you selected Other, please specify:

☐

9.b. Disregarding all explicit invitations, what is the implied call to action in this ad? (Tick all appropriate answers) Required
If you selected Other, please specify:

- Consider Fostering
- Consider a specific type of fostering (e.g., fostering teenagers) Apply to foster
- Contact the authority/agency via email or phone Visit a website
- Attend an information session Call a

**9.b.i.** If you selected Other, please specify:

- [ ] Move from a different agency/authority

**10.** What type of fostering does the ad explicitly convey in text? (Tick all appropriate answers)
If you selected Other, please specify:

10.a.

Based on the text in the ad, which of the following motivations for fostering are explicitly mentioned or implied? (Tick all appropriate answers)
11.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

12. Is any of the text in the voice of a child?

- Yes
- No

12.a. Is the statement by the child positive or negative? Positive framing of text can be talking about the future, hope, etc. Negative framing can highlight past trauma and harmful experiences.

- Positive
- Negative
13. Is any of the text in the voice of a carer?

- Yes
- No

13.a. Is the statement by the carer positive or negative? Positive framing of text can be talking about the future, hope, etc. Negative framing can highlight past trauma and harmful experiences.

- Positive
- Negative

Page 3: Social Media Analytics

14. How many images were on this ad?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9

14.a. What was the amount spent for this ad? Required
**14.a.i.** What was the potential reach for this ad?

- 100 - 1K
- 1K - 5K
- 5K - 10K
- 10K - 50K
- 50K - 100K
- 100K - 500K
- 500K - 1M
- >1M

**How many impressions did this ad reach?**

- 100 - 1K
- 1K - 5K
- 5K - 10K
- 10K - 50K
- 50K - 100K
- 100K - 500K
- 500K - 1M
- >1M

**14.a.iii.** How many versions of this ad were run?
What Gender was targeted for this ad?

- Male
- Female
- Other

What is the percentage of the male gender shown this ad?
What is the percentage of the female gender was shown this ad?

What age group was targeted for this ad?
14.a.v.a. What is the percentage of the 25-34 age group was shown this ad?

- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85-94
- 95-104

14.a.v.b. What is the percentage of the 35-44 age group was shown this ad?

- 0-10
- 11-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 71-80
- 81-90
What is the percentage of the 45-54 age group was shown this ad?

0-10
11-20
21-30
31-40
41-50
51-60
61-70
71-80
81-90

What is the percentage of the 55-64 age group was shown this ad?

0-10
11-20
21-30
31-40
41-50
51-60
61-70
71-80
81-90
0-10
11-20
21-30
31-40
41-50
51-60
61-70
71-80
81-90
CASE STUDY

Interview Questions For Foster Carers In IFA
1. Describe your earliest memory of wanting to foster. When was it and what attracted you to fostering?
2. Describe the period between that first consideration of fostering and your initial inquiry. How long was it? What steps did you take?
3. How aware of fostering advertising were you before you made an inquiry?
4. Did any recruitment material such as an ad or personal invitation prompt you to make an inquiry?
5. How did you select this agency? Did you shop around for agencies? (... did the advertising and print media affect how you shopped around?)
6. Describe the process between your inquiry and your formal application to foster. What was the best and what was the worst part?
7. Are there any issues in the foster carer recruitment process that you feel need to be addressed or improved?
8. What do you think works well in the recruitment process?

Interview Questions for Lead Recruiter In IFA
1. How do you plan your overall recruitment strategies and activities?
2. Take me through what you do for recruitment; what methods you use and why.
3. What is your most effective method?
4. What methods do you deliberately not use?
5. What is the key message of your recruitment advertising?
6. Who do you target, why and how?
7. Do you adjust your messaging and strategies for different demographics?
8. What is the big ask in your advertisements? What do you want people to do when they come across your marketing material?
9. Is there anything you are trying to improve or change about this part of the recruitment process?
10. Did you participate in the Fostering Fortnight? What was your experience?
11. What resources do you use to develop your skills in recruitment?
12. How has the pandemic affected your recruitment?

Interview Prompts for Co-Founder In IFA
1. Take me through the process a new potential carer goes through when they make an inquiry
2. What about a foster carer from another agency?
3. What is the conversion rate from inquiry to assessment?
4. When a person makes an inquiry, what do you consider to be the goal of your interaction with them? (What does a win look like?)
5. What are some of the reasons why people do not make it to the assessment phase?
6. In the assessment phase, do you assess for fitness to foster, fit into the agency or both?
7. Is there anything you are trying to improve or change about this part of the recruitment process?
8. What resources do you use to develop your skills in recruitment?
9. How has the pandemic affected your recruitment?
Interview Questions for Head of Partnerships At N&C

1. Give me a bit of a history about [the N&C], when it started, etc.
2. Are you a marketing firm (is that the primary resource you offer?)
3. Why do you feel that there is a need to do what you do? i.e., what are the Local Authorities and Charities struggling to do that you are doing well?
4. Talk to me about the relationship between faith communities and the care system (local authorities and independent agencies). Why is there a need to be the mediator between the two?
5. Describe your work with fostering agencies and local authorities?
6. Do you work with for – profit independent agencies? Why or why not?
7. What services do you offer your partners?
8. What is faith literacy training?
9. Tell me about your national campaigns.
10. Tell me about your campaign packages?
11. Focusing on recruiting carers. Do you do any direct recruiting, or do you just equip community gatekeepers (churches, etc) to recruit?
12. What is it about your model that works?
13. Do you use any traditional advertising methods such as tv, radio, bus ads, sign boards, flyers, etc?
14. Do you use online advertising methods such as social media ads or google ads?
15. Tell me about faith friendly pathways. Why and how are they created?
16. Tell me about how you recruit churches and other communities of faith.
17. How do you engage with communities of faith?
18. What are the main obstacles to dealing with communities of faith?