Applying behavioural insights to fostering and adoption in England

Research report

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Authors: Kantar Public UK

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Executive summary

Recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents in England is an ongoing challenge, with the number of fostering and adoptive homes available falling short of demands of the care system. The need for foster carers and adoptive parents is particularly acute for 'hard to place children' (i.e. BAME children, sibling groups, older children and those with disabilities or complex needs) who wait much longer to be placed.

The Department for Education (DfE) seeks to support Local Authorities and independent fostering and adoption agencies to recruit more people to become foster carers and adoptive parents. DfE commissioned Kantar, in partnership with Ogilvy, to **understand how behavioural influences on fostering and adoption recruitment can be leveraged to encourage recruitment of quality leads**.

Iterative in nature, this research involved: the exploration of drivers and barriers to fostering and adoption recruitment according to existing literature and stakeholders in the system (the scoping phase); as well as investigating prospective, successful and unsuccessful applicants' attitudes and experiences (the primary research).

Insights from both the scoping phase and primary research were systematically organised according to the COM-B behavioural model to map drivers and barriers to recruiting quality leads against applicants' capability, opportunity and motivation. This allowed the research team to identify prospective applicants' typologies and develop a strategy for communication and non-communications-based interventions. Recommendations were refined in a co-creation workshop with DfE, and were quantitatively tested in Kantar's Behaviour Change Lab.

Perceptions of Fostering and Adoption

Fostering and adoption overlapped in respondents' minds. They tended to be seen as points on a continuum or two sides of the same coin. Some, particularly among those at the earlier stages of consideration, conflated them. Both fostering and adoption were associated with family, reward of supporting a child in need, and giving them better future. Many also thought of children's trauma when picturing fostering or adoption, and felt apprehensive about their abilities to cope with it.

The key differences between fostering and adoption were length and the perceived intensity of the commitment. Fostering was considered temporary, as opposed to adoption, defined by permanency, stability and a greater initial commitment. As a consequence, many saw fostering as a 'trial run' for adoption.

Reasons for respondents considering fostering and adoption could also overlap. Some motivations, like achieving a family vision or finding personal fulfilment were primarily inward, while others, like sense of duty towards the community or helping

children in need, were mostly outward. This research indicates that the **prospect of being paid to foster is not a motivating factor**, as associations between fostering and compensation were mostly unhelpful.

Conversely, **concerns mostly revolved around people's ability to manage children's complex needs,** particularly in light of prospective applicants' receptiveness to 'horror stories' in the media (which highlighted worst case scenarios and fuelled doubts). However, **those directly exposed to the everyday of fostering or adoption, either personally or through people close to them, tended to have a more balanced and positive view.** Previous experiences of care, whether personal or professional, allayed concerns and appeared to boost respondents' confidence in their abilities to cater for children's needs.

When it came to information gathering and seeking reassurance, while some would not be satisfied until they got answers to every question, others tended to be less systematic and spontaneous. **Regardless of these differences, many felt that information on fostering and adoption found online could be fragmented and hard to navigate.**

Attitudes towards the care system

Preconceptions and concerns about the care system and assessment stage could undermine people's belief in their suitability to foster or adopt, and ultimately prevent them from applying. Some concerns applied to either fostering or adoption; others referred to both, albeit with different connotations. Apprehensions included: worries about entering a chaotic system and not receiving the needed support; stigma around social workers' involvement; fear about the intrusiveness of the assessment process and being judged; and being unable to live up to the ideal of the perfect candidate.

Prospective applicants also often struggled to navigate the system, find answers to specific questions online, and make choices between seemingly identical agencies. Difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that asking questions over the phone was not a considered viable option by many who saw the moment of enquiry as the start of the application process, and didn't want to compromise their chances by asking the wrong question.

Mapping fuel (drivers) and friction (barriers) to Fostering and Adoption recruitment

Each respondent's fuel and friction factors were mapped onto the COM-B framework and then clustered to identify prospective applicants' typologies. Typologies were based on **vision for success (whether this was inward; driven by a desire for themselves or their family, or outward; inspired by an ideal community or society)** and **approach to the process (whether respondents had a planner or adventurer mentality).**

The combination of vision and mentality brought to life nine typologies, four for adoption and five for fostering, driven and hindered by different factors:

- **Planner/Outward**: make the **need for foster carers and adoptive parents acute and urgent and put the child at the forefront** to bring these opportunities top of mind. Communications could also **emphasise the importance of foster carers and adopters in society** to tap into altruistic motivations.

- **Adventurer/Outward**: recognise that their lack of focus does not necessarily mean a lack of quality. They need **guidance and encouragement through a safe dialogue** to enable them to focus, prioritise and plan, as well as to identify their value, also to potentially take on more complex cases.

- **Adventurer/Inward**: convey how fostering or adoption can contribute to their personal vision. They need **guidance and nurturing to prepare them**, equip them to successfully move forward, and help them to identify the option they are best suited for. They could increase their commitment as they gain experience.

- **Planner/Inward**: make it **easy for them to gather extensive information, ask questions and think through different scenarios**, emphasising they won't be judged or compromised if they say the wrong thing. Recognise that this is a 'high stakes' situation for them and normalise this through **ongoing support**.

Identifying quality leads and encouraging them to come forward

Previous research provided a framework for understanding characteristics of high potential leads, linking quality to demographic and lifestyle factors. These included age, relationship status, socioeconomic status, practicing faith, other altruistic behaviours (e.g. voluntary work, activity in local community, work for a not-for-profit organisation) and personal experience of fostering and adoption.

However, throughout the research, the team's definition of quality shifted. Regardless of demographic or lifestyle factors, a quality applicant has the capability, opportunity and motivation to succeed in the process. **Specifically, reinforcing individuals' belief in their potential and preparedness is key**. **Myth busting should move beyond demographics and lifestyle** by: debunking the need for perfection; highlighting foster carers can 'start small' and still put their skills and experience to good use; and emphasising that difficult life histories or genuine questions won't prejudice applications.

There are aspects of the current system that undermine individual prospects for quality. Knowledge is compromised by fragmented factual information that has to compete with compelling and pervasive 'horror stories'; questions on resources can lead to dead ends where applicants are lost rather than guided or diverted; confidence in personal abilities is quickly undermined by feeling judged and unwelcome.

To recruit quality leads, it is not enough to motivate people to come forward. The system also needs to give people the best chance to move forward by reducing friction points, and wherever possible, create the conditions for them to build their confidence in taking on more complex cases. Our recommended strategy is therefore composed of four pillars, associated with a different combination of communications and non-communications based interventions.

Messages should tap into the vision and goals that prospective applicants identify with most strongly to bring fostering and adoption top of mind. But igniting the desire to foster or adopt is only the starting point. Communications should also align with other pillars if they set out to get people to act on their instinct and get them through the application process. They should be underpinned by inclusivity so that all manner of prospective applicants know that they will be welcomed and valued.

Unlocking belief in abilities is a critical component of success, creating the conditions for confidence. Scoping interviews emphasised the importance of recognising that people do not start out as the finished article, but with support are often capable of much more than they realise. This process of nurturing is critical in identifying and preparing people who can take on more complex cases. Instilling belief in abilities should start before people begin to interact with the application process, to ensure that they already enter it with a stronger sense of resilience, determination and self-belief.

Once people are inspired to come forward, they need to feel they can move forward. Communications can be designed to instil a sense of urgency, but when people do come forward, they need to feel that they are pushing at an open door. Perceptions of feeling unwelcome, unheard or unreasonably judged need to be addressed, in a safe space to ask questions and explore options. This is also a critical point for improvements in cultural awareness – so that questions can open up avenues for discussion rather than lead to dead ends, for minority groups as for everyone else.

People also need to feel that they will have access to the support and guidance they need to succeed. People approach the process with a wide range of anxieties, insecurities and misconceptions about the care system and application process. Believing that these will be addressed, in a supportive and encouraging way, provides further fuel to move ahead, and contributes to strengthening people's confidence in their abilities, increasing potential to take on more complex cases.

Interventions recommendations

This research identified general interventions valuable to generate more quality leads, based on the above.

- **A 'safe space' to ask questions and easily access reliable information** to dispel worries about being judged; uncertainty on where to find the information they needed; and confusion about differences about agencies or the system's dynamics.

- **A more fluid approach to fostering and adoption enquiries** to capitalise on the overlap between fostering and adoption. This would give people a better chance to agree to the type of involvement that they are best suited for, rather than ruling themselves out prematurely because of confusion or concerns.

- **Embracing challenge in a supportive way**. Acknowledging that challenge is part of the experience for everyone, reinforcing the value for children, and providing a context for coping with challenge through support will make prospective applicants feel more comfortable.

- **Access to the everyday reality of fostering and adoption,** whether through testimonials, online communities, or other forums to share stories and ask questions, to counter misconceptions and normalise the experience of fostering and adoption.

Summary of interventions recommendations by typology

- **Planner/Outward:** make the **need for foster carers and adoptive parents acute and urgent and put the child at the forefront** to bring these opportunities top of mind. Communications could also **emphasise the importance of foster carers and adopters in society** to tap into altruistic motivations.

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Behaviour Change Lab (BCL)

Kantar's BCL was used to explore the effects, and compare the relative influence, of three communication prototypes on participants' intent to foster or adopt. Participants in the fostering and adoption trials were randomly allocated and presented with one of four communications prototypes:

- The **control** was designed to reflect 'typical' recruitment materials;

- **Prototype 1** included the idea of a safe space to explore options and ask questions;

- **Prototype 2** introduced an element of challenge and support;

- **Prototype 3** presented the opportunity to explore fostering and adoption as a continuum

In both fostering and adoption trials, prototype executions outperformed the control.

Prototype 3 was the most effective intervention to encourage fostering, reinforcing the value of allowing prospective foster carers to explore different routes to supporting a child and guiding them through this. In contrast, Prototype 1 had the most impact on behavioural intent for adoption, reflecting previous findings on the need for a safe space to start their enquiry.

Prototype 2 performed better in the adoption trial than fostering, where its effectiveness decreased after the second exposure. While fostering trial participants had an initial favourable reaction to the explicit recognition of challenges and the idea of making a difference, when given more time to consider this, their commitment wavered. This result could reflect some reluctance amongst prospective foster carers to be pushed out of their comfort zone.

However, key driver analysis highlighted that **confidence in one's ability to cope with difficulties associated with fostering and adoption was a critical factor affecting participants' likely behaviour, and was boosted by the belief that support will be available and accessible**. An honest portrayal of challenges - and emphasis on available support - therefore needs to be an important component within recruitment discourse.

Introduction

Responding to the need for Fostering and Adoption placements

Recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents is an ongoing challenge. Although adoption rates do fluctuate annually, there is a consistent shortage in the number of available places, with the number of children ceasing to be looked after due to adoption falling 7% between 2018 and 2019.

Fostering recruitment on the surface appears relatively successful with the number of fostering households increasing 2% over the past year. However, this increase was offset by a 3% increase in the number of children needing placement. Additionally the conversion rate of applications to approvals decreased to 49% in 2017, suggesting a high number of applicants withdraw from the process or are not approved.

In addition to this, for both fostering and adoption, the places available do not accurately match the needs of the population. BAME children, sibling groups, older children and those with disabilities or complex needs wait much longer to be placed and there is an urgent need to increase the number of applicants who can be matched with these children.

The Department for Education (DfE) wants to support Local Authorities and other agencies such as Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs), Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) to recruit more people to become foster carers and adoptive parents.

Previous research has explored the behavioural drivers and barriers to both fostering and adoption and highlighted potential target demographics for recruitment focus. However, there is a need to deepen the insight gathered thus far and develop further intervention recommendations to improve recruitment outcomes.

Existing research has often looked at fostering or adoption independently. However, research by Kindred highlighted that of the 6.3m people open to fostering or adoption, less than half are committed to one option, with up to 3.01m people who would say they are 'fairly likely', 'very likely' or 'certain to' consider both at some point in the future. The high number of people open to both fostering and adoption suggests there may be an overlap in the behavioural influences involved, therefore exploring the two together has the potential to deepen understanding of this group and how their needs can be addressed.

Additionally, whilst research has explored factors and influences at various stages of the journey, few studies have looked across the entire journey. There is a need to take a more holistic approach to better understand how perceptions, motivations and behavioural influences change across the process and whether these correspond to success or withdrawal from the process.

Finally, there is evidence that independent agencies have greater success in placing older children, sibling groups, BAME children and those with complex needs. There is a need to explore perceptions and experiences of different routes into fostering or adoption, to better understand how applicants experience the system, identify learnings across agency types, and develop recommendations to work within and around these factors.

Research aims and objectives

This research aimed to build on existing evidence to provide robust insight into the facilitators and barriers that influence enquiries and applications for fostering and adoption and develop actionable and tested recommendations for communications and other interventions that will leverage and overcome these influences and drive quality enquiries.

The goal is to provide evidence based recommendations for interventions and messaging strategies which can be utilised to generate not only a higher volume of leads for prospective foster carers and adoptive parents, but a higher number of quality leads; those that are successfully matched with harder to place children and which result in fewer withdrawals during the process.

In summary, DfE commissioned Kantar, in partnership with Ogilvy to:

1. Conduct behavioural insights research to provide robust insight into the facilitators and barriers which influence enquiries and applications for fostering and adoption.

2. Provide recommendations for how communications and other interventions could leverage motivations and overcome barriers to drive an increase in quality applications.

About the Research

This research employed an iterative structure over a number of stages which allowed continual development and refinement of insight models generated in the first stage of research. The design of the project and analysis of findings were both informed by the COM-B behavioural model.[1]

Using the COM-B model to diagnose behaviour

We used the COM-B model throughout the research to diagnose and analyse behavioural influences (see Figure 1).

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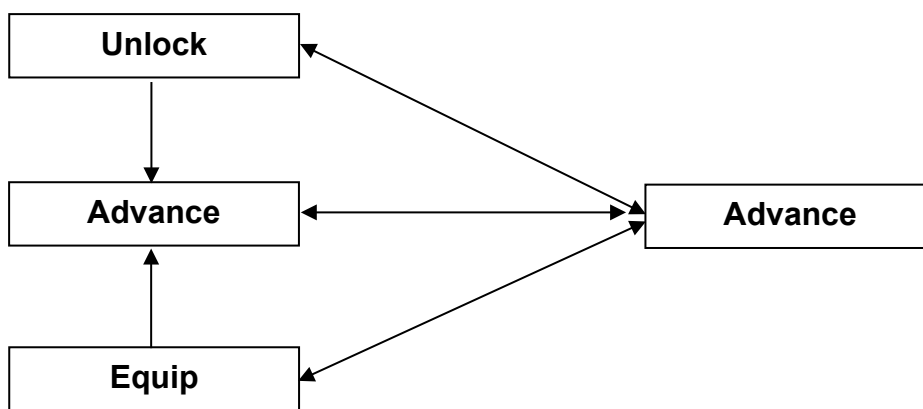
Figure 1. COM-B model

This model highlights three sets of factors that are necessary for a specific behaviour to take place:

- Capability is defined as a person's physical and psychological capacity to engage in an activity and includes having the requisite skill and knowledge.

- Opportunity is defined as all external factors making the behaviour possible or encouraging it (e.g. resources, social influences or the environment).

- Motivation is defined as the internal processes promoting and directing behaviour, like habitual thinking, emotional responses and reasoned decision-making.

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[1] Michie, S., Van Stralen, M. M., & West, R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. Implementation science, 6(1), 1-12.

The research team used the COM-B model to structure our approach at each stage of the project, to ensure holistic consideration of possible behavioural influences in the context of people's lives for both the design of research materials and subsequent analysis.

In particular, the COM-B model was used to systematically map out the drivers (fuel) and barriers (friction) to fostering and adoption recruitment identified through an initial evidence review and conversations with stakeholders followed by interviews with respondents at different points in the fostering and adoption journey as explained in the following overview of the research methodology.

The research method included three iterative phases, combining existing knowledge and hypotheses and the perceptions and experiences of potential applicants

The **scoping phase** was essential to build a solid base of existing knowledge and hypotheses, to avoid duplication and identify gaps for exploration in this research. It was also important for the development of the subsequent stages of the research, for example in identifying who to include in the primary research sample and shaping the themes to be explored further. This stage included:

- **Review of existing literature** on the factors influencing the decision to foster or adopt to develop initial understanding and ensure that research builds on what is already known. Reviews were done separately for fostering and adoption and organised according to the COM-B framework. Literature was selected based on agreed protocol and additional suggestions from DfE and stakeholders.

- **20 exploratory interviews** carried out with stakeholders in local authorities, VAAs, RAAs and IFAs to develop knowledge of the system, and gain insight into fuel and friction factors within it. These interviews built an understanding of the context in which applications are made and explored perceptions around the effectiveness of current recruitment strategies and communications.

The **primary research phase** was important to build a detailed picture of the types of people who foster and adopt, their views and experiences and the motivations and barriers influencing them at different stages of the journey. This stage was also important to understand how applicants experience the system at various stages to identify recommendations for possible improvements and highlight systemic factors which must be acknowledged. Exploring fostering and adoption together in this way enabled identification of similarities and differences across the two, to help develop messaging and strategy recommendations to work across the board as well as on a more targeted level. The level of detail gained through this approach was important to better understand the specific drivers, barriers and attitudes across the population, in order to develop typologies and targeted recommendations.

This included:

- **30 in home in depth interviews** with people across various stages in the fostering or adoption journey (considering, researching, dropped out of process, gone on to foster or adopt). The sample was chosen to reflect key demographics or characteristics identified as potential target audiences for recruitment in the scoping phase, such as practicing faith, same-sex couples, BAME, parents, those active in the local community and those working in caring professions. Researchers spent two and a half hours with respondents in their homes to understand their attitudes to fostering and adoption, and drivers and barriers in the context of their lives. During these interviews we discussed perceptions of fostering and adoption and ideas of what a 'typical' applicant looks like before exploring thoughts, feelings, motivations, triggers and barriers at each stage of the respondent's journey. We also explored reactions to existing recruitment materials and imagery.

- **Eight focus group discussions** with cold (not considering fostering and adoption right now but open to it in the future) and warm (interested, but at early stages in their consideration) audiences for fostering and adoption. These groups were used to understand perceptions in a more general population and explore reactions to a range of messaging concepts.

The **final phase** integrated findings from previous stages with the core team's expertise in order to develop messaging concepts and recommendations for communications and other interventions. This included a co-creation workshop with Kantar, Ogilvy Behavioural Science team, DfE and stakeholders from fostering and adoption organisations. This workshop discussed findings and generated ideas for recommendations targeting the different typologies and across the wider population. Outputs from this session also contributed to the refinement of final messaging to be tested in the Behaviour Change Lab.

This was supplemented by interventions testing in the Behaviour Change Lab

Kantar's Behaviour Change Lab (BCL) was then used to test the final concepts generated by this comprehensive programme of scoping and primary qualitative research. BCL is an online randomised controlled trial (RCT) platform, used to measure the relative impact of exposure to interventions upon the planned behaviours of a nationally representative sample. Importantly, BCL explores the interplay between participants' System 1 and System 2 responses (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982); allowing identification of the mechanisms by which a given intervention generates behaviour change.

The RCT design can be seen in Figure 2.
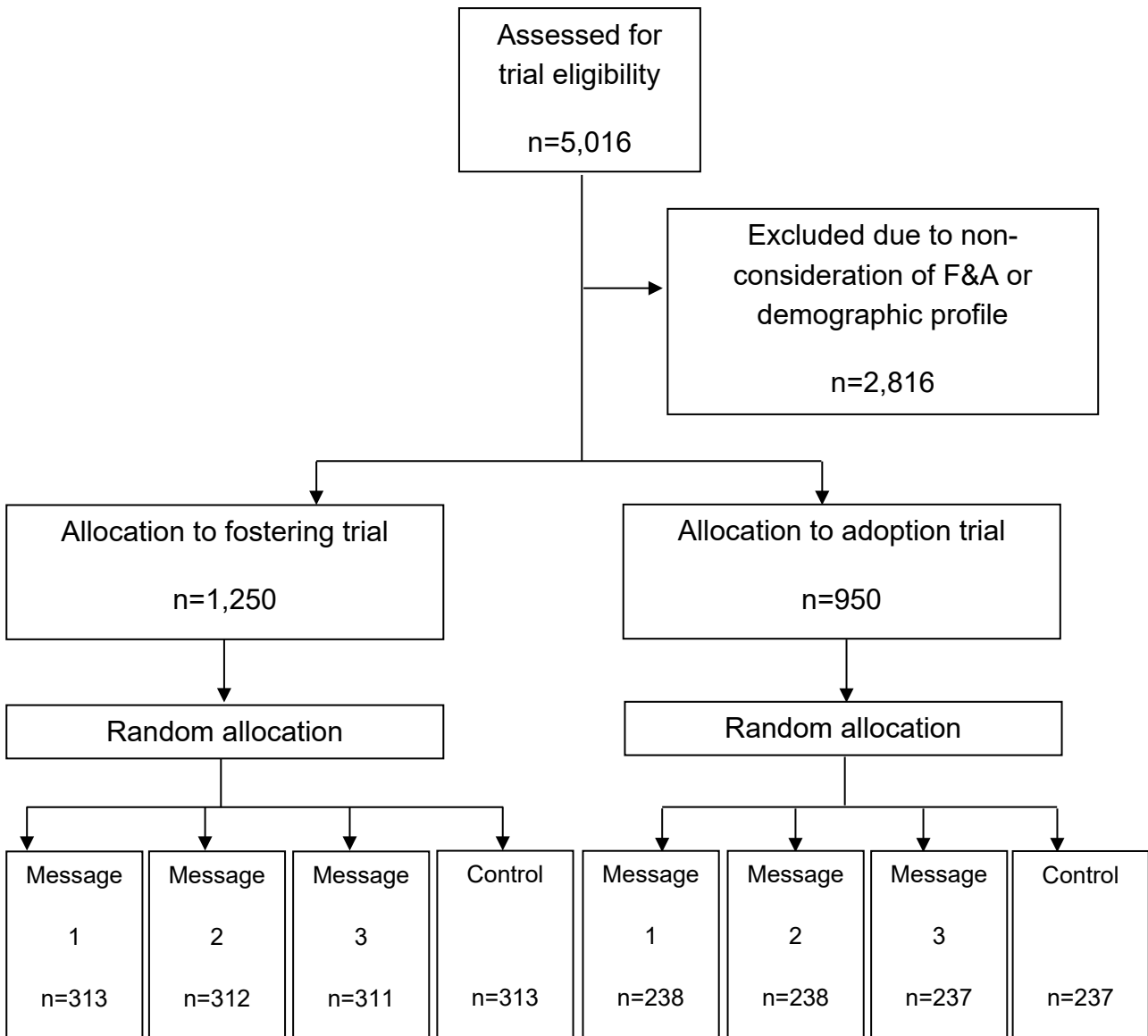
Figure 2. RCT design

Trial participants – who were sourced from Kantar's Profiles panel – were initially screened for eligibility, with criteria encompassing both demographic characteristics – quota targets were imposed for age, gender, region and socioeconomic group - and openness to fostering and adoption. n=2,816 participants were excluded from the trial, the majority of whom were excluded due to their lack of openness to fostering and adoption (n=2,675).

Following eligibility screening, participants: open only to fostering were allocated to the fostering trial; open only to adoption were allocated to the adoption trial; and participants open to both fostering and adoption were randomly allocated to either trial.

Within each trial, participants were randomly allocated to one of four arms: three arms involved the presentation of intervention prototypes; and one arm in which a control prototype - designed to reflect 'typical' recruitment materials - was presented to them. (Intervention prototypes can be found in Annex F).

Trial fieldwork was conducted between 4th and 13th April, 2020, with an average interview length of six minutes. The demographic composition of the total sample can be seen below in table 1, while the geographic distribution of trial participants is illustrated in figure 3.

No significant differences - in terms of demography or geography - were observed between experimental arms.

Table 1. Quota targets and achievements

Gender	Target %	Achieved %
Male	51	52
Female	49	48
Socio-economic Grade	**Target %**	**Achieved %**
ABC1	56	57
C2DE	44	43
Age	**Target %**	**Achieved %**
21-34	34	34
35-44	22	22
45-54	24	23
55-64	20	20

Rim weighting was used to correct for the minor discrepancies between quota targets and achievements – application of this weight resulted in an effective sample size of n=2,198.

Structure of this report

In the first chapter (Chapter 3) of this report we present general insight gathered about the system as it currently stands, highlighting barriers and areas for improvement.

The following section (Chapter 4) will discuss views of fostering and adoption, collected throughout the scoping and primary research from a range of audiences to build a picture

of the existing perceptions and myths around fostering and adoption. This section will also discuss how these perceptions are shaped, where people go for information and who influences their decisions

In Chapter 5 we discuss the role that attitudes about the system play in the decision to foster or adopt. We then move on to discuss how motivations ('Fuel') and barriers ('Friction') vary across the population and introduce the typologies which segment audiences according to motivations and attitudes. In Chapter 7 we further discuss the implications for improving quality leads, introduce the four pillars which make up the strategy and outline recommendations for future interventions. Chapter 8 presents findings from prototype communications testing in the Behaviour Change Lab. The final section (Chapter 9) pulls together implications of findings from the research for the recruitment strategy and summarises intervention recommendations.

The appendices of this report provide further detail on the methodology, achieved sample for the household immersions and focus groups and the stimulus material used in both group discussions and BCL.

Delivering quality leads within the current system

Identifying fuel and friction within the system

Recruitment of quality applicants means attracting people to come forward who have a good chance of continuing to a successful application. This requires navigating the current system that underpins fostering and adoption.

The Scoping phase of this study allowed us to identify 'fuel' and 'friction' within this system. Before considering the motivations of potential fosterers and adopters, it's important to consider what implications these factors have for recruitment of quality leads and how these could be addressed.

In our Scoping interviews, 'resilience' was often cited as a critical quality for prospective adopters or foster carers. Resilience was considered important not only in order to cope well with children coming into their care, but also to enable them to work through the screening process for fostering or adoption. By looking at the fuel and friction in the system, we can identify where prospective applicants struggle and what could help to boost their resilience at these points – by pre-empting their anxieties, building confidence, and reinforcing self-belief.

We look at these factors through the lens of the COM-B model, considering in turn Capability, Opportunity and Motivation.

Learning on fuel and friction for adoption

CAPABILITY: addressing the knowledge gaps

One of the biggest barriers to recruitment for both fostering and adoption is a lack of knowledge about what this will entail and 'how it works'. Although adoption features more prominently in the national consciousness than fostering, its depiction does not typically represent reality – people are exposed to stories of celebrity adoption from abroad or plots using adoption for a narrative twist, neither of which give an accurate picture of adoption in the UK.

Both the literature review and stakeholder interviews highlighted the fact that a lack of knowledge can hamper prospective adopters' chances of making progress. Being stalled by a lack of knowledge is most apparent when applicants are turned down, or feel afraid of being turned down, for example by their Local Authority, and do not realise that there are other agencies that they could contact. Many of the voluntary agencies interviewed emphasised their ability to work with and nurture prospective adopters who had struggled elsewhere. But those who do not have this knowledge of alternatives can find themselves

at a 'dead end'. An awareness that there are options available helps to create the conditions for success.

Lack of knowledge about the time scale of the adoption process can also affect progress. Some over- estimate the timescale and feel daunted and even deterred by this. Others underestimate how long it could take to move through the process, particularly if a couple are not completely aligned and need to take extra time to work through different stages and decisions together. As will be seen, this is exacerbated by the instinct to 'wait for the right time' rather than pre-empting some of the discussions that will need to take place.

Although there is a wealth of information online, this does not equate to knowledge. Prospective adopters would benefit from access to a neutral source of information that would help them to better navigate the system, with realistic expectations.

OPPORTUNITY: creating more positive conditions for enquiry

Opportunity relates to environmental factors and social influences, both of which have an impact on recruitment for adoption.

There are some concrete environmental barriers to adoption, such as the lack of a spare room, as well as some misconceptions around these, such as concerns that living in a flat or living in rented accommodations would be unacceptable – although myth-busting communication from agencies and Local Authorities continues to address these.

However the environmental factor that was cited most frequently by both the literature and scoping interviews as having an impact on recruitment was the nature of the very first enquiry – because if this is a negative experience, people feel that they will not be given the opportunity to proceed. If the immediate feel of this call is perceived as cold, curt, critical, or overly intrusive, the enquirer will question whether they have what it takes to go forward. This is also a deterrent where prospective adopters come with questions to be answered, but then feel uncomfortable about asking these for fear of being judged and even screened out of the application process. This can lead to a frustrating situation where potential applicants stall because they feel reluctant to ask questions but at the same time are reluctant to move forward without the answers.

We found some examples where agencies felt they had overcome this by providing information online. However, as will be seen from our primary research, online research does not remove the need to talk through questions and issues in a safe, non-judgemental way.

Follow up calls were seen as a positive intervention: action by the agency or Local Authority shifts the power imbalance and makes prospective adopters feel valued and wanted.

It should be noted that fear of judgement can be particularly acute for prospective adopters who feel that they do not 'fit the mould'. In some of our scoping interviews it was acknowledged that society has moved on, but that people working for agencies or Local Authorities may not yet have the necessary cultural awareness to treat every applicant without judgement or making any assumptions.

This dynamic reinforces the need for a 'safe' point of enquiry, where people feel welcome, and feel comfortable to ask questions without judgement, and without risk of any prejudice.

Turning to social influences, word of mouth and first hand testimonies are an important source of information for prospective adopters. Awareness of positive experiences of adoption are inspiring and reassuring for prospective adopters, and for their network of family and friends, who have an important role to play in endorsing and supporting their decision to adopt.

Our scoping interviews emphasised the importance of providing these testimonies for prospective adopters, including giving applicants access to current adopters as mentors and advisors as well as testimonials. Further examples of best practice included providing training for the family and friends of applicants, to encourage their support and increase their knowledge of what adoption entails and what they can do to help. This is particularly important for friends or family who feel uncomfortable with the unconventionality of adoption.

While these positive first hand testimonies are very powerful, they are competing with a whole raft of 'horror stories', especially online. Both the literature and our scoping interviews raised concerns at the level of scaremongering, particularly given how much this can be amplified online.

It would be beneficial for prospective adopters to have access to a robust bank of online resources that can share accessible testimonies and contextualise challenges and solutions without scaremongering. These could include the perspectives of extended families and support networks as well as adoptive parents, reflecting the value of their support and encouragement, and providing a tool to open up conversations.

MOTIVATION: boosting belief in capabilities

Prospective adopters come with a number of anxieties about both the process for adoption and what it would be like to be an adoptive parent. Many have a strong fear of rejection – and where infertility is already perceived as a failure, fear of failing again makes this particularly heartfelt. Stereotypes around the perfect or typical adoptive family can also create fears of rejection – although myth-busting efforts have made progress in challenging the stereotype of 'a white middle class family with a nice house and car', we heard in our interviews that there was still work to be done here. And even without the perception of a stereotype to live up to, many feel unsure if they will be wanted. Some

same sex couples or single adopters can feel a particular sense of disentitlement – although in fact they may be better placed to cope with pursuing a path that is not the 'normal' route to parenthood, if they already see themselves as a 'different' kind of parent.

Given these anxiety levels, views on best practice for recruitment often centred on the importance of nurturing prospective applicants. In fact, the ability to work effectively with candidates was often seen as more critical to successful recruitment than any marketing materials. Being able to identify and cultivate the potential of new applicants – particularly those who had been unsuccessful elsewhere – was seen as a strength of effective agencies, who make it clear that they will work with potential and do not expect anyone to be the finished article. There are also prospective adopters who come forward with particularly high anxiety levels from fear of making a disclosure. In these cases a nurturing approach will be extremely valuable if they can be encouraged to reframe difficulties in their past as experiences that could equip them to help a child.

Again, providing a 'safe space' to ask questions and voice concerns would help to address the anxieties that hold some people back. Communicating expectations around potential would also be valuable to dispel myths around perfection and the feelings of inadequacy that these create. Recruitment materials could strengthen prospective adopters' belief in their capabilities by making it clear that they do not need to be the finished article when they come forward, and that the intention is for them to be supported and nurtured.

Learning on fuel and friction for fostering

CAPABILITY: raising the profile of fostering and what it can entail

As with adoption, there is work to be done to increase people's knowledge about fostering – in particular, what the different types of fostering are and what they entail. Our scoping interviews highlighted the challenge of raising the profile of fostering when it often seems to be absent from our national consciousness, meaning that the valuable work that foster carers do is often overlooked.

There are other specific knowledge gaps or misconceptions that were felt to hold people back from applying or affect their progress. Potential foster carers sometimes come forward motivated to foster a child of a specific faith or cultural background. This tends to be either because they feel best suited to care for children sharing their own background, or because they respond to the need to place these children. In these cases, given the need for flexibility to accommodate the children who need placing locally, rigidity in their preferences or a lack of confidence in taking on children of different faiths and backgrounds can create a barrier. There may be a communication gap here, exacerbated by a lack of cultural awareness, if agencies or Local Authorities handling enquiries do not explain that a child's faith or background may not be the most important factor in their

placement, help prospective applicants understand why flexibility is needed, and assume that the enquirer will be inflexible on this without it exploring it further with them.

A lack of awareness about the role of the foster carer, and the opportunity for training and support, was also seen as a knowledge gap that could affect prospective applicants coming forward.

This picture reinforces the importance of a central source of information, for example Fosterline, that can shed light on different issues in a non-judgemental way, helping people explore options they might not have considered (such as taking on a child from a different faith or background) and understand practical requirements. As with adoption, prospective foster carers considering making an application would benefit from having more knowledge around what is expected of them, but also around what support they will receive, something that could encourage and reassure potential applicants.

OPPORTUNITY: expanding and embedding understanding of fostering

Environmental factors are often top of mind in discussion of barriers to fostering given the need for a spare room. Our scoping interviews raised a number of grey areas relating to the requirement for a spare room. As efforts to engage more prospective foster carers from different cultural backgrounds pay off, there is more interest from families where siblings sharing rooms is the norm – which means that while there might be a spare room, the ratio of children at home to bedrooms does not then meet requirements. Empty nesters may have less confidence that their spare room will remain available given the increase in 'boomerang kids' returning home in their twenties.

The same dynamic was raised with regard to work. In our scoping interviews, it was felt that applying more discretion to allow some foster carers to continue working (for example, from home or during school hours, always around the needs of the child) would help to create the conditions for more people to consider fostering.

While these frictions are likely to remain, our scoping interviews raised the question of whether applicants who did not meet the requirements at that point in time could be still be nurtured – either 'kept warm' until circumstances change, or given the opportunity to support foster care in a different way, such as mentoring or respite care.

As with adoption, an additional environmental factor that affects prospective foster carers is the feel of their first enquiry, as a negative experience makes people feel that they won't be given the opportunity to move forward in the process. A cold, impersonal or critical call can have a particularly negative impact if it raises questions about what it would be like to deal with 'the system' in future interactions as a foster carer.

As with adoption, it is important that prospective foster carers can make enquiries and feel comfortable to ask questions without judgement, and without risk of any prejudice.

Regarding social influences, our scoping interviews emphasised the importance of having family and friends who are supportive of the choice to foster. Word of mouth was often cited as an important driver of enquiries, with the perception that most people who come forward know, or know of, other foster carers. Nevertheless for society at large fostering can seem like an unconventional choice, and this can be a barrier – for example when grown up children question an empty nester parent's interest in fostering. Longer term any communication or activity that helps to normalise fostering would be valuable. In our scoping interviews it was hypothesised that a renewed emphasis on sustainability and living locally might contribute to this, as people look more closely at the role they could play in their local community.

MOTIVATION: acknowledging anxieties and promoting support

We have mentioned that some prospective adopters feel discouraged because they have an ideal of the perfect parent and don't believe they will live up to this. Our scoping interviews suggest that this deterrent is less pronounced for foster carers, although occasionally the media portrays foster carers as giving up their lives to look after a huge number of children, which is an image that many feel they can't – or wouldn't want to – live up to. However both the literature review and the scoping interviews emphasised the altruistic nature of foster carers, and that the money earned is not a trigger. Typically foster carers are invested in societal issues, often already active in their community, and attracted by the idea of being part of a collective of people doing something worthwhile. In our scoping interviews there was praise for agencies and Local Authorities who formalise this sense of community, by creating networks of peers, mentors or buddies for foster carers as well as wider support networks of 'foster friends' or 'foster grandparents'.

Our scoping interviews also emphasised that however strong the desire to make a difference, prospective foster carers have to overcome anxieties about being pushed out of their comfort zone. They may feel nervous about dealing with aspects of childhood trauma, particularly sexualised behaviour or self-harm, and particularly if they have their own children. They may feel equipped to deal with younger children but not teenagers, or feel uncertain about looking after a child who has a different cultural background or faith. Anxieties are intensified where people feel uncomfortable about voicing them, in case they come across as inflexible or unsuitable.

Some prospective foster carers have particular concerns about fear of disclosing an aspect of their past, often based on misconceptions around what is acceptable and what is required. Our scoping interviews pointed out that effective agencies and Local Authorities work with people to reassure them on this, and moreover to encourage prospective foster carers to reframe any difficulties in their past as experiences that could equip them to understand and help children who have had their own difficulties.

As with adoption, this element of nurturing is an important part of developing quality applicants, and identifying prospective foster carers who, with support, have potential to take on more complex cases.

Again, this reinforces the importance of providing a 'safe space' to ask questions, voice concerns and work through issues. Conveying the intention to nurture and develop applicants would also help to provide reassurance that there is support available to help prospective carers to consider what they could take on and to feel more confident about their capabilities.

How do people perceive fostering and adoption?

This chapter will explore how people thought and felt about fostering and adoption; what considerations were front of mind when evaluating these opportunities, and what kind of information they received and sought out. These factors are important as they often set the stage for prospective applicants' decision to start the application process, along with attitudes to the care system and assessment stage, which will be explored in the next chapter (p. 32).

Understanding fostering and adoption

Fostering and adoption often overlapped in people's minds

While fostering and adoption are commonly treated as distinct when it comes to policy and practice, lines between the two appeared to be blurred for many respondents, who often saw them as 'two sides of the same coin'. Some, particularly among those who had not started gathering information, conflated the two and could be unsure on how the options differed in practice and which would be best suited for them. For example, **Neil (35-44)**, an art dealer intrigued by the idea of adopting, kept referring to his sister's experience of fostering when explaining what adoption meant and what he thought it would be like.

> "I have always thought about adoption, I'm quite socially aware and I know that children need help. I want to be part of the solution. I have looked into fostering and adoption. A child [in need] is a child, whatever umbrella they are under." Theresa, 45-54, Considering adoption

> "I think fostering can be a gateway to adoption and the other way around." Jack, 25-34, Considering adoption

Both fostering and adoption were associated with family, supporting a child in need, and giving them a safe home and a better future.

> "[Association with family, because children] do come into your family. You shouldn't be a foster carer if you don't want them to come into your family." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

> "Fostering is about encouraging children to thrive. It's about giving child a sense of belonging, and a home environment, because children might come from a children's home where they don't have this." Patricia, 55-64, Considering fostering

> "Adoption is about children and family. And I think fostering would be the same for us." Jack, 25-34, Considering adoption

In both cases, respondents were conscious that children in care have usually undergone significant trauma in their short lives and often felt apprehension about their ability to

manage that, foreseeing that hard work would be inevitable. However, this prospect was accompanied by a sense of reward and fulfilment.

> "It scares me, these children are coming from so called broken homes […] Dysfunctional families and then you're going to bring that into your home." Jessica, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "You'll never know what you're going to get, each child is different, and until they're really integrated into your home, you're not going to know how they really are." Srishti, 35-44, Considering adoption

> "I feel like actually I would love [having a family through fostering or adoption]. I would find it rewarding." Curtis, 35-44, Interested in fostering

> "You need to give [children] love, safety and support. You need to be aware of what the child needs, and know how to understand them, and reassure them, and create a safe space, whether you're fostering or adopting." Carol, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

> "You know you won't get a 'perfect kid' with no problems; they have a background. They've been in care and might have been abused. They have baggage and that might show in their behaviour later on." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

Perceptions of the qualities of good adoptive parents and foster carers also overlapped for respondents, and included openness to learning, adaptability, empathy, and a predisposition to love and level with children. These perceptions matched characteristics that were cited in our scoping interviews as being important, including altruism and resilience, which, although rarely explicitly mentioned by respondents, were traits frequently alluded to.

> "[To foster] you need to be compassionate, caring, non-judgemental. Someone who can take it day by day and not be fazed by what comes up." Anna, 35-44, Considering fostering

> "It's ultimately about not giving up, being able to see from a rational perspective even when things are difficult, and being able to see the long term goal despite the journey setbacks which could be fairly difficult" Sophie, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "It has to be someone that wants to do it, that has an interest, because they want to help and give back. You need to have a genuine love for kids and want to see them do well in life." Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "[To adopt] you need to have an open heart and also strength of character, as it can be testing. I'd say you need patience, tolerance, empathy and understanding. The children will be fragile in some way, they will test you and push boundaries and they might disrespect you. But you need to understand that they are trying to find their safe place. It's no fault of their own but there has been a breakdown. [People who adopt] need to step up and make sure they can heal them." Theresa, 45-54, Considering adoption

While some associated certain demographic and lifestyle characteristics with the decision to foster or adopt, these tended to be quite superficial and not seen as indicative of quality. For instance, some thought it was usually older people who foster because of their flexible routine, and many felt financially stable couples unable to have children would be most likely candidates for adoption. However, while there was a sense that more inclusivity would be beneficial in recruitment materials, and some were concerned about the impact of fostering or adopting on their lifestyle, as will be explained, it should be noted that these factors were not associated with people being better parents or carers.

Given these overlaps, the two main elements setting fostering and adoption apart were length and the perceived intensity of the commitment

There was a consensus among respondents on the fact that fostering is by nature temporary and defined by the child going back to their biological or adoptive family after a period of time. On the other hand, adoption was seen as permanent and associated with greater stability.

> "I don't see much difference between fostering and adoption. Just one is more temporary." Theresa, 45-54, Considering adoption

> "In my head adoption is more permanent than fostering. The permanency of it is the key for us in choosing what route we're going down." Amy, 25-34, Considering adoption

This had implications for the level of commitment and preparation that respondents associated with each option. Many felt that adoption would require a 'full on' commitment from the very beginning, while fostering could allow for time to evaluate their ability to parent because of the limited time window.

In fact, a few respondents thought of fostering as a 'trial run' for adoption, reinforcing them as a continuum. For instance, **Jessica (25-34)** saw fostering very much as a 'stepping stone' to adoption. Helping children in need was one of the tenets of her religious faith. However she thought that "you build up your love for a child then I imagine they go" and would be looking to adopt the child after "testing the waters and seeing if it's right for me and the family." Similarly, **Sophie (25-34)** was researching fostering, and anticipated that she would start as a short term foster carer. She saw that as less of a commitment compared to long term fostering or adoption, which would allow her to test her skills and see how she "can help people but still be able to maintain a healthy family ourselves.".

> "For me [fostering and adoption] are exactly the same thing bar the length of time. They have the same underlying principles. Although it's kind of common sense that one is for life and one is for Christmas in a manner of speaking." Daniel, 45-54, Enquired about adoption

> "With fostering love would grow, with adoption you throw yourself in the deep end." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

"I try my shoes on in the shop before I buy them […] If I fell in love with [the child], I would definitely consider adopting them." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

"I feel like fostering has given me more confidence to really go for adopting. [If it wasn't for her fostering experience] I would be thinking 'oh am I going to have a bond, can I do this or that'." Meriem, 35-44, Fostering and interested in adoption

"[Fostering is] a nice stepping stone before adoption. You see what it's like to have a child in your home." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

Contemplating fostering and adoption

From completing their family to giving back to the community, the reasons respondents had for considering fostering and adoption could also overlap

While the wish to help children in need was certainly a factor in the decision to foster and adopt, neither choice was exclusively altruistic. Both fostering and adoption tapped into desires that ranged from personal or family fulfilment to responding to a sense of duty towards the community.

"We're not foster carers, we're parents, we treat them both the same, there's no distinguishing between them, they both call us dad...." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

Each respondent's reasons appeared to map on a spectrum between inward and outward motivations, showing that there was overlap in motivations across fostering and adoption and that each satisfied a number of needs for people. These are outlined below.

Becoming a parent or adding to the family

Many of those considering adoption saw it as a way to add a child to their family at a time when they were unable, or no longer able, to have children.

"I didn't want to be the stereotypical gay still going up town and trying to drink and trying to get on with kids when 50 and people saying, 'who's that old bastard'. […] We just wanted another person to share our lives, give someone the best life we could." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

This was often a difficult decision, coming at the end of an emotional journey accepting infertility. This was the case for **Amy (25-34)**, who, because of severe health problems after having her first daughter, settled in the idea that she would have to adopt to get the family she always wanted with her husband. **Bill (35-44)** and his wife Frances also came to the conclusion they would adopt after going through two unsuccessful rounds of IVF. Frances realised that they could have the family they wanted without having children themselves when they hosted one of Frances' mum's ex foster children for the holidays:

"We were at the table having a lovely time having dinner and it just made me realise that we can still have a family, I don't have to get pregnant to have a child. It felt right."

> "We wanted a big family, that's one of the main things that brought us together in the end and we couldn't have that as part of our own family. I was always crying, I used to call myself broken. And he 'd be like 'no, if this is all we have we it's amazing, if not we can have children from fostering or adoption and that's our family'. It's been quite hard to mentally take on." Amy, 25-34, Considering adoption

> "We'd always sat at a table for four and there was always an empty chair. We always talked about the empty chair and that one day there'd be someone sitting in that chair. " Bill, 35-44, Adopting and interested in fostering

Fostering could also be a way to fulfil the vision some respondents had to become a parent, since, as explained, many saw fostering as an opportunity to test their skills before committing to adoption. For instance, **Meriem (35-44)** decided to foster to satisfy a need for a 'mummy fix', as she was unable to have children and couldn't do 'mumsy stuff' with her grown step son.

> "Unfortunately I can't have children of my own, so this gives me the ability to parent and be a mother. I needed something more, the nurturing side of me. My husband brought his son up pretty much himself, and they have such a strong bond it's unbelievable, so I knew that I would get his support all the way, it just made it more simple to decide yes we should foster." Meriem, 35-44, Fostering and interested in adoption

Finding personal fulfilment

Fostering in particular was perceived by some as a way to use their professional or parenting ability in a meaningful way or to find a new direction in life after they retired from their full time jobs. For instance **Malia (65+)**, started considering fostering after she retired from a career as a health visitor in order to keep herself busy and put her skills to use.

> "Once I gave up my job and I retired was the time when I felt a bit lost and redundant really, I had time on my hands, and even my daughter said to me 'do something mother, get involved in something'. That was the time when I heard on the radio or was it the television, there was a programme about fostering, and that's when I thought, maybe I could do that" Malia, 65+, Fostered in the past and considering doing it again

> "I'm looking for a new direction now, I've told people at work that fostering will become my priority now, so I'm scaling back at work. I wanted the change, the challenge, a new direction, something new and different." Patricia, 55-64, Considering Fostering

While **Curtis (35-44)**, a parole officer, wanted to foster and test his parenting abilities for a future adoptive child, he also thought his "skills are wasted not being a dad". He felt he could take on teenagers and manage complex needs because of his experience.

When it came to adoption several respondents were motivated by a sense of personal fulfilment, primarily connected with the desire to be parents. For instance, **Neil (35-44)** was not actively researching adoption but saw it as something he would like for himself for the future, as he saw fatherhood as a source of pride.

> "Although you do adopt to help the child, you are adopting for yourself." Toby, 25-34, Adopting

> "I have a lot of love to give and I really wanted to have a family to love. Being in your 40s and being an auntie and a teacher you just feel a bit redundant, because you get to the end of the school year and off they go." Rebecca, 45-54, Adopting

Sense of duty towards children in need

The decision to foster or adopt was for many, at least in part, a selfless one. While some could still envision themselves contributing to their family by fostering or adopting, a few respondents were animated by a desire to give back and help children in need. For instance, **Sophie (25-34)**, always wanted to foster to support her community, and explained that it was part of her religious belief to feel responsible for others. **Daniel (45-54)** felt a similar responsibility because of his faith, but was primarily oriented towards adoption as a way to exercise it. On the other hand **Anna (25-34)** was looking into adoption for "ethical reasons" tied to overpopulation.

> "Our church's religious ethos promotes and encourages seeing ourselves as responsible for others who need our help, even those not in own family or friendship" Sophie, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "Because of my duty and faith and responsibility, for me personally, changing the world is exactly what my faith teaches me to do, go out and repair the world" Daniel, 45-54, Considering adoption

> "I think having three kids is unethical. There's a certain amount of looking after the planet as well." Anna, 25-34, Considering adoption

> "We always had a sense that at some point we would foster or adopt, it was part of our whole ethic, we give back to society." Karen, 35-44, Adopting

> "As a Muslim you're supposed to help those in need, neighbours, especially orphans, the poor and vulnerable in society and children come under that category. I feel it's something I have to do and want to do to help." Jessica, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "With both fostering and adoption there are values of wanting to give back and be generous with your time. A bit selfless in a way because it's not going to be an easy path." Tilly, 35-44, Considering fostering

> "Because we enjoy being able to give a child experiences, we want to do that for another child that in another life might not have been able to have these experiences" Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out from fostering for adoption

Overall, the prospect of being paid to foster was not an incentive, as fostering was seen more as a calling than a career

Financial compensation was not seen as a main driver for applying to become a foster carer. Money as an incentive was seen at odds with the image of caring and family that fostering elicited for many. While they explained they were not surprised that the prospect of a monthly fee could be motivating for other people, they disapproved of money being seen as an incentive.

> "It feels at the moment that because there is a shortage of foster parents, they are recruited by being told they get paid for it, which is not the right motivation to do it." Rachel, 45-54, Applying to foster

> "When you look up fostering online it has a price tag on it, and I think that's wrong. It's for money, lots of people can't be doing it for love. It's quite an eye opener when you're considering [becoming a foster carer] to make a difference." Anna, 45-54, Considering fostering

> "For fostering [ads] put a lot of emphasis on how much money you would earn and I don't like that, it shouldn't be the motivation." Theresa, 45-54, Considering adoption

> "I don't think the money should be publicised, it might attract people for the wrong reasons." Focus group London, Considering adoption

> "We went to an open evening [about fostering] and some of the questions were all about the money, it was disgusting. We went to another one and they said to everyone 'if you're in this for the money then you're in the wrong place' and it was very reassuring." Carol, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

> "I don't think there are many people who do [fostering] for the money. You have to have that element of caring and / or duty." Daniel, 45-54, Considering adoption

Some also found the idea of fostering as a full-time job or career misguided, as they thought the focus should be on caring. In their minds fostering appeared to be more akin to a calling, which deserves status and recognition, but was seen as incompatible with the idea of financial gain.

> "[Career is the] wrong word, so what you're going to get paid, get a promotion? It's not a career when you're raising someone, a career is going to a job and getting a promotion." Peter, 45-54, Considering fostering

> "Soldiers don't go into the army for the money or the luxury, it's because there's a sense of integrity and doing something that matters, that's meaningful and important, and they are overall treated as superior citizens and its' look at these amazing people doing amazing things for our country, they get discounts and get on planes first […] The non-professionalism of it is quite tricky, not having contracts or paid holidays or any of that, that doesn't help the perception that you matter and that the job matters." Karen, 35-44, Adopting

However, this resistance to engaging in the finances of fostering can be a barrier. Some of those open to fostering felt they were not financially stable enough to take on the commitment and others, like **Rachael (45-54)** and **Patricia (55-64)** felt they could foster at the time of the interview because they had reached financial stability and could reduce hours at work. If reframed, financial contributions could represent a **significant enabler** with the potential to be used to support and direct prospective applicants towards the fostering option best suited to their circumstances.

A more constructive engagement with the finances of fostering could also help some who are unsure whether to foster or adopt. For example, **Theresa (45-54)** was recruited as considering adoption but through discussion it became apparent that she was also interested in fostering. One of her main concerns about adoption was whether she was stable enough financially to be accepted. In weighing up both options, she did not take into consideration the fact that fostering would give her an income.

Similarly many in the Birmingham focus group (with **respondents interested in fostering**) also did not feel stable enough financially to formalise their interest by applying. They did not seem to realise that monthly fees could relieve some of their concerns, possibly bringing them closer to being able to foster.

> "Of course the finances are a factor. I'd have to think about that and if fostering took off for us that would make a difference." Anna, 34-45, Considering fostering

Concerns about their ability to manage children's complex needs were also top of mind when respondents considered fostering or adoption

Several of the worries playing on people's mind when considering fostering or adoption were also shared across the two. Many respondents questioned whether they would be emotionally resilient and skilled enough to deal with the reality of fostering and adopting, from enduring the assessment process (which will be explored further in the next chapter, p. 32) to dealing with children's likely trauma and consequent behavioural issues.

For this reason, many worried about 'being the right fit' and living up to an ideal of what a good foster carer and adoptive carer should be or act like. For example, **Bethany**'s partner **(55-64)** was unsure about fostering as he was not confident in his skills. He was particularly worried about taking on a teenager and "the house being trashed and stuff like that."

> "You wonder what damage there will be to be fixed, and can you fix it?" Focus group Manchester, Open to adoption in the future

> "He was a bit dubious at first he wanted to do it but it was 'what can I bring to it' and it did become 'yeah, I can do it'...he had more skills than he thought. […] He didn't think he could bring anything." Bethany, 55-64, Dropped out of fostering

"We realised that 99% of children [waiting to be adopted] have experienced some form of neglect, abuse, some form of maltreatment. I thought there would be a decent number who hadn't. But you're not going to get an undamaged child." Jack, 25-34, Considering adoption

"You have to think what you can cope with, be honest with yourself. Some things are very difficult… we said, no way [to taking on children with some behaviours]. You need to understand that there will be challenges, these children have been through some form of trauma." Carol, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

"[I worry] about being the right fit, how [adoption the assessment process] will affect our daughter and our emotional impact as well." Amy, 25-34, Considering adoption

Respondents who already had children could also worry about the impact that bringing a new child into the family would have. In particular, welcoming teenagers was a common concern. This was shared by single prospective applicants as well, not only because of behavioural issues, but also as they were unsure they would be able to form a bond with an older child. For instance **Rita (25-34)** wouldn't want to foster a child too close to her in age. Because she lived alone she was concerned a teenager would not follow her rules and respect her. She also felt teenagers are already "stuck in their ways", and would not listen.

"With a younger child, you can develop them more easily and get them to work with you, whereas a teenager comes already with own mindset and morals, it's more difficult to change them." Patricia, 55-64, Considering fostering

It's daunting, more so than having one of your own child. I would feel less pressure having my own than being given' someone else's child. I know the negative effect you can have on a child by their upbringing and wouldn't want to be responsible for that for a child that's already been taken from a bad situation." Sally, 25-34, Considering adoption

Some of the concerns however were **more prevalent for fostering**. For instance, some worried about the impact a child might have on their family life or freedom. This tended to be those fostering for inward reasons, who seemed to be less compromising about disruption caused to their lives.

"What is the impact on your family, that's the important thing, you don't want a child to come in and mess up your flow." Meriem, 35-44, Fostering and considering adoption

"It could be great for our son, seeing kids who are worse off than him. But it could be the wrong thing to do at the moment. I just don't know." Anna, 34-45, Considering fostering

"If we're not having [our own] kid, we don't want the whole rest of our lives to be about another kid. If there's a chance to help whilst also keeping a little bit of freedom." Tilly, 35-44, Considering fostering

Others worried about attaching themselves to a child they would have to let go. For those aware of different types of fostering, this was often the factor determining a choice between short and longer term. For instance, **Meriem (35-44)** had been fostering a

teenager for seven months and saw them staying with her until the age of 18. She had made the conscious decision to foster long term, as she would be too sad to see her foster child leave after forming a bond.

> "I could never do long term, I would be heartbroken when they have to leave." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

> "Being able to let go of the rope, of the relationship at some point, whether that's at the end of the weekend or the end of three years when you've invested a lot into it, that would be quite a wrench." Daniel, 45-54, Considering adoption

Finally, some worried about what would be deemed appropriate behaviour with the child and about the risk of some kind of reputational damage. For example, **Malia (65+)** explained that hearing about the experience of a foster carer losing his job and home as a result of an allegation a 14 year old made against him made her feel less sure she would be the right fit to foster. She was concerned she would not get support from social workers in such an instance, and about her integrity being damaged.

> "Note taking is important as foster carer because foster children can tell fibs, make allegations which would impair your reputation. I couldn't have this happen to me because of the work I do." Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "I know [compared to parenting, fostering] would be completely different, because [there are things] you couldn't do. Would I be able to hug them still? People are so funny about things these days. Am I allowed to cuddle them, say I love them? Could you treat them like your own blood? The last think I want is to be accused." Peter, 45-54, Considering fostering

Finally, some were also concerned about having to leave their job, primarily because of the loss of income, but also because work was seen as a source of satisfaction for many. For example**, Anna (25-34)** was open to both fostering and adoption. Because of her work with foster children in secondary school she knew she would not be able to be a "normal working mum" if she fostered and having to give up work and lose her remuneration worried her. **Rita (25-34)** also did not want to sacrifice her job to foster. She also felt that "in the modern day, we shouldn't expect women to not work in order to parent" as work is necessary to make a livelihood, which is also a lesson she would like to impart to her foster child.

> "It's sort of like a dig to say you're working so you can't help no one. They could make the rules a little bit flexible to involve more people to doing it." Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

Other concerns were **unique to adoption.** While they often felt secure in their decision to adopt, often after having discussed it at length with those closest to them, some worried about having acceptance from their family and society as they described some negative misconceptions lingering about adoption.

> "I would be worried about my family accepting them. I could be sure, but what if they are not supportive?" Focus group Manchester, Open to adoption in the future

> "Most of our friends and family get it. But we have had a few odd comments from grandparents. It's not from malice, just misconceptions. Adoption is a bit of a fringe option, so it feels like it's a bit taboo." Jack, 25-34, Considering adoption

Because of the permanency of adoption, some also worried about the matching process. There was a wide spread expectation about being able to connect and form a bond with the new member of the family, and many worried about the child not being the 'right match' or fitting in. These concerns were often combined with a lack of understanding of what to expect and what support would be available after the child was placed.

> [Not being able to get a girl] was a bit of a barrier in my head. What if we don't get what we want? […] I worried I might not connect with the child." Bill, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

Matching was sometimes a key concern for respondents of practicing faith who could feel strongly about a child of the same religion or background while being uncertain about how matching would work in their case. For instance **Jessica (25-34),** who was considering fostering hoping it would ultimately turn into adoption, wondered how Muslim children would be matched and what choice would carers or parents have.

Previous experiences, whether personal or professional, boosted respondents' confidence in their abilities to parent children in care

Respondents with parenting experience or working with children with complex needs tended to feel more confident in their abilities to take on challenging cases.

Sophie (25-34) worked with teenagers at her school so she felt she would prefer to foster an older child. Like others she drew her confidence from her professional experience. However, her husband thought they would be better with a younger child, as they had experience parenting their own young children.

> "I have always worked with teenagers so they're the group I'm better with, or more experienced with. Teaching gives you communication skills definitely." Sophie, 25-34, Considering fostering

Peter (45-54) also felt well equipped to foster as he successfully raised his daughter, while also being exposed to a close friends' fostering experience.

> "I did a good job as a parent; my daughter is great. […] You don't need money, as long as they're out and they're with you and you're showing them love and you're they're for them that's it. You just need to give them love and structure" Peter, 45-54, Considering fostering

Srishti (35-44) worked in a hospital and regularly interacted with foster carers coming in with their children. Foster carers often told her that children act more positively around her, which made her feel more confident she would be able to build a positive relationship with a child quite quickly.

"I think I have an ability to make children feel ok and to communicate with them. They come in quite scared, I work in a hospital. I think maybe there is something that I could do that would make it okay." Srishti, 35-44, Considering adoption

Jack (25-34) explained how his experience with his brother's severe autism and his partner's work with children with special needs eased their concerns about adopting children with complex needs or learning difficulties.

"We already considered adopting a child with special needs or learning difficulties. It's less of a leap for us. My brother has severe autism and her job is with children with special needs. So it's in our comfort zone." Jack, 25-34, Considering adoption

Those who went on to foster and adopt confirmed their learning curve and that they had developed their skills and confidence 'on the job'.

"At the time, you don't have the skills and the resources and the mindset and everything else that you actually do need for that child, but you get them as you go along." Karen, 35-44, Adopting

Influences and information gathering

Respondents' initial perceptions developed over time, but were disproportionately influenced by 'horror stories' in the media portraying fostering and adoption in a negative light

Among respondents with limited experience of fostering or adoption, many struggled to pinpoint exactly where their initial perceptions had come from. However, television and the media were often identified as key sources of information, with 'horror stories' in the news being top of mind for many.

Stories of disruptive behaviour, false allegations and a lack of information and support from services picked up through these channels all painted a negative picture of the fostering and adoption experience and could negatively influence people's views. For instance, **Jessica (25-34)** had heard many "scare stories" in the media which fed into her fear that she wouldn't be able to cope with the challenging behaviour of a foster child. Jessica took pride in being a good mother for her two children and felt that she would be disappointed if her fears came true: "If I didn't have the ability to do that with a child it would affect my identity I imagine, I'd feel really, really down."

"You hear about adoption from the media: Tracey Beaker, horror stories. You never hear of the positives." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

"We didn't want to hear the horror stories, it's like Googling your symptoms, you've got a headache and next week you'll be dying of a brain tumour." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

Those who were directly exposed to the everyday of fostering or adoption through people they knew tended to have a more balanced and positive view

When individuals had personal experience of fostering or adoption, through family or friends who had adopted or were involved in the process, they tended to base their perceptions on real life experiences and pay less attention to the media and horror stories. People who knew others who fostered or adopted were able to gather a more balanced view of daily life with a foster or adoptive child and witness the positive and rewarding moments alongside the challenges. They were able to see others 'like them overcoming difficulties and managing challenging behaviour which helped build self-confidence and belief in their capabilities. Many had personally followed the development of a looked after child and found it inspiring to see how rewarding fostering or adopting could be for both the child and adult. For example, **Rita (25-34)** used to be a key contact for her aunt who fostered and saw the positive experiences and the challenges first-hand. This gave her a realistic vision of what to expect from the experience making her feel more prepared and positive.

> "I know sometimes they will come at you with a fork and you need to be firm: 'no, put it down'. But it's not always like that. You can have little angels and you don't want them to go." Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

Rachel (45-54) had a colleague who fostered a child long term. Seeing her friend lead a normal life whilst making such a difference to the child made her realise that anyone, including herself, could do it.

> "She's a single woman on her own, with two dogs, she runs her own business. She got cancer last year and went through treatment, and even then she carried on with it, so she was an inspiration. She shared with me the progress he had in his life. He's done really well with his education, and she's helped him with that. And she still goes out and sees her friends, she still has a life with it." Rachel, 45-54, Applying to foster

Daniel's (45-54) daughter's best friend was adopted and seeing the positive impact this had on her life strengthened his belief that adoption would be a rewarding and worthwhile way to channel his desire to help.

> "We see each week at ballet, Sarah and Jess together, we see what a child looked after can achieve, or what can be done for them. We get to see weekly what a difference grown-ups can make and it's inspiring." Daniel, 45-54, Considering adoption

Close friends and family had a strong influence in triggering the decision to foster or adopt and in encouraging people to feel they could do it

Many had been considering fostering or adoption for some time. For some, it was an idea lingering in the back of their mind, strongly formed enough to come to the forefront on seeing an advert on a billboard or bus side. Others were putting it off, often due to uncertainty, a lack of confidence or a feeling that now wasn't the 'right time' to apply. For

these people, family and close friends were a key source of motivation and encouragement to make an enquiry.

Rebecca (45-54) really wanted a child but was unsure whether she would be able to adopt as a single mum and doubted her ability to go through it alone. However, her sister had recently adopted and convinced Rebecca she should apply. **Patricia (55-64)** felt ready to try something new after her daughter moved out and she reduced her hours at work. She had some concerns about her ability to cope, but her brother, who had two adopted children made her feel more confident to go forward.

> "My brother and sister saying I should do it boosts my confidence, they see it in me that I can do something like that." Patricia, 55-64, Considering fostering

> "When my friend [who's fostering] told me 'you would be good at it' it made me feel good about it." Peter, 45-54, Considering fostering

People had very different approaches to information gathering and while some wanted answers to every question, others were far less methodical

When it came to finding factual information about fostering and adoption, respondents tended to have different mindsets. For some it was important to gather as much information as possible, as this helped them feel prepared and reduced the chances of encountering any surprises along the way. These people sought to gather information from multiple sources, such as websites, online forums and blogs and were eager to hear about the challenges as well as the successes. For example, **Sophie (25-34)** had been thinking about fostering for several years. Whenever she heard about an agency that people said was good, she would look them up online. She also went on an 8-week course with a charity at her church to learn more about fostering. However at the time of the interview she still felt tentative about making an enquiry.

> "I was forcing myself to read the hard stories, other people who were struggling and the advice they were being given." Olivia, 35-44, Adopting

This approach could act as a barrier for some as it prevented them from feeling able to take the next step until their every information need was satisfied. Some recognised this and realised it might not be possible to feel fully prepared for having a child, which would be a huge life change, regardless of how much information they found. For example, **Sally (25-34)** had begun to think about starting a family with her wife. She was hesitant to enquire about adoption as she wasn't sure whether now was the right time. As she was talking through her feelings around this in her interview she eventually admitted that no amount of information gathering would ever make her feel fully prepared.

> "You're always going to waiting for the right time but sometimes you just have to make it work, or you're going to be waiting forever. There's always going to be something." Sally, 25-34, Considering adoption

Similarly **Amy (25-34)** was researching adoption but had several concerns and preconceptions about the process and what to expect that she could not dispel. Despite her research she was unsure that she had found all there was to know – but she also recognised that she might never find all the answers she wanted and just needed to make an enquiry to 'get on with it'.

> "I'm not really sure what the process is. I've got this misconception that it's going to be this big, massive thing, really horrible and lengthy but actually I'm unsure what to expect. I need to get out of this headspace and actually make the call" Amy, 25-34, Considering adoption

Others were more relaxed or sporadic in the way they gathered information, and some had done very little research before making an initial enquiry. For some, this meant they ran the risk of entering the process slightly naïve of what to expect and before they were fully prepared. This could potentially lead to them being rejected or dropping out. For example, **Victoria (35-44)** and her partner had discussed adoption vaguely in the past. They heard an advert on TV which triggered them to call up that day. They found themselves thrown into the application process and quickly became overwhelmed with the amount expected of them. They chose to pause the process until they felt slightly more prepared.

However, for others this attitude was reflective of their optimistic outlook and belief that everything would ultimately turn out for the best. They were aware there would be challenges along the way but felt positive that they would be able to overcome them. For example, **Peter (45-54)** had done some research into fostering but explained that this was not the way he approached life choices: "I don't really think ahead too much, I don't think you can. I just go forward, I'm not one to plan, whatever will be will be."

> "I know there's probably going to be tough times and some of the kids might be challenging, but I'd just be up for trying" Tilly, 35-44, Considering fostering

Whilst both types of people can represent a quality lead for both adoption and fostering, they appear to have different needs. The former need support not to get stuck waiting for the perfect time to enquire, while it is important that the latter are given the necessary information to best prepare them for the application and assessment process. We will explore these differences further in Chapter 6 (p. 39).

Regardless of approach, information on fostering and adoption found online can be fragmented and hard to navigate

Those at the researching stage usually went online as a first step to find out more information. The multitude of websites and sources available could be overwhelming, with many finding it difficult to navigate and understand where to go for the most relevant and reputable information. This could be a friction for those who felt the need to feel fully informed before progressing to an application. It could also be a friction for those who were disinclined to do much research, as they could lack focus and be easily distracted by

disparate information. For example, **Victoria (35-44),** found researching online difficult and would have preferred a tailored information package that answered the questions most relevant to her.

> "If you're looking at a website you never read it you just look at little bits, dip in and out, filter it, and you never know if you're looking at the right bit." Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

> "Some of the websites don't give much information. There's a lot of hearsay." Carol, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

People wanted to see information presented in a variety of ways

Some wanted to see more facts and figures, for example around levels of need, to help them decide which option was best for them.

> "We need to get a full picture of everything, we're quite fact driven, we want to know how many children go back to the parents [in fostering for adoption]. We did actually find a report online with statistics, like the percentage of children that have gone into care, and into concurrency. That's what we want, a visual report of what the situation was like in Lancashire." Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

> "I would like to know what the need is in my area. It would feel differently knowing that these children need help at my doorstep." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

Many preferred case studies and real-life stories to build a picture of what the experience would really be like. It was important that these case studies reflected 'people like me', with those currently found online often felt to lack authenticity and relatability.

> "It would be really good to see some case studies. Real life case studies of what it's like to be a foster parent. I want to know what the challenges are, what a really shitty day looks like as a foster parent. It's a real shame that don't get put in touch with foster carers before you consider it, so you can have a chat with them about what it's like. The social worker is useful to talk to but she's always going to be positive about it because she wants to place the child, she doesn't have a foster child waking her up at 3am, screaming for mum and dad." Rachel, 45-54, Applying to foster

> "It's always useful to hear stories of people who have done it, because I can see that person is just like me, is my age, and if they're doing it at my age I could have a go at doing it myself." Patricia, 55-64, Considering fostering

"It is good to get written info off them but you kind of want someone to know you and reassure you that you could do it, and you can only do that if they meet you. I found the Council website was so hard to navigate, I couldn't find any info about it at all. I had to call a number but I didn't really want to speak to someone about it at the LA. They won't tell you about the experience, just about process and procedures." Sophie, 25-34, Considering fostering

Having the right type of information available has the potential to make people feel prepared and well informed before entering the process.

Implications for increasing quality leads

- Messages should capitalise on the fact that fostering and adoption are not distinct in people's minds, **presenting options** and where relevant **supporting all potential leads to choose** the route that works best for them;

- Fostering fees should be presented as an enabler and used as appropriate to he**lp prospective applicants find the option** best suited to their circumstances;

- Prospective applicants should be provided with **accessible and relatable information** to boost confidence in their ability to foster / adopt. This should be a mix of **facts and believable real life stories;**

- **Building experience** and **ongoing support** will be key in helping foster carers / adoptive parents take on increasingly challenging cases.

What role do attitudes about the system play in the decision to foster and adopt?

This chapter will explore respondents' awareness of and beliefs about the care system and assessment stage, as these could also play a significant role in the decision to foster or adopt. By care system, we mean the organisation of institutions (e.g. local authorities and independent agencies), social workers and processes to assess prospective carers and parents and place children in foster care or their permanent adoptive homes. In Chapter 3 we analysed fuel and friction in the system based on the perceptions of those who work in it – here we look at the system through the eyes of people who may be encountering it for the first time.

Judging the system

As touched upon in the previous chapter, when weighing the decision to foster or adopt, some of the challenges and concerns that people identified related to the care system and assessment stage. A range of preconceptions could undermine people's belief in their suitability to foster or adopt, and prevent them from acting on their inclination to apply. While some of these could apply to either fostering or adoption, others generally referred to both, albeit with different connotations.

Entering a chaotic system

When thinking of fostering, many had doubts about the state of the system and its ability to support them in times of difficulty. In particular, there was a concern about dealing with children who might have learnt to 'play the system' and be used to getting their way over the years. They worried about not being able to cope with children's needs and demands, as some imagined this would cause a significant disruption to their lives.

> "I would not take on a British kid, even if they're Muslim, because of the amount of disruption they'd create, they know they system already, they've been in care and I spoke to another lady who took on Muslim kids, British and she had to end the placement." Meriem, 35-44, Fostering and interested in adoption

For adoption, as explained, there were worries about agencies' abilities to accurately match children and parents and about the levels of support they would receive once adoption was finalised. Many lacked knowledge about how matching works and wondered whether they (or the child) would get any choice and have the option to refuse.

> "The people I know who have fostered have done it through agencies and they seem to get more support for the child and parent [than with adoption]." Srishti, 35-44, Considering adoption

> "Matching is a bit hit and miss, it depends on the borough. [His sister] was left to get on with it. You're being judged, it's a lot of pressure." Neil, 35-44, Interested in adoption

Social workers' involvement

A few respondents had negative associations with social services being in touch or visiting their family   because of a certain stigma associated with their involvement. For example, when **Rachel (45-54)** was first told that she had been 'assigned a social worker' her heart sank. She thought that other people would associate social workers with troubled families and felt that the person coming to see her family about fostering should have a different title to remove that stigma.

> "When you think social services the image is them taking away kids, dealing with negative situation. […] I was sitting on a train and he rang and I said, 'remember we've got a social worker coming 'round tonight', and this woman gave me the dirtiest look and she was talking to her friend, like what's he done?, he's got a social worker." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

> "When it's your child, you just get on with it, but with adoption… Are people going to be watching me and checking up on me?" Sally, 25-34, Considering adoption

For fostering some questioned whether as a foster carer they would really be valued or considered part of the team by social workers, particularly if their interactions with social workers had left them feeling discouraged. For instance **Karen (35-44)**, who ended up adopting her child through a fostering to adopt scheme, felt that while she was fostering, she was not valued or consulted for her contribution. **Malia (65+)** felt similarly and based on her experience "caring for the children is an absolute joy, the only time we get problems is when a social worker gets involved."

> "It's very disempowering as a foster parent, your views don't really get taken into consideration, there's that professional and then there's you" Karen, 35-44, Adopting

> "I think the biggest thing I found with social services is be honest with the foster carer. They didn't include us as part of their team. You think you will be included but you're not, in any of the decisions. They bypass you. They make decisions and come and tell you. The whole thing is absolutely ridiculous […] and the assessment: some of it is hair raising, but you know you have to go through." Malia, 65+, Fostered and considering doing it again

Fears about the assessment process

Prospective adoptive parents tended to worry most about the demanding assessment process, particularly fearing its scrutiny and invasiveness. Those at early consideration stages imagined it would be gruelling, and those who had been through it felt it might be designed to deter applicants.

> "You're almost fearing you're being tripped up all the whole time." Bill, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

"Any agency that's looking for someone needs to do stringent checks…. But I feel you are judged on any previous mistakes you have made and I don't agree with that. You could have had traumatic experiences that may be sad or harrowing but that doesn't make you a bad person…. I did apply 20 years ago and the social worker came 'round and gave me all the worst case scenarios. I felt a bit battered by it all, the whole approach seemed very negative." Theresa, 45-54, Considering adoption

"You have to be sure of what you're doing. You'll get knocked down so much, you'll have a complete stranger coming to your house and judging every aspect of your life. […] It was a terrible experience, that was one of the reasons why we didn't adopt again but decided to foster, because of how bad the experience was." Joe, 25-34, Adopting and fostering

"People considering adopting need to be aware that their lives are open books during the whole process, and until they get that rubber stamp that that child is theirs. You have to be prepared to share your life with social workers and with birth parents." Toby, 25-34, Adopting

Those who had tried to have children biologically, and found out they couldn't, were worried they would be deemed a failure once again. Sometimes these concerns were due to misconceptions, as people were unsure of what the process would actually entail, but these kind of worries were perpetuated by word of mouth and popular culture. This was the case for **Amy (25-34)** who had decided to adopt with her husband to achieve their vision for a big family after she had been through the trauma of finding out that another pregnancy could have been fatal for her. While Amy knew that she really had no reason to be rejected, and that completing such a complicated journey actually made her more emotionally resilient, she was still 'terrified' of being told that had she failed again.

"I've had enough bad news and heartbreak that I'm scared to get it confirmed." Harriet, 35-44, Considering adoption

While the adoption process was perceived to be particularly tough, some also thought that the application process for fostering was overly invasive. For instance**, Bethany (55-64)** had to drop out because she felt overly questioned through her assessment about decisions and relationships she had had decades ago.

"I just thought that was absolutely ludicrous, to go and speak to someone I was. married to for less than 12 months! I told them, that has no link to where I am now […] It felt I was paying for what happened in past. […] It was the way I was questioned about it, as if I was trying to hide something and it was all in the medical notes." Bethany, 55-64, Dropped out of fostering

"We were in a position where we felt like we were being assessed, had to be careful about what we saying, couldn't have concerns because 'if you're thinking that then you shouldn't be adopting'. We couldn't really think out loud." Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

Concerns about the scrutiny they would undergo also impacted some prospective applicants' willingness to ask questions and enquire ahead of starting their application, as many did not want to risk being judged prematurely and ruining their chances. For instance, **Rachel (45-54)** explained her husband had questions that he would ask 'another foster parent' but not the social worker, as he feared being judged or raising issues that would hinder their application.

> "It would impact your mental health if you think you're not good enough [and you don't feel you can ask], or if there are things you don't want to discuss" Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> "I've thought about picking up the phone at various times, I know I have the qualities and attributes to do it. But maybe age and background would go against me. There is the fear of being rejected and that would be so sad." Theresa, 45-54, considering adoption

Some also wanted clarification on the length of the process as that might have an impact on their decision to go through with it.

Living up to the ideal of a perfect candidate

Many felt additional pressure when contemplating the adoption assessment as they were not sure that they already embodied all the characteristics they imagined were required.

> "Then there's that fear too. That you have to be absolutely perfectly everything nail on the head before you start" Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

> "I'm single. I'm just about making enough to have a comfortable life, have a flat with 2 bedrooms. I'm just not the candidate am I?" Harriet, 35-44, Considering adoption

For fostering, there was a sense among some that an ideal foster carer should be a selfless carer and that applicants would end up giving up their life in order to care for a foster child.

> "I wouldn't want to give up all of my other commitments and I don't know how that would work [with a foster child]" Kate, 55-64, Considering fostering

> "I value that our lives at the moment are not chaotic and it's balanced, so I don't want to be zooming from one place to another." Rachel, 45-54, Applying to foster

Navigating the system

As explained in the previous chapter, many perceived information about fostering and adoption to be fragmented and difficult to access. This also applied to information on eligibility and process requirements, differences between agencies and marketplace dynamics. This could create a barrier for prospective applicants and is a source of friction in their journey that should be addressed.

It was often difficult for respondents to find answers to specific questions around eligibility and process requirements online

Information online often felt broad and indistinguishable, so that prospective foster carers' and adoptive parents' questions were not always answered. These questions often related to eligibility requirements or what to expect from the process or in the day to day. Some also felt like the information online could be biased to give a 'rose-tinted' version rather than presenting a comprehensive picture of the topic they wanted to know more of.

> "The internet can give you information but it often doesn't answer the exact question you want." Anna, 25-34, Considering adoption

> "I don't have a clue, I think it would be useful if there was more information out there, because when you google it it's literally like you're bombarded with everything, and you have to read through the spec and everything." Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

> "If you're looking at a website you never read it you just look at little bits, dip in and out, filter it, and you never know if you're looking at the right bit." Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

However, it appeared that when people asked for "more information" what they really wanted was accessible, easily scannable and reliable answers to their questions, and when they got that they found it helpful and informative.

> "There were lots of Qs and As on the website, so when you come up with a question and you don't know who to ask, there's lots there." Bill, 35-44, Adopting and considering fostering

Many struggled to see differences between agencies and were not clear on how to select them

Local Authorities were often the first point of contact for respondents, as councils were seen as a go to, reliable service, historically known to have ownership of children in care locally. **Karen (35-44)** adopted through her LA as she saw them as more dependable than private agencies and thought that they would help her through the process.

> "There's that sense, there's a constancy that they will be there over a long period of time whereas you don't know what's going to happen to the private agency" Karen, 35-44, Adopting

However, others thought that because of the high workload and broad remit for action LAs might not be able to provide the service they were looking for. They felt private agencies would be more efficient and able to provide extra support, and some thought they dealt with complicated cases. For instance, **Bethany (55-64)** doubted her local council would have the time to give her extensive the support she felt she needed as social workers are 'so strapped for time'. Bethany was interested in fostering an older child and felt support was especially important in this case, so she decided to apply through an IFA.

"My sister [who fosters] had used [a private agency] and had a really good social worker...they find you a child from wherever" Rebecca, 45-54, Adopting

The lady that visited us told us the council one was the main one and kids would go through them first and then they would go to the [private] agency, almost like the [private] agencies get the ones that nobody wants." Victoria, 35-44, Dropped out of fostering for adoption

"The impression I got as people tended to go to the private agencies if they'd been turned down." Olivia, 35-44, Adopting

However many were not aware of the different agencies until they were actively researching, and even then, many were uncertain about how to select agencies and differences in offer. For instance, **Sophie (25-34) and Rita (25-34)** described having issues choosing what agency to go with, as there was so many out there and no easy way to compare them all to see which would be best for them.

"It's hard to know which agency to go for, which one would suit you best. It would be good to have a directory, with what each one specialises in, so I could compare them. User feedback, ratings and reviews of each agency would be helpful." Sophie, 25-34, Considering fostering

"There are too many companies. When you google, all the information looks the same. How do you know you're picking the right one?" Rita, 25-34, Considering fostering

"I'm not sure how I would choose, I would probably just choose the first one, if there are reviews, my gut instinct says I'm going to try this one, if they're sounding right I'll give it a go." Peter, 45-54, Considering fostering

Asking questions over the phone was not a viable option for many who saw the moment of enquiry as the start of the application process

Many were reluctant to call agencies to find out more information. They saw this call as being the first step in the process and a notable commitment, rather than an opportunity to ask questions and find out more. For instance, **Sally (25-34)** was trying to decide between IVF and adoption but wasn't sure whether she wanted to commit to either just yet. At this time she didn't feel like she could call up any organisation to get information as this felt like taking the first step on a journey she was not ready for.

"It feels like a massive leap, you just type something in and it's suddenly like 'you need to come and meet someone'. It seems like a big jump with nothing in between." Sally, 25-34, Considering adoption

Amy (35-34) had been considering adoption for some time, but had concerns about the process and the emotional impact it would have on her if her family did not get accepted. She admitted she "just needed to get out of this headspace and actually make the call" but did not want to raise expectations for her daughter or parents and in-laws by taking that step.

Even some at the very start of considering fostering or adoption were concerned that they would not be able to openly ask questions and gather information without judgement or affecting their chances of approval, with some expressing a desire for a 'safe space' where they could seek answers without fear of repercussions.

> "I would be worried to spoil my chances if I asked a certain question. There should be a space to say things that won't limit your chances." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> "There should be list of the questions and the answers, a more definitive place you know you can go, and it has the answers." Focus group London, Considering adoption

Implications for increasing quality leads

- Messages should not imply perfection, but try to debunk it, continuing to reinforce inclusivity and openness to applicants' own experience and skills;

- Prospective applicants should be reassured about their ability to deal with a child who has been in the system, and about the fact they will receive support if needed;

- Prospective carers and parents should be helped in acquiring information and navigating the marketplace;

- Interventions should validate anxiety about the process, but convey nurturing and support.

How do drivers and barriers to fostering and adoption vary across different people?

Previous chapters have focussed on the way people think about fostering and adoption, what considerations they make when deciding about them, and how they see and approach the care system and assessment process. This chapter will explore the use the COM-B model to systematically map out the drivers (fuel) and barriers (friction) to fostering and adoption recruitment. Variation in fuel and friction factors across respondents allowed researchers to identify different types of prospective applicants motivated and challenged by different factors. These formed the basis for the development of a strategy to increase quality leads.

What drives people towards or holds people back from fostering and adopting?

For each interview, analysis took into account:

- What are respondents looking for in fostering or adoption?

- What motivates them?

- What holds them back?

- How do they approach the moment of enquiry and beyond that, starting their application?

- What would enable them to make a successful application?

This information was plotted onto a framework organised according to the COM-B model, drawing out any fuel and friction factors affecting attitudes and behaviours towards fostering and adoption recruitment to individual's capability (psychological and physical), opportunity (physical and social) and motivation (automatic and reflective). These are listed in the Table 2 overleaf.

Table 2. Applying to foster or adopt: friction and fuel factors

Table 2. Applying to foster or adopt: friction and fuel factors

	FUEL – could be reinforced	FRICTION – could be removed
Capability	• Awareness of need for foster carer or adoptive parents, including children with complex needs • Awareness of the reality of being a foster carer or adoptive parent • Adaptability to changing behaviour and habits • Openness to learning and being challenged cognitively • Affinity with children and/or young people	• Lack of awareness of what is required to foster / adopt • Lack of clarity on what to expect from the process • Propensity to interrogate every detail when searching for information
Opportunity	• Support from family and friends • Encouragement from family and friends (including those who fostered or adopted already)	• Practical constraints (e.g. finances, age of own children, space, time) • Discouraging early interactions with the system • Difficulties finding information • Influence of horror stories
Motivation	• Desire to start or expand the family / vision of being a parent part of identity • Desire to make a difference or give back • Desire to nurture a child, to give them love and stability • Conviction that fostering and / or adoption is the right thing to do • Fostering seen as a personal fulfilment, a way to plot a new direction	• Inclination to wait for the right time / until fully prepared • Anxiety about having enough knowledge to make an informed decision • Perceived emotional investment / weight of the commitment • Lack of focus and urgency • Uncertainty about own abilities / skills / qualities required • Fear of judgement or of asking wrong questions and of rejection at the end of process • Lack of preparedness for impact on their life (barrier later in the process)

• Belief that adoption matters in society and that more people should do it • Confidence in skills, qualities and abilities (from family or parenting experience or from working with children with special needs) • Positivity and optimistic outlook	• Concerns about 'the done thing' – how to behave with a fos-ter child, reputational damage, lack of cultural fit, having to give up work (fostering) • Worriers about quality of the match (adoption) • Uncertainty about level of support / validation from social workers • Worries about impact on own children • Worry about being pushed out of comfort zone / life being disrupted

Clustering the main fuel and friction factors across respondents generated two axes:

Outlook on fostering and adoption: inward vs. outward vision

The horizontal axis illustrates whether respondents were primarily driven by a vision for themselves and/or their family (inward vision), or by what they believed is good for others, their community or society (outward vision).

Those with inward vision tended to be highly motivated by the prospect of building or adding to their family, but were more sensitive to aspects of fostering or adoption that would disrupt this vision, both emotional and practical.

In turn, those with outward vision were inspired by the greater good and less easily deterred by challenges. However, they need to feel their efforts are contributing to this, and their qualities and work being put to good use.

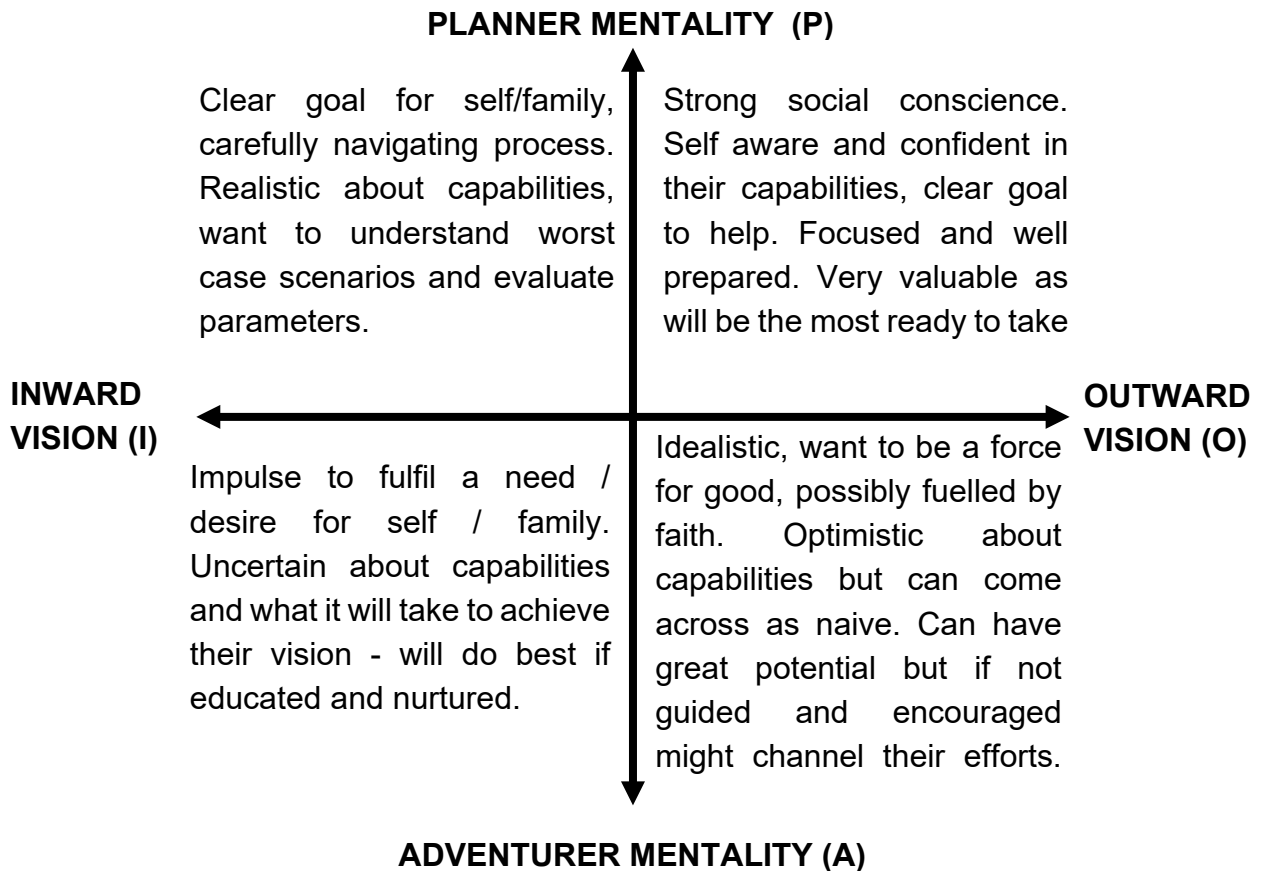**Approach to the opportunity – planner vs. adventurer mentality**

The vertical axis outlines whether respondents were evaluating different options and thinking them through with a methodical step by step approach (planners), or they were willing to find a route as they went, trusting that things would ultimately work out (adventurers).

Planners were the most at home with a rigorous application process and will prepare for it, however they won't be satisfied until they feel they have all the answers to move on, which can stall them.

Adventurers can start out a little naïve and will need to be directed and nurtured. They were open to changing direction and being guided, and while less sensitive to barriers at the beginning, they can face them as they go through a process they may not be prepared for.

This creates four quadrants for mapping prospective applicants for fostering and adoption, characterised by different fuel and friction (see Figure 3). Our goal in developing interventions will be to stoke the fuel – for example, by reinforcing their conviction – and remove the friction – for example, by dealing with their anxieties.

Figure 3.The four quadrants describing prospective applicants

PLANNER MENTALITY (P)

Clear goal for self/family, carefully navigating process. Realistic about capabilities, want to understand worst case scenarios and evaluate parameters.

Strong social conscience. Self aware and confident in their capabilities, clear goal to help. Focused and well prepared. Very valuable as will be the most ready to take

INWARD VISION (I) ← → **OUTWARD VISION (O)**

Impulse to fulfil a need / desire for self / family. Uncertain about capabilities and what it will take to achieve their vision - will do best if educated and nurtured.

Idealistic, want to be a force for good, possibly fuelled by faith. Optimistic about capabilities but can come across as naive. Can have great potential but if not guided and encouraged might channel their efforts.

ADVENTURER MENTALITY (A)

TYPLOGIES OVERVIEW

Planner/Outward: Preparing to parent a child in need (Adoption)
Planner/Outward: Commitment to care (Foster Care)

Adventurer/Outward: Urge to make a difference (Adoption)
Adventurer/Outward: Instinct to care (Foster Care)

Adventurer/Inward: Urge for a child (Adoption)
Adventurer/Inward: Looking for a direction (Foster Care)

Planner/Inward: Preparing for a family (Adoption)
Planner/Inward: Plotting a new direction (Foster Care)
Planner/Inward: Plotting a route to parenthood (Foster Care)

Types of prospective applicants (typologies)

Planner/Outward

Description: Strong social conscience. Self-aware and confident in their capabilities, clear goal to help. Focused and well prepared. Very valuable as will be the most ready to take on complex cases.

- **Preparing to parent a child in need** (Adoption). Prospective parents who see adoption as a way to create a better society, not just a family. Great conviction in their ability - and duty - to make a difference, but may delay action waiting for the timing to be perfect.

- **Commitment to care** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers who believe they can make a difference to vulnerable children, providing they feel equipped to deal with their needs and valued by the system.

Those in the **Planner/Outward** quadrant are highly valuable prospects for both fostering and adoption, given their combination of altruism and preparedness. They have a strong social conscience and a clear goal to help. They are able to focus, prepare and navigate a process, and are self-aware and confident in their capabilities. This combination of attributes and motivations also means that they will be the most ready to take on complex cases.

Preparing to parent a child in need: "We always knew we would adopt, why insist on putting our genes into the world when there are so many children in need?"

These prospective adopters are fuelled by a number of positive factors: a strong awareness of need, including children with complex needs, a strong desire to make a difference and great conviction that this is the right things to do. They believe that adoption matters in society and that more people should come forward to do it. It's likely that they are good at engaging family and friends in their conviction, enlisting their support. They also have confidence in their skills and abilities, perhaps including experience with children who have special needs, which boosts their belief in their capabilities.

The frictions that affect this group stem from their Planner mentality – the inclination to wait until they are fully prepared, or until have reached the right moment in their home and work life, given the significance of the commitment they are taking on.

Commitment to care: "If there's a problem and we can be part of solving that problem, that's what we want to do, if we've got the means and ability to do that."

Prospective foster carers in this quadrant are also fuelled by a strong awareness that there are children in need of foster care, and a belief that it is important to come forward and

help. Again they have a strong desire to make a difference and great conviction that they have what it takes to help. They have a good sense of the reality of fostering and the role it plays, and are confident in their skills and abilities to rise to the challenge. They are likely to be able to draw on the support of family and friends, including those who foster already and can encourage them from a position of knowledge. Their conviction may also be reinforced by their faith.

In terms of friction, again their Planner mentality means they may hold back until their own situation is in exactly the right place for fostering – perhaps considering the age of their own children, or their finances. Despite their level of conviction, they are also still sensitive to any discouraging interactions with the system, if they feel it is putting up barriers to them helping, or they do not feel valued. They may also have some anxieties about dealing with children who have experienced trauma – although they do want to feel equipped to help them.

Adventurer/Outward

Description: Idealistic, want to be a force for good, possibly fuelled by faith. Optimistic about capabilities but can come across as naive. Can have great potential but if not guided and encouraged might channel their efforts elsewhere.

- **Urge to make a difference** (Adoption). Prospective adopters who feel adoption would be a wonderful way for them to make a difference – but so might fostering. Feel they have something to give but need validation and focus to move forward.

- **Instinct to care** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers who have a strong instinct to give back and feel that fostering could be a good fit for them – but are open to other suggestions while they figure it out.

Those in the **Adventurer/Outward** quadrant stand out for their instinct to help, which is often expressed with energy and enthusiasm, but can be quite unfocused, which makes it harder for them to navigate and progress through the system. They are idealistic and keen to be a force for good – possibly fuelled by faith or a belief in community. Optimistic about their capabilities, they could come across as naïve in some interactions. Given their desire to make a difference they could have great potential to foster or adopt successfully, but if not guided and encouraged they might channel their energy and efforts elsewhere.

Adoption: Urge to make a difference: "For me personally, changing the world is exactly what my faith teaches me, go out and repair the world… but we haven't got into the detail of [adoption or fostering] yet."

For prospective adopters in this quadrant, their altruistic nature provides elements of fuel: an awareness of need combined with a strong sense of duty and responsibility to society and a desire to make a difference in some way. They may also be inspired by people they

know personally who have adopted or fostered, sparking their own interest. Support and encouragement from these people, and from other family and friends, will be important fuel as well. Their Adventurer mentality can also drive them forward, with a positive optimistic outlook that convinces them they will be able to overcome any hurdles as they come to them.

The key friction that holds them back is often a lack of awareness around what is required, which can then result in a lack of resources, which could have been avoided with more preparation. Their trust that things will fall into place when the time is right does not equip them for the reality of the application process or the time that will be required. So another key friction is a lack of focus and urgency. People in this quadrant could easily be attracted by a different route to help – in fact fostering could also be an option for them – but they might find a way to make a difference which does not require such rigorous assessment.

Fostering: Instinct to care: "Anyone can foster, if you've got the room, the love, the time and the commitment… you could make that difference to that one child, that's what I'd like to do."

Similarly prospective foster carers in this quadrant are driven by an awareness of need and a conviction that it's important to give back to society however you can. Fostering appeals because they believe they have something to offer a child in need, from space to fety to love.   They may also be inspired and encouraged by others they know who have fostered, who have opened their eyes to fostering as a way to make a difference. Their positive outlook and sense of optimism also provides valuable fuel and reinforces their instinct to help.

Friction for this typology lies in lack of knowledge and uncertainty – they may be unsure who to make an enquiry with, unsure about practicalities, generally unprepared regarding what life could be like with a foster child and what they would need to put in place. This lack of preparedness means that they could be quite exposed when making initial enquiries, and liable to be discouraged if they encounter any dead ends in the system (whereas someone with a Planner mentality would be better equipped to navigate these).

Adventurer/Inward

Description: Impulse to fulfil a need / desire for self / family. Uncertain about capabilities and what it will take to achieve their vision - will do best if educated and nurtured.

- **Urge for a child** (Adoption). Prospective adopters with a strong impulse to become parents. Seeking reassurance and encouragement but may also need a reality check to equip them to move forward successfully.

- **Looking for direction** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers looking to fill a gap in their life and wondering if fostering could be the answer. Could have great potential but could also be easily deterred if the reality doesn't match their vision.

Those in the **Adventurer/Inward** quadrant are characterised by a strong impulse to fulfil a certain need or desire for themselves. They realise that they have a certain vision of what they would like their life to look like and they have the urge to make this a reality – even though they are not completely sure what this will entail. Unsure of the next steps and uncertain about their capabilities, they will do best if educated and nurtured.

Adoption: Urge for a child: "I'm not going to say I'm massively altruistic, I'm not going to say I wanted to save a poor child that was having a bad time because that's not true. I just really wanted to be a mother."

The fuel for prospective adopters in this quadrant is very much intrinsic, driven by a strong desire to have a family and a realisation that being a parent is an important part of their identity. They are inspired by the prospect of parenthood as a source of personal fulfilment and adoption is on their radar as the best way – and maybe the only way - to fill this gap in their life.

Friction faced here is the same lack of preparedness we saw in the Adventurer/Outward quadrant – a lack of awareness around what exactly is required, perhaps resulting in a lack of resources, which can compromise their suitability or credibility as a candidate. Without that level of altruistic motivation, prospective adopters in this quadrant can also be very sensitive to horror stories, and nervous about being exposed to challenges that do not fit into their personal vision of the future. This nervousness is exacerbated if they have doubts about their parenting abilities or whether this really is the right time for them to start a family.

Fostering: Looking for direction: "You've got to challenge yourself. Otherwise you go a bit stagnant, you have to challenge yourself to do something that moves you forward."

We also find prospective foster carers in this quadrant. In this case the fuel is a strong urge to do something more with their life, described as 'an itch to scratch'. They are keen to explore a new direction, to embark on a new adventure, and are considering whether fostering could be the right route for them. They are aware of the need for more foster carers and can see themselves nurturing a child, providing love and stability. They may also have relevant skills that they would like to put to use. Additional fuel could come from the encouragement of others, particularly if they know people who have fostered and are enthusiastic about them doing it too.

Again friction is created by a lack of awareness of what will be required and a lack of preparedness to face possible challenges – even though they are inspired by the prospect

of a challenge in principle. Friction also comes in the form of anxieties around possible difficulties and disruption, amplified by awareness of any horror stories, that do not match their vision of themselves as a foster carer.

Planner/Inward

Description: Clear goal for self/family, carefully navigating process. Realistic about capabilities, want to understand worst case scenarios and evaluate parameters.

- **Preparing for a family** (Adoption). Prospective adopters with a strong desire to start or expand their family, carefully working towards this goal but can be stalled by feelings of anxiety or pressure or a failure to get all the answers.

- **Plotting a new direction** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers drawn to fostering as route to personal fulfilment as they enter a new life stage. Keen to put their skills and experience to good use, but weighing up the risk of disruption to their life.

- **Plotting a route to parenthood** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers also considering adoption, who see fostering as a logical first step to test out their suitability and desire for a longer term commitment.

Those in the **Planner/Inward** quadrant have a clear goal for themselves or their family, and are carefully navigating the process of achieving that. They prefer to take a realistic view of their capabilities – versus the optimistic Adventurer outlook – and to evaluate exactly what will be required of them in that light. Before they can move forward, it's important to them to have fully considered the implications of different decisions and to make sure they fully understand potential worst case scenarios.

Adoption: Preparing for a family: "For me it wasn't an option not to have children… I was forcing myself to read the hard stories [about adoption], other people who were struggling and the advice they were being given."

Prospective adopters in this quadrant stand out for their strong desire and determination to start or expand their family. They are aware of adoption as a possible route to this, often through people they know, who they will reach out to ensure they are as well informed as possible. Additional fuel to capitalise on for this typology is their ability to work through a process and their great appetite for learning and training in order to reach their goal. Despite their levels of determination, their need to have all the answers before moving forward also creates friction. In particular, any fear of being judged for asking the 'wrong questions' and therefore risking rejection and failure can put people in a holding pattern where they feel unable to move forward. Friction also comes from the tendency to interrogate every detail and to worry about the practicalities and finances, creating anxiety about whether this is the right time to go ahead. The Planner mentality brings a fear of being rushed into anything and to wait until the circumstances are right. This can include

feeling confident that they have the right social worker behind them who will be able to support and advocate for them.

Fostering: Plotting a route to parenthood: "We are thinking of adoption but we're considering fostering first, to see if that level of commitment would be right for us."

It's also worth noting that we find in this quadrant those who are considering fostering really as a prelude to adoption. Similar in fuel to the prospective adopters above, they want to take all routes into consideration, and think that it might be prudent to foster first, encouraged by others they know who have done this. In addition to the above, friction arises from the tendency to delay action as they fully evaluate both options.

Fostering: Plotting a new direction: "It's all about using my skills to make a difference. But I wouldn't want to give up all of my other commitments and I don't know how that would work… You need to understand all the different kinds of behaviours, and the support available."

Prospective foster carers in this quadrant are drawn to fostering as a route to personal fulfilment. They are fuelled by the desire to take on a new challenge and are attracted to the prospect of applying their skills and abilities as a foster carer. They are aware of fostering and the important role it can play, and encouraged by others they know who have fostered who think that they would be a good fit. They may well have an affinity with children or young people and can picture themselves helping a child in need, something that would be personally very rewarding and a way to enrich their life – particularly if entering a new lifestage as their own children become more independent or leave home.

The primary friction for this typology is a fear of disruption, that their life will be turned upside down or that they will be pushed out of their comfort zone. They are particularly sensitive to horror stories and keen to find accurate information about possible disruption and risk. This can be particularly important to empty nesters who fear that positive aspects of their life now could be compromised, and may also be anxious to work around emerging health issues or feel conscious that they are not as physically strong as they used to be. They will also seek reassurance that their skills and abilities will in fact be appreciated and put to good use.

In the next chapter we will explore the scope for interventions aimed at boosting the fuel and removing the friction for each quadrant, as well as identifying interventions that would be valuable across the board.

How to encourage quality leads to come forward?

What does 'quality' mean?

While the literature initially pointed to the fact that there might be demographic and lifestyle factors contributing to the identification of quality leads, insight from this research suggests that rather than specific personal characteristics, quality reflects individual potential and sense of preparedness to foster and adopt.

Regardless of demographic or lifestyle factors, quality applicants have the capability, opportunity and motivation to succeed in the process. They enter the process with a knowledge about what to expect and where to go for information. They are resilient and are not afraid of a challenge. They also have sufficient actual or perceived resources (time, space, finances) and support from key people. But most of all, they believe they can succeed and give children the love and care they deserve. They believe in positive outcomes and feel prepared for the process, while still maintaining an open mind as to what might lie ahead.

While practical constraints relating to resources can constitute a temporary barrier, it is often a lack of belief in their own capabilities – reinforced by social influences – that prevents people from ever applying to foster and adopt.

Reinforcing individuals' belief in their potential and preparedness is therefore key

In recent years there has been a focus on myth-busting around who can foster or adopt, designed to ensure that sexuality, faith or ethnic background is not seen as a barrier to fostering or adoption. This research suggests that the scope of myth-busting should now be expanded beyond these aspects in order to further broaden the pool of people who feel that they might be welcome to apply. We identified three particular targets for myth-busting: making it clear that adoptive parents and foster carers are not expected to be perfect or conform to any stereotypical family ideals; communicating that any hard times in an applicant's past might give them some very positive attributes rather than undermining suitability, and that this is something to be shared and explored; and expanding people's awareness of fostering and that foster carers can 'start small' (for example with respite fostering) and still put their skills and experience to good use.

As we have seen, there are aspects of the current system which undermine individual prospects for quality. People considering fostering and adoption often start with limited knowledge of what is required, and their ability to feel informed can be compromised by a fragmented system that has to compete with 'horror stories'. Questions of resources can lead to dead ends where applicants are lost rather than guided or diverted to a different route. And prospective applicants' confidence in their abilities can be quickly undermined by early encounters with the system which leave them feeling judged and unwelcome.

Given this, future strategy needs to better equip potential applicants for success. To recruit quality leads it is not enough to inspire people to come forward, we also need to give them the best chance of moving forward and navigating the system, wherever possible creating the conditions for increasing people's confidence to take on more complex cases, across applicants from all backgrounds.

There are three further dynamics that need to be taken into account when developing and executing the strategy:

Overlap between perceptions of fostering and adoption and lack of knowledge of the options

In this research it was striking to see how many people had both fostering and adoption under consideration and saw them as closely linked, 'two sides of the same coin'. In some cases there was a clear need for more guidance on the difference between the two and on how to explore the best fit for a potential applicant. There was also little awareness of different types of fostering and, for some, uncertainty about whether fostering can or should lead to adoption.

A lack of awareness about the application process can lead many to fear the worst

Again, it was striking to hear that information is 'hard to find'. This can actually relate to the fact that, with competing agencies and Local Authorities present online, searching for information can be overwhelming, or that it can be hard to judge what is accurate rather than trying to sell a service. As we have seen, some typologies are also disinclined to do much research at all. But not knowing what to expect from the experience is detrimental to recruitment as it leaves people fearing the worst, fearful of being misjudged and anxious about not receiving the support they need.

Direct experience of fostering and adoption has a positive impact

Those who knew people who had fostered or adopted were typically more confident in their capabilities because of the exposure this gave them to the good and the 'normal' - an important aspect in bringing to life challenges and rewards in an everyday way and boosting belief in capabilities.

Four strategy pillars

With these factors in mind, the recommended strategy for generating quality leads has four pillars or steps (outlined in Figure 4): inspiring people to come forward, unlocking their belief in their own capabilities, making it feel urgent and easy for people to advance, and equipping them to succeed in the process.

Figure 4. strategy pillars

	Inspire
Make people think they want to foster / adopt Bring fostering / adoption top of mind	
Enable people to see themselves doing it Boosting their belief that they can do it	Unlock
Create a sense of urgency Support people to navigate choice	Advance
Empower them to go through the process Establish that they will be supported	Equip

We will now explore each of these factors in turn.

INSPIRE

Inspiring prospective applicants is the startpoint for recruitment, keeping fostering or adoption top of mind for people and tapping into their own motivations for considering it. In this research we have identified angles on inspiration for different typologies, tapping into the vision and goals that they identify with most strongly. Those who identify more strongly with 'Inward' motivations have a personal vision of success in mind, and like to be able to picture themselves caring for a child, giving them the love and security that they need. Those who identify more strongly with 'Outward' motivations will also be inspired by the bigger picture, the vision of a society who does more to care for children in need. In both cases the call to 'make a difference' is compelling and allows people to project their own vision of success.

However igniting the desire to foster or adopt is only the startpoint. Future communications can work much harder if they set out not only to inspire people, but to also unlock their belief in their ability to foster or adopt – and to make it through the application process.

UNLOCK

Unlocking belief in abilities is a critical component of success, creating the conditions for confidence. Our scoping interviews emphasised the importance of nurturing potential – recognising that people do not start out as the finished article, but with support are often capable of much more than they realise. This process of nurturing is of course critical in identifying and preparing people who could take on more complex cases, but may not recognise this themselves when they come forward.

Our research suggests that instilling belief in abilities should start before people begin to interact with the application process, to ensure that they already enter it with a stronger sense of resilience, determination and self-belief. This is particularly important for anyone who feels they do not perfectly fit the mould, and can't see themselves succeeding.

Communication can sow these seeds in a number of ways, reinforced by execution which is inclusive and empathetic. This could be through specific promises of support and nurturing as people enter the process, acknowledging that its normal to feel daunted at this point, and that help is at hand.

There is also an appetite for messaging which debunks the need for perfection or conforming to stereotypes – such as the line from the 2020 'You can adopt' campaign, 'no two families are the same and adoption is no different – if you want to adopt, the chances are you can'.

Consider also tackling the specific fears that some people have about whether past difficulties might rule them out – for example, through the thought that 'the hardest times in your past might lead to the best in a child's future'.

ADVANCE

A key friction confirmed by this research is the tendency to wait for a 'right time' to embark on fostering or adoption. Communications can be designed to instil a sense of urgency, implicating people in the need for foster carers or adopters. Messaging designed to debunk ideas of perfection could also help to challenge the idea of there always being a 'right time'. However, given how personal a judgement this is, this friction will never be removed completely.

Given this, it is extremely important that when people do feel inspired and galvanised to come forward, they need to feel they can move forward - that they are pushing at an open door. However as we have seen there are a number of stumbling blocks around the point of first enquiry: perceptions of feeling unwelcome, unheard and unreasonably judged.

All aspects of this research point to a need for clear signposting of a safe space where people can ask questions and explore and interrogate options without fear of judgement.

This is particularly heartfelt for some of the typologies that we identified, particularly those with a Planner mentality who like to feel that every question has been answered before they can move forward. We would observe that those with an Adventurer mentality, who could come across initially as unprepared or naïve, would also benefit from a safe space to ask questions and clear up any confusion that they have.

This point of initial enquiry is also a critical point for improvements in cultural awareness – so that questions can open up avenues for discussion rather than lead to dead ends, for minority groups as for everyone else.

EQUIP

As we have seen, people approach the process with a wide range of anxieties, insecurities and misconceptions. Some relate to the prospect of being an adoptive parent or foster carer, but some relate to the process itself. Believing that these concerns will be addressed, in a supportive and encouraging way, provides further fuel to move ahead. A good example of that in this research was appreciation of the thought that 'you may be capable of more than you know, we'll work with you to find out', with its promise of support and guidance.

This kind of communication will be valuable to strengthen people's confidence in their abilities, increasing their potential to take on more complex cases. The promise of nurturing is also valuable because it depicts a system that takes these anxieties into account (as well as the needs of the child). It also depicts a system that will value what they can contribute and help them to do this to the best of their abilities, as well as accepting where they have gaps and helping them to overcome these.

Each of the strategy pillars is associated to a different combination of communications and non-communications based interventions

An effective strategy is likely to require a combination of communications activities and non-communications based interventions, as well as leveraging alternative mechanisms for communication.

Inspire is likely to be only through communications, and its purpose should be primarily to grab attention and deliver some information to reframe fostering and adoption for people (e.g. making them more aware of need in their local area or showing different options available as it will explained). On the other hand, Unlock, Advance and Equip are likely to require messages and non-communications interventions to complement each other.
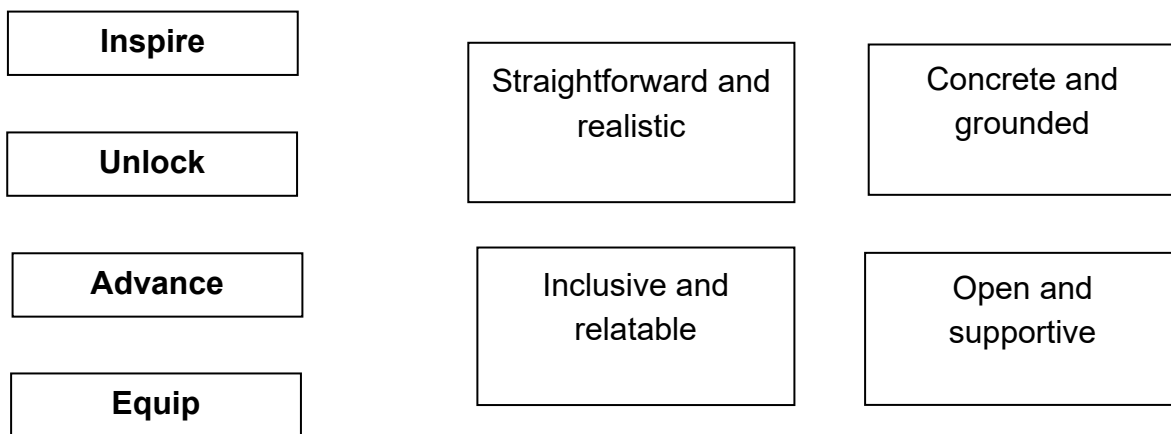
Interventions can combine elements speaking to different pillars. In particular any message that seeks to Inspire should be underpinned with messaging that speaks to Unlock, Advance or Equip in order to maximise its effectiveness.

How to communicate?

Responses to the messaging territories used as stimulus in the primary research, together with the more general insights discussed above, indicate some broad principles for the tonality and content of communications for both services (summarised in Figure 5). In general, communications should be:

- **Straightforward and realistic in the portrayal of challenges** while showing that they can be overcome as many do it already;

- **Grounding fostering and adoption concretely in people's everyday**, rather than providing aspirational language, imagery, and aspirations;

- **Inclusive and relatable,** empathising with prospective applicants' concerns and debunking perfection to make them feel valued and welcome;

- **Conveying availability of emotional and practical support,** as well openness to deal with queries in a non-judgemental way.

Figure 5.Tonality principles for communications

| Inspire |
| Unlock |
| Advance |
| Equip |

| Straightforward and realistic | Concrete and grounded |
| Inclusive and relatable | Open and supportive |

Interventions recommendations

Before looking at specific recommendations by typology, there are a number of interventions that would be valuable to generate more quality leads across the board:

A 'safe space' to ask questions and easily access information

Many of those interested in both fostering and adoption were worried about being judged, uncertain where to find the information they needed, and unclear about differences about agencies and the system's dynamics. This contributed to avoidable concerns and, for many, a tendency to put off making an enquiry.

This research suggests that there would be great value in providing people considering fostering and adoption with a neutral enquiry point that would allow them to safely:

- Ask questions without judgement

- Talk through different scenarios and evaluate different options

- Explore individual parameters and capabilities

- Understand the differences, and the relationship, between fostering and adoption

- Understand different kinds of fostering and which might be the best fit

- Perhaps explore options beyond fostering and adoption that could act as a stepping stone to one or both of them

Fosterline, the DfE funded helpline and website, can provide a template for this, but it should be noted that this service was not salient for our sample. This reinforces the importance of signposting, with communications to promote the existence and role of this safe space, and the fact that it's confidential and non-judgemental, supported by easy online searching (e.g. comes up as the first option on a Google search).

This safe space would be an important component in the ADVANCE pillar by making it easy for people to find the information they need and move forward in the process, as well as helping to EQUIP by providing support through the process.

For those who do make their first enquiry with agencies or Local Authorities, this research reinforces the importance of the very first call. As above, it is critical that this is non-judgemental, welcoming, and encourages people to explore avenues rather than shutting them down.

A more fluid approach for dealing with enquiries across fostering and adoption

Given the perceived overlap between fostering and adoption, as well as the lack of clarity on what different options entail, there is scope to help people to explore both. Currently the system forces people to make an enquiry in one direction or another, but this research suggests that people would benefit from being encouraged and guided to explore both options in order to find the one that is right for them.

A more fluid approach would have a better chance of directing people towards the type of involvement that they are most comfortable with, and best suited for, rather than ruling themselves out entirely because they are confused or have explored the wrong direction.

A more fluid approach to promoting could INSPIRE people by presenting opportunities they might not have thought of and ADVANCE them by helping potential applicants navigate choice and finding the best one for them, rather than taking a one size fits all approach.

From a communications perspective, this would mean sharing messages that acknowledge difficulties in choosing between the two, normalising the decision and offering support and the possibility to discuss the best course of action. Messages should also make people aware of different options and levels of commitment. Thoughts to the effect of 'whether it's respite days, longer term fostering, or adopting a child, we're here to help you find the best option' have the potential to be effective.

From a non-communications perspective, the safe space as described above would be one way to deliver advice and guidance that crosses both fostering and adoption, either through two separate services or one 'front door' that serves both fostering and adoption.

This currently falls beyond the scope of how LAs, IFAs and RAAs work, but it is worth considering whether more cross fertilisation could be achieved in order to boost the total pool of prospective applicants, perhaps through increased collaboration between agencies so that potential applicants can be 'passed on' where appropriate. Local Authorities could also adopt this fluid approach in the way they communicate, providing accessible and upfront information on both fostering and adoption, helping people to discuss what works better for them at the point of enquiry and signposting to other resources.

Cross fertilisation between fostering and adoption would ideally also create better conditions for nurturing the potential of people who come forward with the desire to help but do not yet have the right resources to qualify. Identifying whether there are other ways for them to help, and creating mechanisms to stay in contact with these kind of 'warm leads' should both be considered in order to strengthen the pipeline of quality leads for the future.

Embracing challenge in a supportive way

One of the key themes emerging from this research, and critical to the UNLOCK pillar, was how to communicate challenge. As we saw through the exploration of fuel and friction, 'challenge' can be part of the fuel for people who feel they have something to give and can see meeting a challenge as being personally very fulfilling. Challenge is also something to be embraced for people with more altruistic motivations, who perceive dealing with challenges as part of their duty to care for those in need. However challenge can also be daunting, at worst raising the prospect of disruption, anxiety and inability to cope.

We recommend that communications, and dialogue with people considering fostering and adoption, does not shy away from referring to challenge, but does provide a context for coping with challenge that will make people feel more comfortable. This means acknowledging that challenge is part of the experience for everyone, reinforcing the value of how much children will benefit from their care, and reassuring people that support is available. In this research, the thought that 'there are good days and bad days for every family, but when you're fostering / adopting you know that every day you're making a difference' worked extremely well to convey that things won't always be easy, but that they will always be rewarding. In the co-creation session the team also developed the idea of confronting challenge head on in a relatable way - along the lines of 'it won't be plain sailing, it won't be a walk in the park, there will be bumps in the road..' - encouraging open conversation about concerns people could have and how these could be addressed.

While this intervention mostly refers to communications, it does need to be backed up by a supportive and nurturing approach from agencies and Local Authorities.

Access to the everyday reality of fostering and adoption

Knowing others who foster and adopt and seeing the difference they make, and how they do it, was consistently cited as a motivating factor for people thinking about doing it themselves. We also heard about the appeal of testimonials for those who were researching further, although there can be some uncertainty as to how authentic they are.

Taking this into account, this research suggests that there is an appetite for more access to everyday experiences of fostering and adoption, whether through testimonials, online communities, or other forums to share stories and ask questions. Ideally these snapshots of real life would work to counter misconceptions around stereotypes and pressures to be perfect, showing diversity, normality and the imperfections of everyday life as well as the rewards, as with the communication of challenge. It's important that these feel relatable as well as reliable, rather than staged as to make a pitch for business. Hosting these interventions from the neutral 'safe space' mentioned above – which could also have a presence on social media - would also help to reinforce authenticity and ensure that they feel independent from any agency.
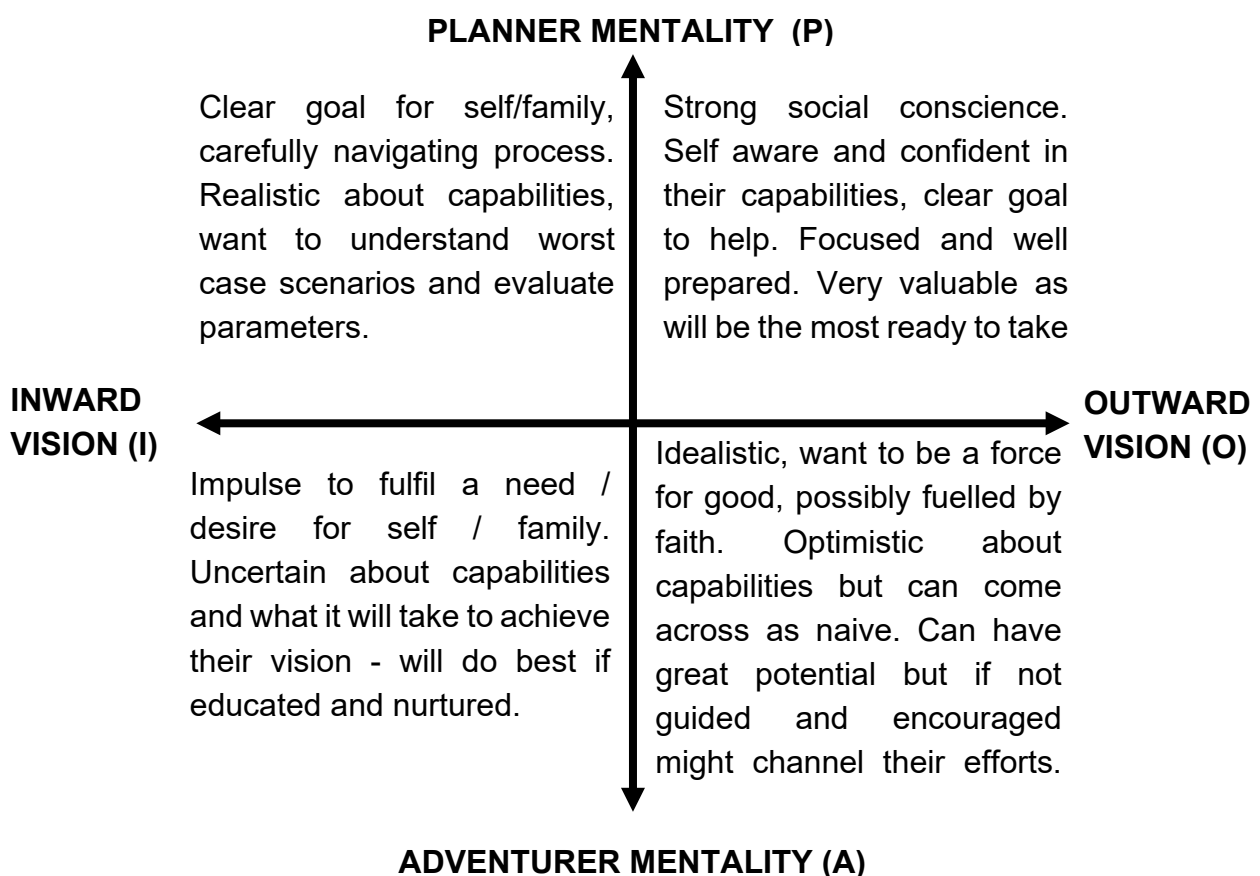
A step further in giving people access to real life experiences, and also addressing the need for support, would be the offer of access to a network or buddy system. This could include mentoring through the application process, which would be a significant promise to EQUIP people to move forward. These interventions also have potential for a positive impact more broadly in the way they convey multiple layers of support, implying a well-functioning system that values the people who come forward.

Interventions recommendations by typology

It is also important to consider where there is scope to attract or nurture more prospective applicants by removing the frictions that affect specific typologies. Exploring the fuel and friction that characterise each typology reveals some specific areas for intervention which we share here, in some cases supplemented by ideas that were developed by the team in our co-creation session.

Figure 6 is a recap of the quadrants we identified based on motivations and barriers to fostering or adoption, and the typologies that fall into each one.

Figure 6.The four quadrants describing prospective applicants

PLANNER MENTALITY (P)

Clear goal for self/family, carefully navigating process. Realistic about capabilities, want to understand worst case scenarios and evaluate parameters.

Strong social conscience. Self aware and confident in their capabilities, clear goal to help. Focused and well prepared. Very valuable as will be the most ready to take

INWARD VISION (I)

OUTWARD VISION (O)

Impulse to fulfil a need / desire for self / family. Uncertain about capabilities and what it will take to achieve their vision - will do best if educated and nurtured.

Idealistic, want to be a force for good, possibly fuelled by faith. Optimistic about capabilities but can come across as naive. Can have great potential but if not guided and encouraged might channel their efforts.

ADVENTURER MENTALITY (A)

TYPLOGIES OVERVIEW

Planner/Outward: Preparing to parent a child in need (Adoption)
Planner/Outward: Commitment to care (Foster Care)

Adventurer/Outward: Urge to make a difference (Adoption)
Adventurer/Outward: Instinct to care (Foster Care)

Adventurer/Inward: Urge for a child (Adoption)
Adventurer/Inward: Looking for a direction (Foster Care)

Planner/Inward: Preparing for a family (Adoption)
Planner/Inward: Plotting a new direction (Foster Care)
Planner/Inward: Plotting a route to parenthood (Foster Care)

Planner/Outward

- **Preparing to parent a child in need** (Adoption). Prospective parents who see adoption as a way to create a better society, not just a family. Great conviction in their ability - and duty - to make a difference, but may delay action waiting for the timing to be perfect.

- **Commitment to care** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers who believe they can make a difference to vulnerable children, providing they feel equipped to deal with their needs and valued by the system.

For both prospective adopters and foster carers in this quadrant, the most important goal of any intervention is to instil a sense of urgency. While they believe in the value of fostering or adoption, their Planner mentality means that they may delay action waiting for the perfect timing or complete preparation. To challenge this, communications should make the need acute and urgent and put the child at the forefront.

In the co-creation session, the team explored ways to dramatise the need, highlighting that 'Children are coming into care every day' (for fostering) and 'Children are waiting for their forever family' (for adoption). In both cases this could be followed by a direct exhortation to them to act more quickly: 'The sooner you're approved, the sooner you can change a life'. Communications along these lines should emphasise that no action is a negative course of action – making inaction a difficult choice rather than the default option. Communication for respite fostering could make the sense of urgency even more timely.

Communication that speaks to these typologies can also emphasise the importance of foster carers and adopters in society, reflecting their belief that we all have a part to play in creating better prospects for children in need.

Adventurer/Outward

- **Urge to make a difference** (Adoption). Prospective adopters who feel adoption would be a wonderful way for them to make a difference – but so might fostering. Feel they have something to give but need validation and focus to move forward.

- **Instinct to care** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers who have a strong instinct to give back and feel that fostering could be a good fit for them – but are open to other suggestions while they figure it out.

For both of these typologies, the most meaningful interventions will be non-communication based – the option to explore their options, and ideally to work through their potential for both fostering and adoption, in the 'safe space' that we described earlier. When supporting these typologies it will be important to recognise that their lack of focus does not necessarily mean a lack of quality, and to guide them to a point where they feel more

conviction that they have found the right path for them. They will need encouragement to voice uncertainties and work through these, and guidance to enable them to focus, prioritise and plan, as well as to identify if they have capability to take on more complex cases as they may not recognise this themselves.

In terms of communications, in addition to signposting the above, there would be value in a call to action that captures their imagination, harnesses their energy and openness and validates their desire to be a force for good.

This could tap into their Adventurer mentality, evoking the idea of a voyage of discovery - for example with a promise that fostering or adoption 'can take you to unexpected places', underpinned by encouragement and guidance such as 'we'll help you to find the right path, call us to take the first step'.

It could also appeal to their altruistic nature, emphasising the child who needs them and that they could choose to make a difference to a child's life. Communicating the option of respite fostering could speak to their more spontaneous side and show how their actions could have a wider impact, as in 'one weekend a month in your life could help a child to have a family for a lifetime - with short break fostering, a small change to your life makes a big change to theirs'

In the co-creation session, the team also explored ways to celebrate the vision of society that these typologies share. As they may well have a strong faith or sense of community spirit, the message that 'it takes a village to raise a child' is likely to resonate with them. They may also be receptive to the idea of being part of a child's wider support network if they can't commit to fostering or adoption.

More generally celebrating the contribution of those who foster and adopt, and what a difference they can make, is likely to be inspiring to these typologies – as with the line 'adopting/fostering one child won't change the world, but for that child the world will change'.

Adventurer/Inward

- **Urge for a child** (Adoption). Prospective adopters with a strong impulse to become parents. Seeking reassurance and encouragement but may also need a reality check to equip them to move forward successfully.

- **Looking for direction** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers looking to fill a gap in their life and wondering if fostering could be the answer. Could have great potential but could also be easily deterred if the reality doesn't match their vision.

For prospective adopters with this 'urge for a child' there will be less need for communications and more for guidance and nurturing in order to equip them to move

forward. The main friction they face is a lack of preparedness and a 'firm hand' may be required to transform them into quality leads – to help them to see more clearly what will be required, how they need to proceed and how they can build competence. It will also be important to explore any potential to take on more complex cases as they may not recognise this – if they can expand their personal vision to see this as rewarding then their determination could be an asset.

In the co-creation session, the team explored ways to address this typology and felt that there was a need to encourage people to take more time, slow down, understand the process, and do some planning – injecting some realism as well as encouragement and helping people to be informed. Any messaging should reassure them that 'adoption is a route to your forever family - it's great that you want to do this - we will hold your hand every step of the way on this journey'.

Prospective foster carers in this quadrant are looking for a positive vision of fostering that will reinforce their belief that this would be both rewarding and achievable for them. Communications should broaden their horizons with guidance on different options for fostering and the requirements of each. In the co-creation session the team felt that relevant messaging for this typology could show that foster carers are all different, all putting their skills to good use, encouraging people to picture themselves in the role.

Beyond communications, this typology would benefit from further access to real life experiences. The opportunity for any kind of 'test drive' would be very relevant to them, as would having access to foster carers who can introduce them to the realities of fostering in an encouraging way. If this can't be offered in real life, then providing access to online materials which replicate this should be considered.

For both fostering and adoption, one of the frictions in this quadrant is uncertainty about not being able to cope. As mentioned, the communication of challenge contextualised by reward and support is relevant in all quadrants. However it's particularly important for these typologies, who can find themselves swayed by horror stories and feeling anxious about their capabilities, and will benefit from reassurance.

Planner/Inward

- **Preparing for a family** (Adoption). Prospective adopters with a strong desire to start or expand their family, carefully working towards this goal but can be stalled by feelings of anxiety or pressure or a failure to get all the answers.

- **Plotting a route to parenthood** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers also considering adoption, who see fostering as a logical first step to test out their suitability and desire for a longer term commitment.

- **Plotting a new direction** (Fostering). Prospective foster carers drawn to fostering as route to personal fulfilment as they enter a new life stage. Keen to put their skills and experience to good use, but weighing up the risk of disruption to their life.

For prospective adopters in this quadrant (including those who are considering fostering as the first step on this journey) the main friction we identified was the inability to move forward without all the answers. Given this the provision of the 'safe space' where people can ask questions, think through different scenarios and evaluate different options will be particularly important for this typology, breaking the 'holding pattern' of feeling unable to ask or feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of worst case scenarios.

With this typology in mind this could be strengthened by further resources online from a neutral source – ideally an encyclopaedic bank of real life experiences, case studies and testimonials bringing clarity to expectations at every stage and offsetting horror stories. They will also appreciate any further access to learning, training or mentoring programmes that can be made available.

This typology are also anxious about reaching their goal and are looking for support and advocacy every step of the way. Communication and dialogue with them should recognise that this is a 'high stakes' situation for them and normalise this. In the co-creation session the team explored ways to provide reassurance to this group that their feelings are understandable – 'it's normal to feel nervous' (or daunted, challenged, or not quite ready yet) – but should not stop them moving forward.

The typology for fostering in this quadrant, Plotting a new direction, are weighing up the pros and cons of being a foster carer as a route to personal fulfilment. Their main friction is the fear of disruption, which can be particularly acute if they have reached a stable point in life – for example as Empty Nesters, or newly retired.

This fear can likely only be fully addressed by the conversations they have once they make an enquiry, again reinforcing the value of the 'safe space' to work though different options. Ideally they would be able to engage in adult to adult conversations about how their skill set and experience could be best used, within the parameters of their circumstances or lifestyle. Because they have a particular vision of what they would find fulfilling, they are hoping to validate this and feel that their skills and life experience will be put to good use. They need to feel able to work through small details as well as bigger issues in order to give them a very vivid picture of how fostering would affect their day to day life. They will also benefit from reassurance that they can draw on support and training, and that there is advice available for coping strategies for the different situations they may encounter.

In terms of communication, there is an opportunity to inspire this audience by reminding them how fostering could enrich their life. In the co-creation session the team explored

ways to make this relevant and uplifting taking life stage into account, for example by celebrating the value of staying connected with young people.

Behaviour Change Lab

This chapter will explore concept testing in Kantar's Behaviour Change Lab (BCL), the final stage within this programme of research. As mentioned previously, BCL is Kantar's online Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) platform. BCL is used to measure the relative impact of interventions upon the planned behaviours and perceptions of a nationally representative sample. Importantly, BCL draws on dual-process theory to explore the interplay between participants' intuitive and considered responses to stimuli[2] in a two-stage repeated measures experiment.
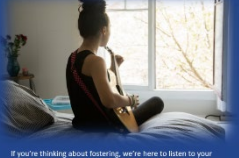
Trials overview

BCL was used to explore the effect, and compare the relative influence, of three communication prototypes on participants' likely behaviour to foster or adopt. In this experiment, those eligible for the fostering and adoption trials were randomly allocated and presented with one of four options or experimental arms: three arms involved intervention prototypes; and one arm a control prototype (as shown in Figure 7 and in Appendix G).

- The **control** was designed to reflect 'typical' recruitment materials;

- **Prototype 1** included the idea of a safe space to explore options and ask questions;

- **Prototype 2** introduced an element of challenge and support;

- **Prototype 3** presented the opportunity to explore fostering and adoption as a continuum.

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[2] Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1982). Variants of uncertainty. *Cognition*; 11(2), pp. 143-157.

Figure 7.The three prototypes and the control

	Control	Prototype 1	Prototype 2	Prototype 3
Fostering				
Adoption				

Prototypes were shown to participants twice:

1. **Exposure 1**: time-limited, such that participants could view the prototype for a maximum of ten seconds before indicating their likelihood to foster/adopt.

   Participants' answers following Exposure 1 reflect their **System 1** response to the stimulus. System 1 responses are typically described as swift, automatic unconscious and driven by heuristics.[3]

2. **Exposure 2**: time-unbounded exposure, such that participants could view the prototype for as long as they liked before indicating their propensity to foster/adopt.

   Participants' answers following Exposure 2 reflect their **System 2** response to the stimulus. System 2 responses are typically described as measured, controlled, mindful and driven by rules/analysis.[4]

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[3] Reyna, V. and Brainerd, C. (2011). Dual Processes in Decision Making and Developmental Neuroscience: A Fuzzy-Trace Model. *Developmental review*; 31(3), pp. 180-206.
[4] *Ibid*

Differences between the answers provided by participants following Exposure 1 and Exposure 2 indicate whether their System 1 responses are overridden by their System 2 responses.

Overall findings from the trials are outlined below:

- Prototype executions generally outperformed the control (typical recruitment material), for both fostering and adoption.

- Prototype 3 (hybrid approach to fostering and adoption) was the most effective in encouraging **fostering**. This result emphasises the value of allowing prospective foster carers to consider and explore different routes to supporting a child, giving them the opportunity to enter into a dialogue and be guided through this.

- Prototype 1 (safe space to ask questions) had the most impact on behavioural intent for **adoption**. This result complements the qualitative findings regarding the anxiety felt by prospective adopters around judgement and rejection and the need for a safe space to start their enquiry.

- Prototype 2 (challenge and support) performed better in the adoption trial than fostering, where its effectiveness decreased after the second exposure. While fostering trial participants had an initial favourable reaction to the explicit recognition of challenges and the idea of making a difference (exposure 1), when given more time to consider this (exposure 2), their behavioural intent weakened. This result could reflect some reluctance amongst prospective foster carers to be pushed out of their comfort zone.

- However, further driver analysis highlighted that confidence in abilities to cope with difficulties associated with fostering and adoption was a critical attitudinal factor affecting participants' intended behaviour, boosted by the belief that support is available and accessible. An honest portrayal of challenges and emphasis on reliable support will therefore still be an important component of recruitment discourse.

- While Prototype 2 was less effective in making this communication universally motivating for fostering, the concept is still worth exploring as a key part of the dialogue with prospective foster carers. Similarly, for adoption, Prototype 1 - already successful because of focus on the safe space - could be fortified by including assurance of ongoing support (as in Prototype 2).

Detailed results from the BCL for fostering and adoption respectively follow.

Fostering message testing

Behavioural impact

Figure 8 maps intent to foster ('how likely or unlikely it is that you will foster a child'?) against confidence in decision-making ('please indicate how certain or uncertain you are about your answer to the previous question'), comparing the difference between Exposure 1 and Exposure 2 for all fostering Prototypes.

As illustrated below, confidence in System 2 responses was far greater: this is to be expected, as decision-making regarding fostering/behaviour is measured and deep. Further, **Prototype 3 (hybrid approach to fostering and adoption) exhibited the strongest performance**. While participants' System 1 reaction to this Prototype was positioned between Prototype 2 (challenge and support) and Prototype 1 (safe space to ask questions), their System 2 response was by far the strongest, measuring highest on both likelihood to foster and confidence in decision making.

Figure 8.Likelihood to foster vs. confidence in decision, by prototype
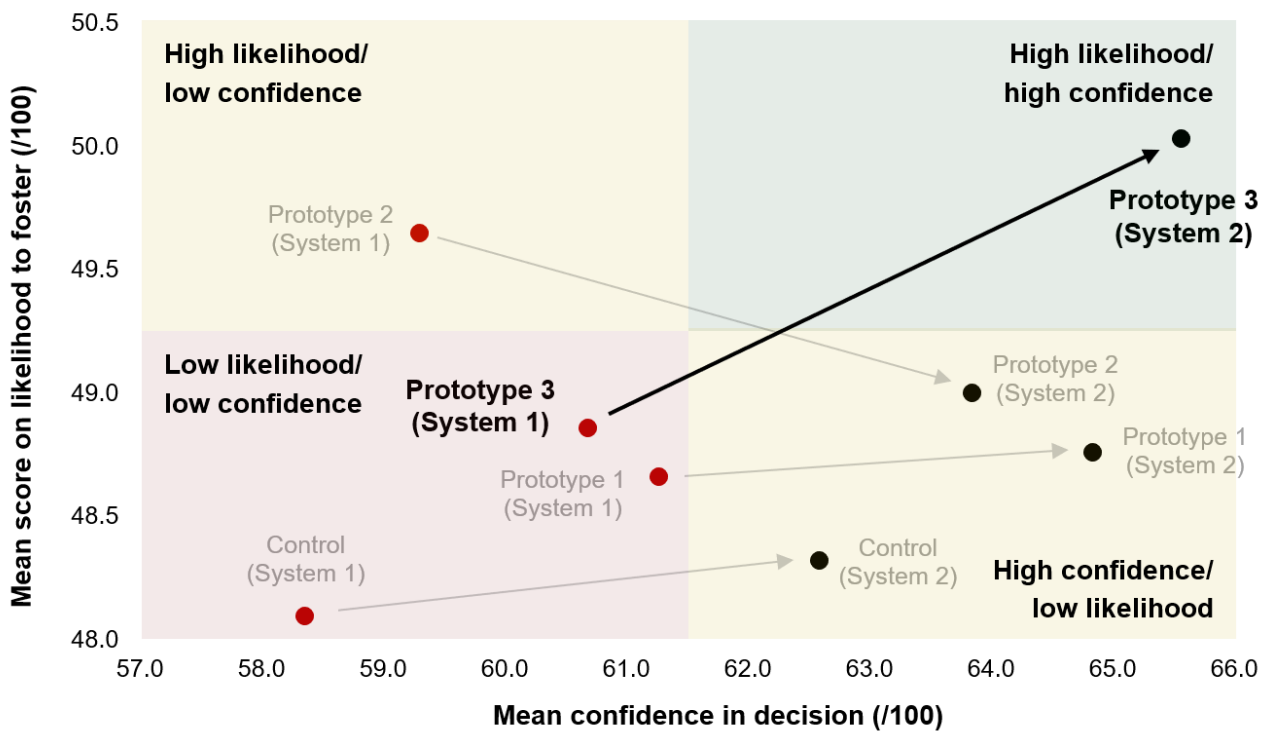
Base: n=1,251; participants in the fostering trial

This result was confirmed by following up modelling, which indicated a highly significant interaction between interest in fostering and Prototype 3 (both at Exposure 1 and Exposure 2).

The interaction can be seen below in Figure 9: put simply, Prototype 3 was especially effective for those further within the fostering consideration set. That is, the effect of Prototype 3 was heightened among those who were strongly considering fostering at the time of the trial (as opposed to in the future), particularly in terms of their reasoned 'System 2' response.

Figure 9.Interaction between interest in fostering and exposure to Prototype 3
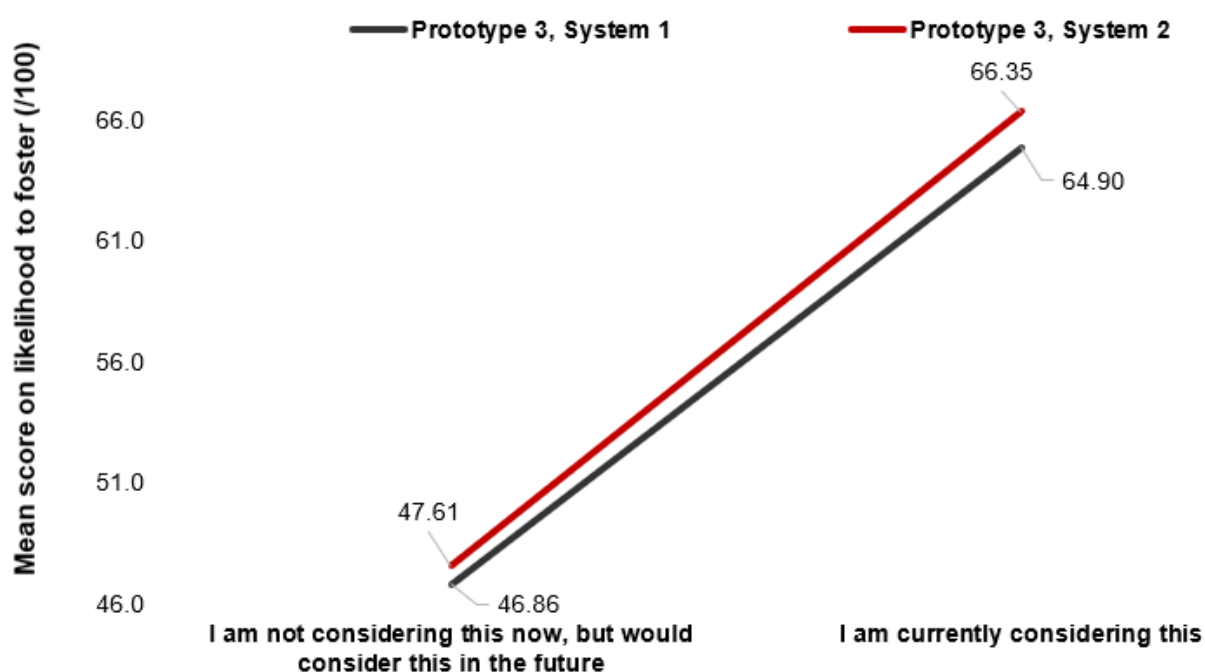
Base: n=312; participants exposed to Prototype 4

The results outlined in Figures 8 and 9 suggests that Prototype 3 resonates with respondents on two levels: to a lesser extent, on an immediate, System 1 level; and to a greater extent on a considered, System 2 level.

In contrast, participants exposed to Prototype 2 – which acknowledges the hardships associated with fostering (challenge and support) – generally had a stronger System 1 reaction and a weaker System 2 reaction. This result suggests that this Prototype's message caused some participants to question their initial conviction with respect to fostering: this was particularly the case among those with high (£75,000 or more) and low (up to £7,499) household incomes.

Attitudinal impact

The positive impact of the Prototypes upon participants' perceptions of fostering was most evident for three attitudinal measures (see Figure 10). (Please note: light green arrows represent agreement that is significantly higher than the control group at 90% confidence, while the darker green arrows represent agreement that is significantly higher than the control group at 95% confidence.)

- **I know where to go to find out more about fostering**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Prototype 1 and Prototype 2, compared to the Control.

- **People thinking about fostering can ask questions and find out more in confidence**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Prototype 1, and particularly Protypes 2 and 3, compared to the Control.

- **People who are considering fostering can access support and encouragement**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Protype 1 and Prototype 2, compared to the Control.

Figure 10. Significant differences in attitudes towards fostering, by Prototype (relative to the control)
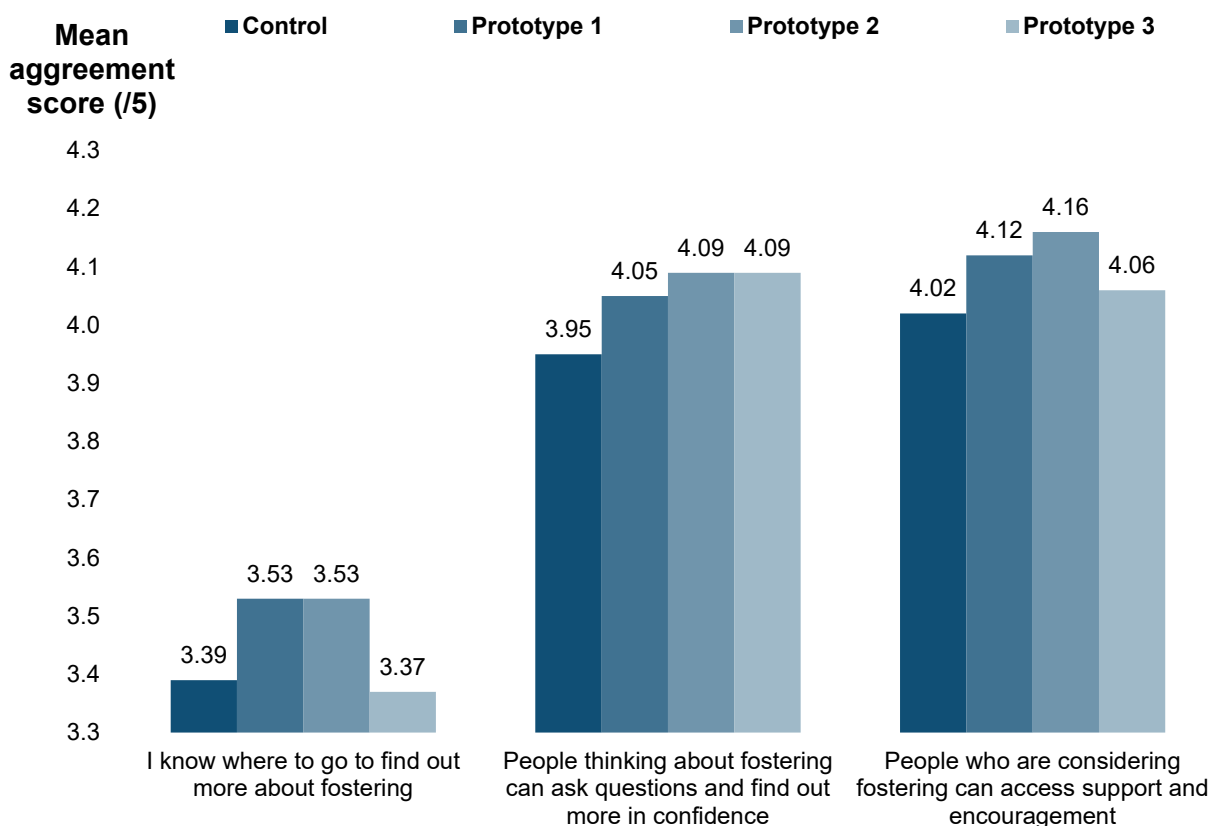
Base: n=1,251; participants in the fostering trial

In summary, the effect of the Prototypes was most pronounced in communicating that there are channels available to considerers where they can access information about fostering; ask questions confidentially; and access support.

The attitudinal impact of the Prototypes illustrated in Figure 10 is especially positive given the result of follow-up attitudinal driver analysis.[5] Driver analysis aims to identify the perceptions that have the biggest impact on a given outcome variable (in this case, intent to foster/adopt).

The results of this driver analysis are contained in Figure 11. (Please note: the thickness and direction of arrows represents the direction and strength of influence between drivers. For example, the thick arrow between 'fostering a child has its challenges, but I think I can overcome them' and 'there is no perfect time to foster a child' suggests that the former belief strongly influences the latter.)

As illustrated, the key barriers to fostering (the red circles) are space ('I don't have enough spare space…to foster a child') and time ('I don't have enough spare time to foster a child'), both of which are influenced by the general perception that one does not have what it takes to foster a child.

Positively, the belief that 'I am not sure if I have what it takes to foster a child' is reduced by the acknowledgement that fostering has challenges that are not insurmountable 'Fostering…has its challenges, but I think I can overcome them'), and knowledge about where to go to find out more about fostering.

In short, increasing the belief that 'Fostering…has its challenges, but I think I can overcome them' among those interested in fostering is likely to have the following effects: an increase in agreement that 'there is no perfect time in life to foster a child'; a decrease in agreement that 'I am not sure if I have what it takes to foster a child' and 'I don't have enough spare time to foster a child'; and an increase in the behavioural intention to foster a child, both as a direct result of increasing this belief, and as a result of the indirect effects outlined.

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[5] modelling run using 200 bootstrapped Bayesian belief networks.

Figure 11.Attitudinal fuel and friction factors for fostering
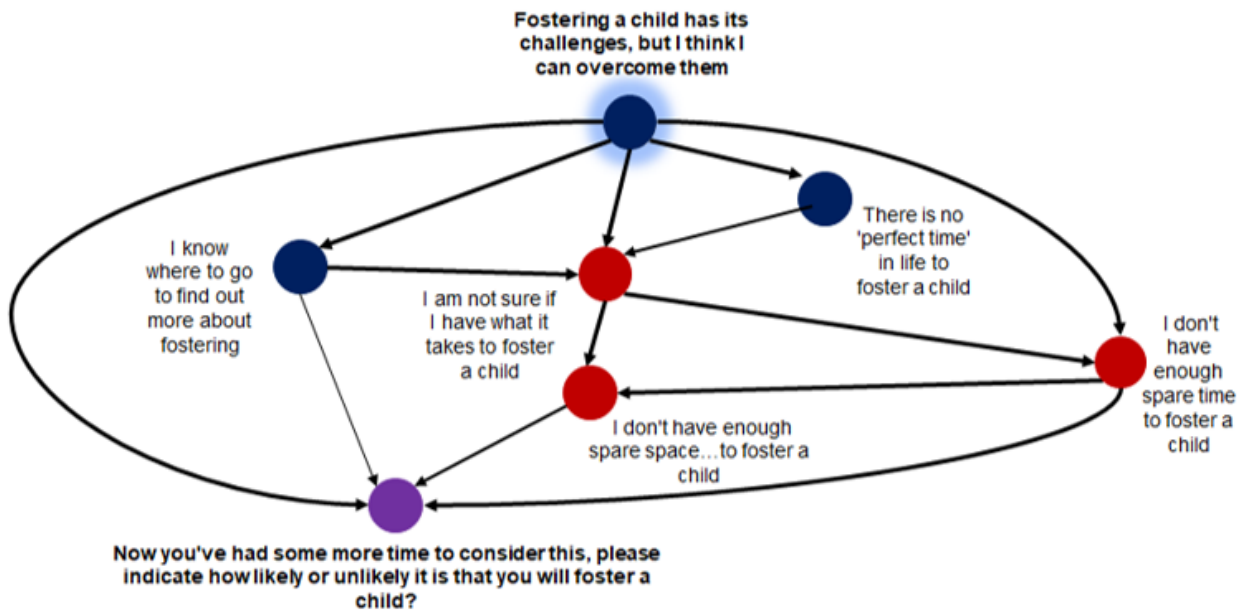
Base: n=1,251; participants in the fostering trial

Influential demographic characteristics

Across demographic characteristics, the factor that most strongly determined both attitudes towards fostering and intent to foster was age.

Figure 12 illustrates the relationship between age and intent with respect to fostering. Overall, those aged 35-44 held were most likely to be further into the consideration set, with more currently considering or applying to foster at the time of the trial (17% across these two categories).

Conversely, fewer older individuals (particularly those aged 55-64) were currently considering or applying to foster (9% across these two categories), suggesting that they are a high potential group that should be focused upon in future communications campaigns.

(Please note: green arrows represent a proportion that is significantly higher than other groups at 95% confidence, while red arrows represent a proportion that is significantly lower than other groups at 95% confidence.)

Figure 12.Views regarding fostering, by age (excludes 'have done this in the past')

Legend: ■21-34 ■35-44 ■45-54 ■55-64

- I would never do this: 10%, 7%, 6%, 6%
- I am not considering this now, but would consider this in the future: 68%, 72%, 79%, 77%
- I am currently considering this: 13%, 13%, 10%, 8%
- I am currently doing this/applying to do this: 3%, 4%, 2%, 1%
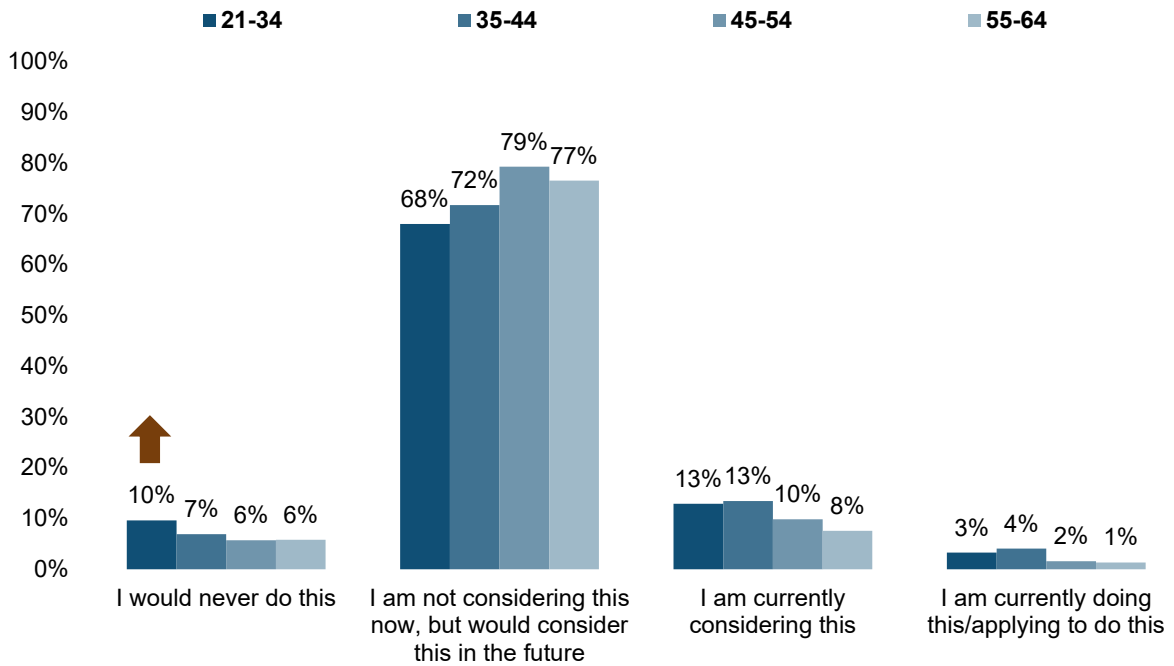
Which of the following best describes your views regarding fostering?

Base: n=1,251; participants in the fostering trial

Positively, as Figure 13 highlights, Prototype 3 was also effective in augmenting likelihood to foster across age groups. Importantly, this was particularly the case for those aged 45 – 64; that is, those suited to future conversion.

Figure 13.Likelihood to foster, by age and Prototype
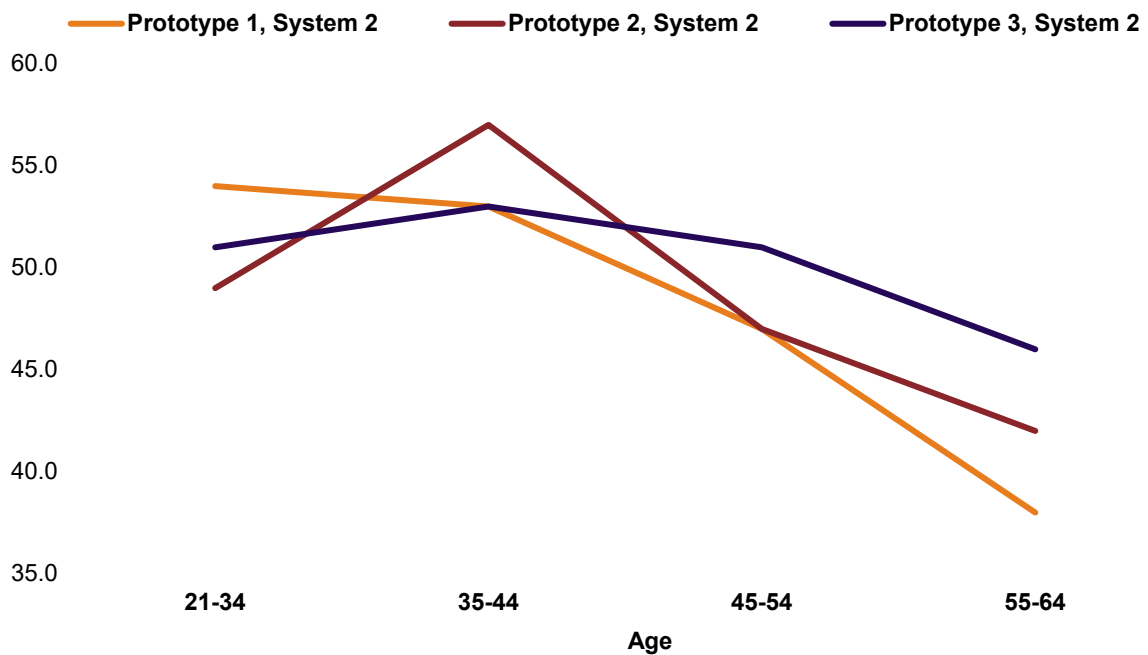
Base: n=1,251; participants in the fostering trial

Summary

Of the Prototypes tested, Prototype 3 ('Even a small change to your life…') was the strongest performer, followed by Prototype 2 ('All families have their good and bad days'). The System 2 responses (that is, considered responses) of those exposed to Prototype 3 were significantly higher than their System 1 responses (that is, their gut reactions); further, they exhibited the highest scores on likelihood to foster and confidence in decision making.

One relative weakness of Prototype 3 was its ability to inform people about information sources: scores on 'I know where to go to find out more about fostering' were lower among this group. Emphasising the access points for information channels in messaging similar to Prototype 3 would likely help to increase the effectiveness.

Adoption message testing

Behavioural impact

Figure 14 maps intent to adopt ('how likely or unlikely it is that you will adopt a child'?) against confidence in decision-making ('please indicate how certain or uncertain you are about your answer to the previous question'), comparing the difference between Exposure 1 and Exposure 2 for all adoption Prototypes.

As illustrated below, Prototype 1 (safe space to ask questions) exhibited the strongest performance. In contrast to fostering, likelihood to adopt was relatively consistent between the first and second exposures, suggesting that individuals' views with regard to adoption are more stable. This result is not unexpected: choices made with respect to adoption have been shown to be highly considered.[6]

Figure 14. Likelihood to foster vs. confidence in decision, by Prototype
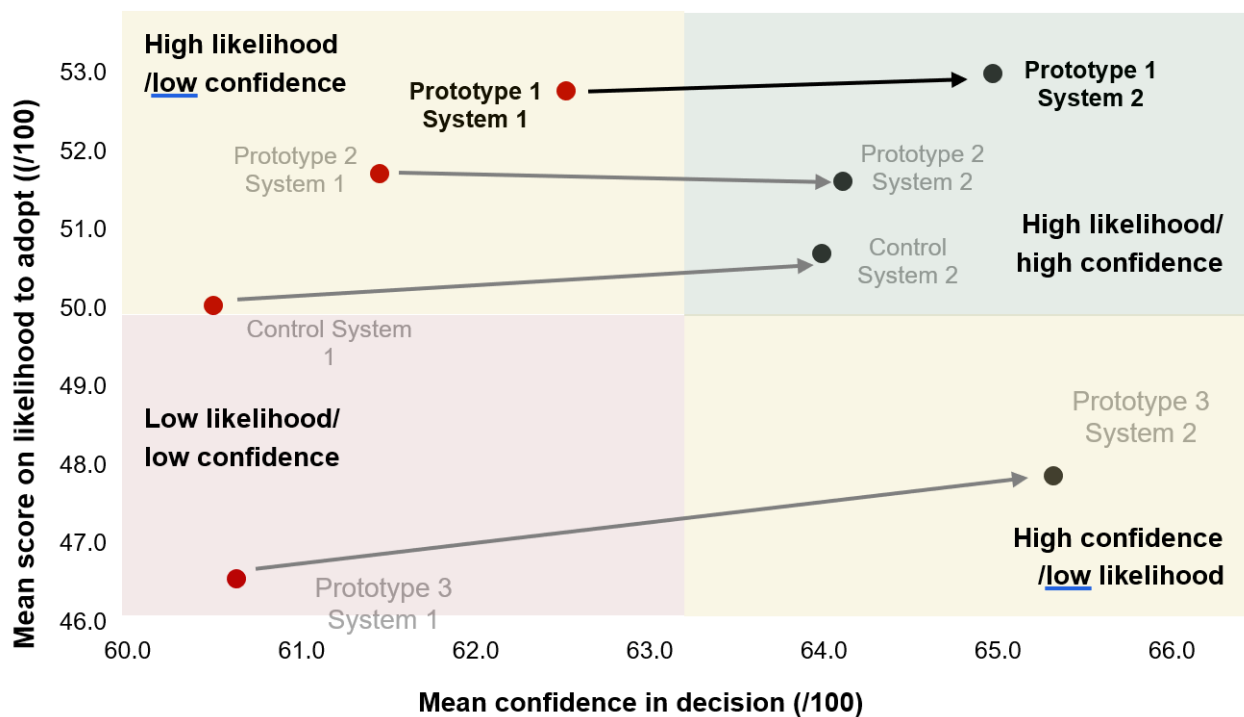
Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

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[6] Bausch, R. (2006). Predicting Willingness to Adopt a Child: A Consideration of Demographic and Attitudinal Factors. *Sociological Perspectives*; https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2006.49.1.47.

Attitudinal impact

The positive impact of the three Prototypes upon participants' perceptions of adoption was most evident for four measures (see Figure 15, Figure 16), two of which were also observed for fostering. (Please note: green arrows represent agreement that is significantly higher than the control group at 95% confidence, while red arrows represent agreement that is significantly lower than the control group at 95% confidence.)

- **People thinking about adoption can ask questions and find out more in confidence**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed Protypes 2 and 3, compared to the Control.

- **People who are considering adopting can access support and encouragement**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Protype 2 and Prototype 3, compared to the Control.

- **I know where to go to find out more about adoption**: level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Prototype 2, compared to the Control.

- **Adoption can be challenging:** level of agreement was higher among those exposed to Prototype 3, compared to the Control.

Figure 15.Significant differences in attitudes towards adoption, by Prototype (relative to the control)
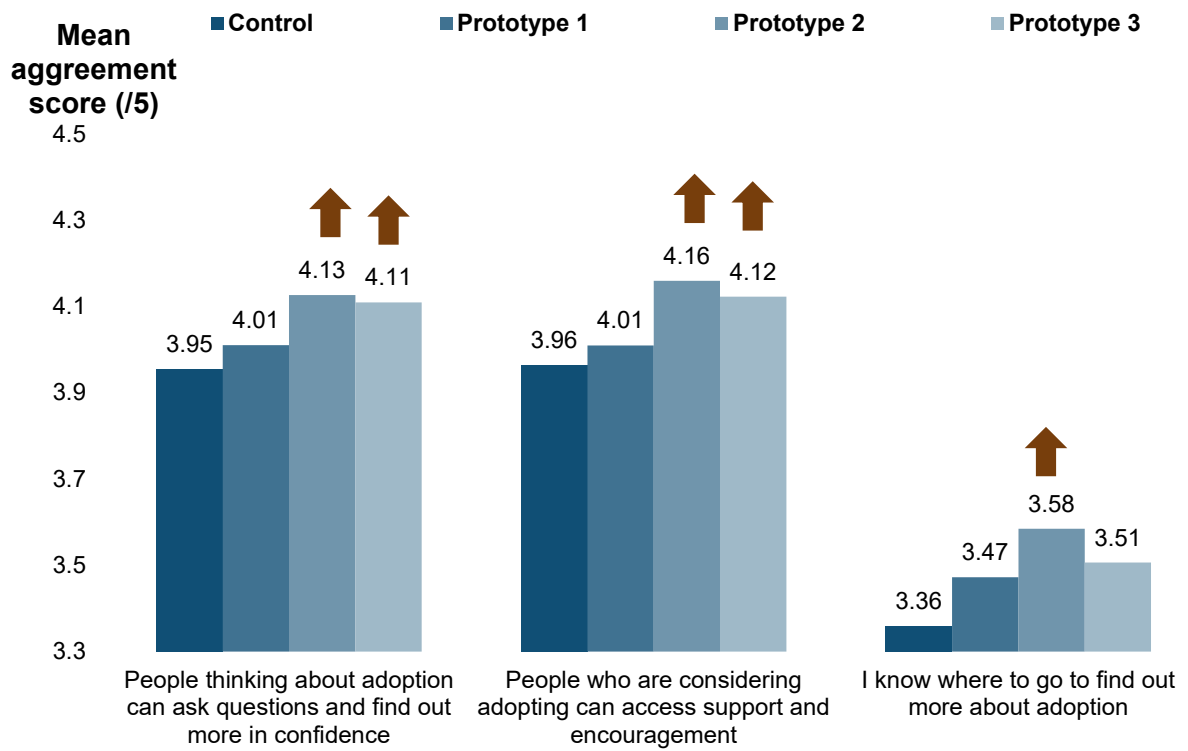
Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

Figure 16.Significant differences in attitudes towards adoption, by Prototype (relative to the control)
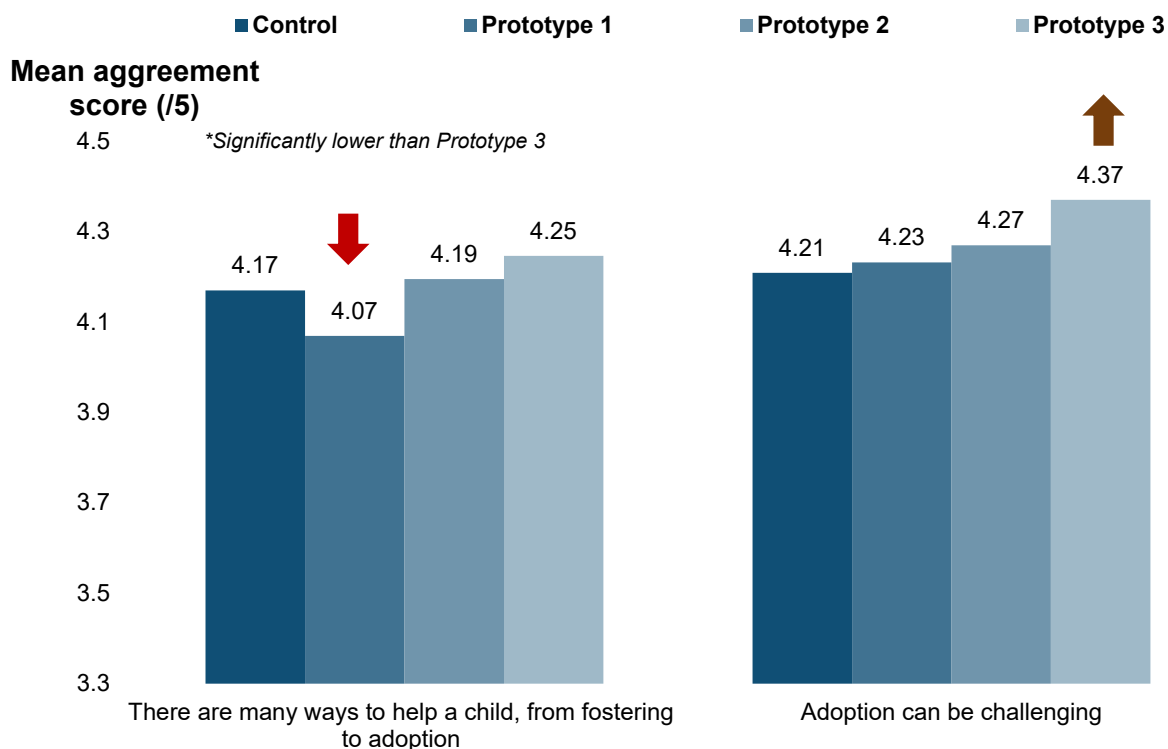
Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

Driver analysis identified two key differences between the fuel factors for adoption and fostering. Relative to fostering, the following two perceptions are more important for adoption:

- the availability of a safe space to ask questions about adoption, and

- information that helps inform decision-making regarding the choice between adoption and fostering.

The driver analysis also highlighted that, as for fostering, recognition of the surmountable challenges associated with adoption was fundamentally important in increasing behavioural intent (see Figure 17).

Therefore, increasing the belief that 'Adopting…has its challenges, but I think I can overcome them' is likely to have the following effects: a decrease in agreement that 'I am not sure if I have what it takes to adopt a child' and 'I don't have enough spare time to adopt a child'; and an increase in behavioural intention to adopt a child, both as a direct result of increasing this belief, and as a result of the indirect effects outlined.

Figure 17. Attitudinal fuel and friction factors for adoption
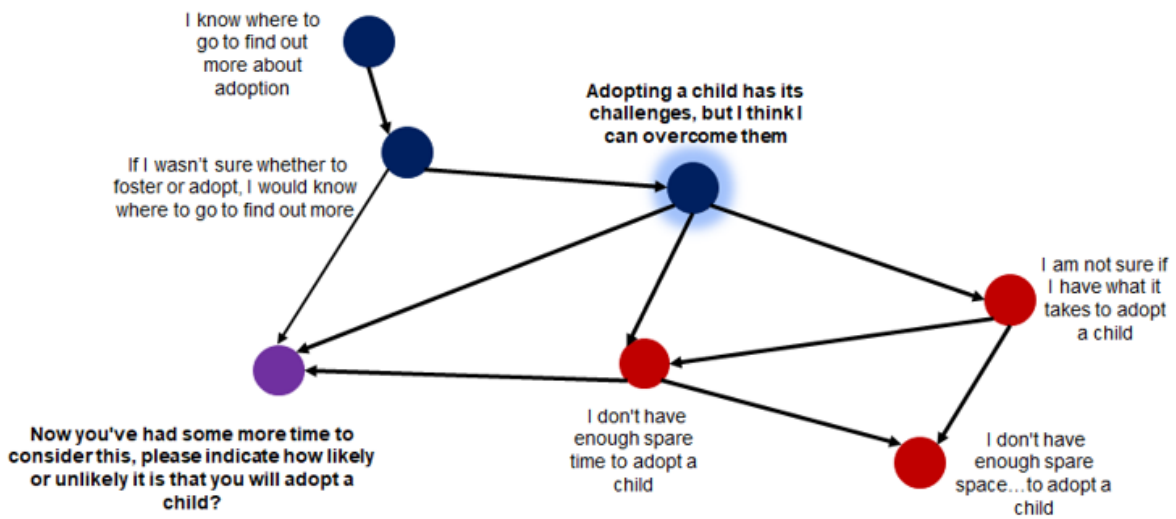
Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

Influential demographic characteristics

As with fostering, the demographic characteristic of adoption participants that most strongly determined attitudes towards adoption and intent to adopt was age.

Figure 18 illustrates the relationship between age and views with respect to adoption. As for fostering, those aged 21-34 and 35-44 were furthest within the consideration set, with more currently considering or applying to adopt at the time of the trial (14% and 15% across these two categories, respectively). Further, 21-34 year olds were significantly more likely to have indicated that they would 'do this in the future'.

(Please note: green arrows represent a proportion that is significantly higher than other groups at 95% confidence, while red arrows represent a proportion that is significantly lower than other groups at 95% confidence.)

**Figure 18. Views regarding adoption, by age (excludes 'have done this in the past')**
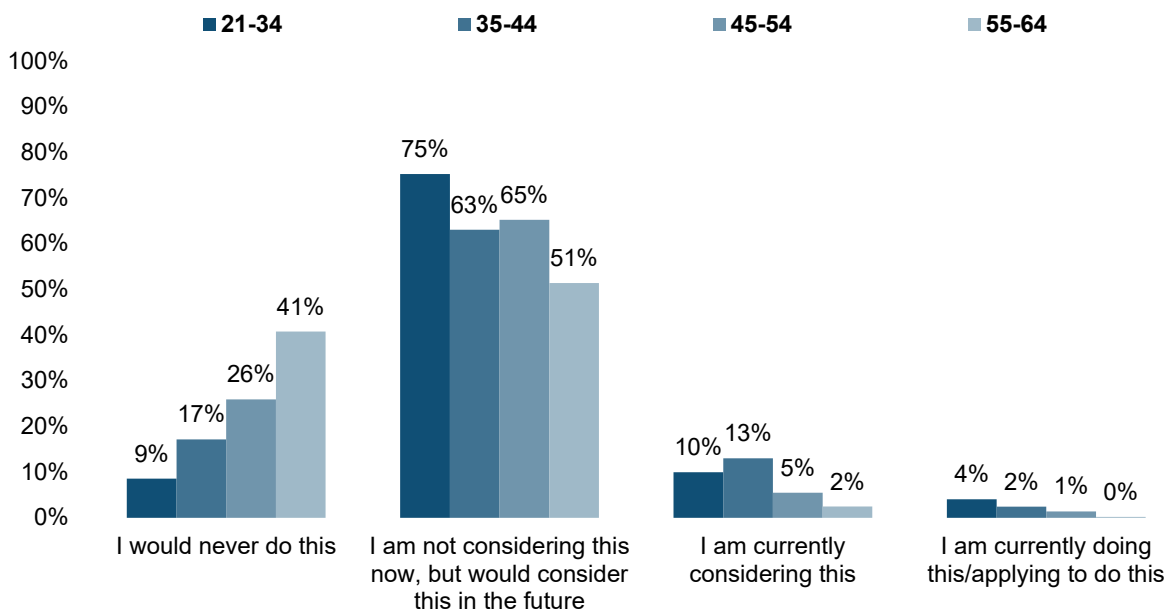
Which of the following best describes your views regarding adoption?

Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

As Figure 19 illustrates, importantly, Prototypes 1 and 2 were the most effective in maintaining likelihood to adopt across different life-stages. Further, these Prototypes performed best for the 21-34 year olds, the group most ripe for behaviour change.

Figure 19. Likelihood to adopt, by age and Prototype
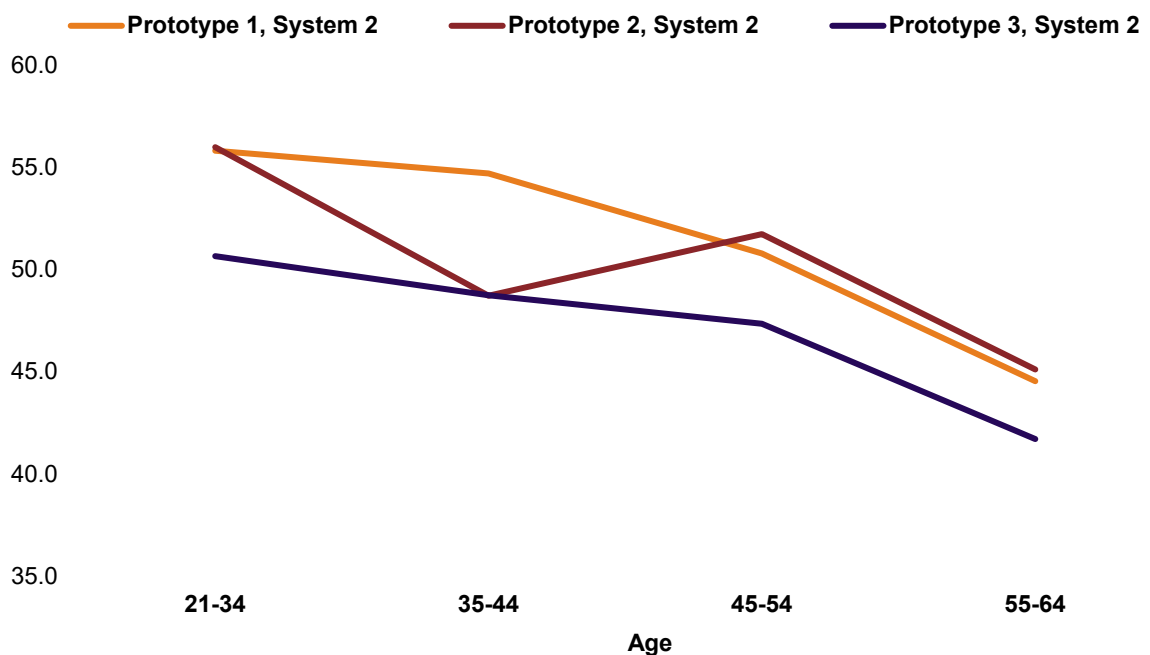
Base: n=949; participants in the adoption trial

Summary

Of the adoption Prototypes tested, Prototype 1 ('Do you want to transform a child's life?') performed best, likely due to its emphasis of a safe space for questions ("we're here to listen to your questions").

Across the adoption Prototypes, System 1 and System 2 responses regarding intent to adopt were consistent, a result which was not unexpected: choices made with respect to adoption have been shown to be highly considered (Bausch, 2006).

While Prototype 1 was most effective of the three messages, its impact could potentially be enhanced via incorporation of realistic information regarding the (surmountable) challenges that adoption involves (as contained in Prototype 2).

Conclusions

This conclusive chapter pulls together implications of key findings from the research for the recruitment strategy and summarises recommendations for communications and non-communications based interventions.

Applying the strategy pillars

This research found that reinforcing and enhancing people's sense of preparedness to foster or adopt is critical to securing quality leads and enabling them to take on increasingly challenging cases. In order to do this, it is necessary to bust myths and preconceptions about the reality of fostering and adoption and the application process, providing reliable and easily accessible information on options available, and helping leads find the most suitable option for them.

Our recommended strategy is therefore composed of four pillars:

INSPIRE – tapping into prospective applicants' vision for success to bring fostering and adoption top of mind and ignite their desire to pursue them.

UNLOCK – supporting people to realise their potential and see themselves fostering or adopting.

ADVANCE – instilling a sense of urgency and facilitating prospective applicants to explore options and choose the one most suited to them.

EQUIP – providing ongoing support and guidance to tackle anxieties and misconceptions about the care system and the application process.

As explained in Chapter 7, an effective strategy will combine elements from multiple pillars, and involve a mix of communications and non-communications - or service based - interventions. Tailored recommendations for each typology can be found on pp. 61-66.

Communications based interventions

Communications should be used primarily to INSPIRE potential leads, presenting fostering and adoption as options they can pursue, and making them salient. However these interventions should also be used to promote and support non-communications interventions, tapping into elements of the other pillars. For more detail on the below recommendations see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

- Present the **opportunity of exploring fostering and adoption as a continuum**, allowing people, and especially potential **<u>fostering leads</u>**, to choose the route most suited to them.

- Promote the fact that prospective applicants, and particularly **<u>adoption leads</u>**, will be **able to have their questions answered in a confidential and non-judgemental space,** helping them acquire information and navigate the marketplace.

- Illustrate the reality of fostering and adoption through **testimonials, stories or snapshots of real life;** showcase its rewards as well as its imperfections, to counter misconceptions and promote diversity. The same can be done with regards to **the stages of the application process, preparation needed, and the training and support provided** to become foster carers and adoptive parents.

- Validate prospective applicants' feelings by **providing an honest portrayal of challenges**, while **balancing this with the prospect of accessible and ongoing support.** This research shows that while this may not be universally motivating as a headline message, it should still be an integral component of the recruitment discourse.

With regards to tonality, the wording and style of communications should be **realistic, concrete, inclusive, and nurturing**. Messages should contribute to dispelling myths around perfection, debunking the idea that that people need to be completely ready or unrealistically selfless to start their fostering or adoption journey.

To maximise effectiveness, messages should clearly direct to points of access to follow up or gather more information. This research also suggests that targeting of communications should focus on 35-44 years olds for fostering and 21-34 and 35-44 years olds for adoption, as explained in Chapter 8.

Service based interventions

Service interventions should focus on addressing fragmented knowledge and nurturing potential, concentrating on the UNLOCK, ADVANCE and EQUIP pillars. The recommendations below therefore aim to address elements of the system which can undermine individual prospects for quality, giving potential leads the best chance to enter and succeed in the system. These are complementary to the communications proposed above, and a precondition for them. For more detail on them see Chapter 7.

- **Provide a 'safe space' to ask questions as a neutral enquiry point.** Supported by clear signposting and easy access online, such a space can act as a comprehensive repository of information, satisfying prospective applicants needs for reliable information and guidance, without fear of being judged prematurely. For those who prefer to enquire over the phone it can be translated into a welcoming, confidential and encouraging first call.

- **Adopt a more fluid approach to fostering and adoption enquiries,** addressing the need for more guidance on the difference between the two and on how to explore the best fit for a potential applicant. While this currently falls beyond the scope of how LAs, IFAs and RAAs work, it is worth considering whether more cross fertilisation could be achieved, perhaps through increased collaboration between agencies.

- **Embrace a nurturing approach starting from enquiry and all the way through to approval**, by ensuring that the first call is welcoming and understanding; creating mechanisms to stay in contact with those who enquired but were not quite ready; and providing ongoing development opportunities. Best practices of nurturing prospective applicants' potential already exist in the system. They provide an opportunity to retain warm leads and illustrate that people don't need to be perfect from the offset.

- **Offer access to current foster carers or adoptive parents through forums, dedicated networks or buddy systems**, allowing potential leads to explore real life experiences, and get independent advice or support. This could include mentoring through the application process, which could significantly help equip people to move forward.

Appendix A – Detailed methodology

Scoping phase

Review of existing evidence of behavioural influences on fostering and adoption recruitment

The research team carried out a rapid evidence assessment (REA) of fostering and adoption literature to build a knowledge base of existing evidence on behaviours influencing fostering and adoption recruitment. The review allowed the team to better understand the context in which fostering and adoption decisions are made, identify gaps in the literature to inform further exploration and develop the sample structure for the primary research. Evidence was organised for analysis using the COM-B framework, juxtaposing drivers and barriers in capability, opportunity and motivation to foster and adopt.

Evidence was identified through systematic searches of both academic and published grey literature, guided by a review protocol. A long list of sources was narrowed down for detailed review based on an assessment of relevance and quality and was supplemented with additional sources identified through hand searching bibliographies and recommendations from the scoping interviews (explored overleaf).

The complete bibliography can be found here:

- Narey, M., & Owers, M. (2018). Foster Care in England. A Review for the Department for Education

- Baginsky, M., Gorin, S., & Sands, C. (2017). The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review

- DfE (2018). Fostering Better Outcomes

- The Education Select Committee inquiry into fostering (2017).

- Kindred. Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters

- The Adoption Barometer (2019)

- Clifton, J., & Neil, E. (2013). Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officers

- Ward, E. (2003). Adoptive Parent Motivation. A Psychosocial exploration of deciding on adoptive parenthood.

- Dance, C., & Farmer, E. (2014). Changing lives and changing minds: the experiences of adoptive parents from application to approval

- Lawson, K., & Cann, R. (2019). State of the nation's foster care

- Foyle, J. (2013). The Fostering Network. Why Foster Carers Care.

- The Muslim Fostering Project Report

- Wilson, K. (2006). The Professionalism of Foster Care

- Colton, M., Robert, S., & Williams, M. (2009). The recruitment and retention of family foster carers: An international and cross cultural analysis

- Scott, A., & Duncan, C. Kindred Agency Limited. (2013). Understanding attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering. A marketing proposal for the Department for Education

- Sebba, J. (2012). Why do people become foster carers. An international literature review on the motivation to foster

- McDermid, S., Holmes, L., Kirton, D., & Signoretta, P. (2012). The demographic characteristics of foster carers in the UK:Motivations, barriers and messages for recruitment and retention

Scoping interviews with sector stakeholders

To complete the scoping phase, the research team conducted 20 interviews with a range of stakeholders in local authorities, independent fostering agencies and regional adoption agencies to:

- Understand the context in which applications to fostering and adoption are made

- Explore current understanding of what does and doesn't work in recruitment

- Gather recruitment materials considered effective to act as stimulus in primary research

- Check the relevance and validity of the emerging insight models

- Further clarify the sample frame for primary research

Interviews were conducted with individuals working in a range of roles and with different expertise regarding fostering and adoption recruitment. These included marketing leads, agency CEO's, recruitment leads and academics. This stage was essential in building a solid understanding of the system as it currently is, and the best practice and barriers existing within it. It enabled the team to form an understanding of frictions to be explored in the primary research and develop recommendations that can be effective within the confines of the current system. Insight from these interviews was examined both in

isolation and holistically, enabling identification of similarities and differences in the drivers and barriers to recruitment between service providers' and respondents' experiences.

Primary research

Household immersions

30 in depth interviews were conducted with respondents at different stages of the fostering and adoption process (e.g. considering, researching, applying, dropped out, went on to foster or adopt) to explore their experiences and views of recruitment as well as their motivations and concerns. The sample was split equally across fostering and adoption and was designed to include of a range of demographics and lifestyle characteristics identified as influential on quality recruitment leads in the previous stage, including faith, sexual orientation and ethnicity.

For each interview researchers spent 150 minutes in the respondent's home to understand contextual factors and priorities influencing attitudes and behaviours. Interviews revolved around respondents' stories and focussed on their personal journeys with fostering and adoption, with the aim to build a holistic picture of their perceptions, experiences, drivers, and challenges at each stage preceding and forming the recruitment process. Photos were taken of respondents and their homes to capture the reality and diversity of applicants and to bring them to life in the research outputs.

The themes covered in each immersion included:

- Participant background, including details about home life, family and a typical week, using a 'wheel of life' to identify priorities and areas for change.

- Perceptions of fostering and adoption, views on a typical applicant and exploration of who and what makes a 'good' foster carer or adoptive parent

- In-depth exploration of the journey from pre-contemplation, initial triggers, researching, selecting an agency/authority, the process (application, assessment, matching) and dropping out or going on to foster or adopt, probing motivations, barriers, feelings and perceptions at each stage.

- Reactions to a selection of existing recruitment materials and images.

Insight from the household immersions was used to develop sample frame and stimulus for the ensuing group discussion.

Focus group discussions

The team held eight focus groups with participants who were either open to adoption in the future, while not considering it right now (cold audiences) or interested but at early stages in their consideration (warm audiences) for fostering and adoption separately.

These groups were also divided into pre- and post- family groups to explore the differences in motivations and barriers between these groups and ensure a shared experience between participants to facilitate the discussion. These focus groups covered similar introductory topics as the immersive interviews, exploring initial associations with fostering and adoption, perceptions of a 'typical' and 'good' foster carer or adoptive parent and individual motivations and barriers. Participants were given time to read the materials and form opinions before discussing these further as a group. The groups were useful in building understanding of perceptions in a more generalised population and in refining the messaging concepts further.

Recommendations development

Analysis and interventions co-creation

Following the primary research, we conducted a thematic analysis, systematically mapping responses from all interviews in an Excel framework that allowed us to review responses both within and across cases. This framework was structured around the discussion guide as well as the underlying COM-B factors motivating behaviour for each individual. Alongside this, we held a series of brainstorms within the research team, structured around the key research questions and integrating insight from all stages of research in order to develop emerging findings. Based on outputs from these two processes, we developed nine audience typologies across four quadrants, with five representing fostering and four representing adoption.

Final recommendations were developed through a co-creation workshop with the core research team, Ogilvy's Behavioural Science unit, DfE and stakeholders from fostering and adoption agencies. This workshop immersed attendees in the emerging findings and typologies (using presentations and pen portraits) before introducing the EAST (Easy, Attractive, Social, Timely) model to brainstorm recommendations and messaging ideas across the population and for each typology. The research team then worked with Ogilvy to further develop these ideas to create final propositions for quantitative testing. These final materials were designed to be effective across typologies and test key concepts arising from the analysis, for example the idea for a 'safe space' for exploration of questions and a joint up approach to fostering and adoption recruitment.

Impact of three prototypes developed from the co-creation workshop on likely behaviour were tested in the Behaviour Change Lab, Kantar's online randomised controlled trial (RCT) platform.

Appendix B – Sample frames

Fostering depth interviews

TOTAL ACHIEVED	15
STAGE OF THE JOURNEY	
Interested/considered but unsure if they would be the right person	4
Considering, researching (online/talking to others)	6
Dropped out of the application process (own accord)	2
Went on to foster	5
RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE CHARACTERISTICS	
Practicing faith	4
Same sex	3
Caring profession	5
Empty nesters	3
Active in local community	9
BAME	5
SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP	
AB	5
C1	7
C2	2
DE	1
AGE	
21-24	0
25-34	4
35-44	5
45-54	2
55-64	3
65+	1
GENDER	
Male	3
Female	12

Adoption depth interviews

TOTAL ACHIEVED	**15**
ATTITUDE	
Interested/considered but unsure if they would be the right person	6
Considering, researching (online/talking to others)	3
Dropped out of the application process (own accord)	0
Went on to adopt	6
RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE CHARACTERISTICS	
Adopted sibling groups	2
Adopted child with complex needs	2
At least one biological child	5
Caring profession	7
Same sex	3
BAME	3
SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP	
AB	6
C1	6
C2	3
DE	0
AGE	
21-24	0
25-34	5
35-44	6
45-54	4
55-64	0
65+	0
GENDER	
Male	5
Female	10

Fostering group discussions

TOTAL ACHIEVED	**23**
ATTITUDES TO FOSTERING	
Considering applying to be a foster carer in the near future	1
Thinking about fostering as an option but not ready to apply	5
Have done some research into becoming a foster carer and are considering it for the future	5
Have not given it much thought but could see themselves doing it/wouldn't rule it out in the future	12
LIFESTAGE	
Single, no children	6
Living with partner, no children	5
Living with partner and children at home	7
Not living with partner and children at home	1
Empty nester	4
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
Heterosexual	20
Same sex	3
LOCATION	
London	6
Bristol	6
Birmingham	5
Manchester	6
SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP	
AB	6
C1	7
C2	8
DE	2
AGE	
21-24	0
25-34	8
35-44	7
45-54	6
55-64	2
65+	0
ETHNICITY	

White	12
BAME	11
GENDER	
Male	10
Female	13

Adoption group discussions

TOTAL ACHIEVED	**23**
ATTITUDES TO FOSTERING	
Considering applying for adoption in the near future	1
Thinking about adoption as an option but not ready to apply	6
Have done some research into adoption and are considering it for the future	5
Have not given it much thought but could see themselves doing it/wouldn't rule it out in the future	11
LIFESTAGE	
Single, no children	9
Living with partner, no children	8
Living with partner and children at home	4
Not living with partner and children at home	0
Empty nester	2
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
Heterosexual	12
Same sex	6
LOCATION	
London	6
Bristol	6
Birmingham	6
Manchester	5
SOCIOECONOMIC GROUP	
AB	2
C1	11
C2	5
DE	5
AGE	
21-24	2
25-34	11
35-44	6

45-54	4
55-64	0
65+	0
ETHNICITY	
White	13
BAME	10
GENDER	
Male	11
Female	12

Appendix C – Depth interviews (household immersions) topic guide

40311620 DfE Applying Behavioural insights to fostering and adoption recruitment in England

Topic Guide for Household Immersions

150 minutes

Researcher information

Background

DfE wants to ensure that there are the right placements for children in the right place at the right time. Part of that is working to support LAs, RAAs and other agencies (IFAs and VAAs) in retaining and increasing the capacity in foster care and adoption places in England. This will involve recruiting more people to become foster carers or adoptive parents by raising awareness and understanding, addressing concerns and myths, leveraging motivations, and broadening demographics. It also means increasing specific types of placement and improving retention, so capacity more accurately maps onto demand.

Previous work has identified drivers/barriers and other important factors, and proposed plans which have been implemented. We now need to deepen this insight and develop new, evidenced recommendations for communications and other interventions.

This study has been designed to provide robust **insight into the facilitators and barriers** that influence enquires and applications among different audience groups; and actionable and tested **recommendations for communications/interventions** that will leverage and overcome these influencers, to drive action among these groups

Our research programme comprises 5 key stages:

- **Inception:** clarify and agree how the project will work, building on this proposal

- **Evidence review and scoping:** collect insight and recruitment materials from existing evidence and LA/agency experts to produce initial insight models and inform further research

- **Primary research:** exploratory qualitative approach involving household immersions and group discussions to deepen insight models, develop audience typologies, and inform recommendations development

- **Recommendations development:** workshop to develop and filter ideas and underpinning theories of change

- **Interventions development:** co-creation workshop to finalise ideas; quantitative effectiveness assessment using Behaviour Change Lab

This interview forms part of the primary research, and will be followed by 8 group discussions.

The structure of the immersions is as follows:

- Participant context - lifestage, lifestyle, values, aspirations

- Initial thoughts on and impressions of fostering/adoption

- Their journey so far

- Revisiting perceptions of fostering/adoption, motivations and barriers

- Exploration of information sources, recruitment materials

- Further immersion: could include tour of house, conversation with partner, observation of parent with children – tailored to each participant

- Final thoughts

Please note, this guide is not a script and is intended to be used flexibly, with participant responses guiding the flow of the conversation, topics covered in the order that they naturally arise, and probes used as needed

Bear in mind that key output from each interview is an insight model listing friction and fuel factors (i.e. barriers and drivers) under the key areas of the COM-B model: **capability** (physical and psychological), **opportunity** (environmental and social) and **motivation** (automatic and reflective) – so it's important to get a clear picture of these for each respondent, and of how they fit within their life / context. See the elements making up each area below:

Capability				
Individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in the activity concerned				
Physical Physical actions that require ability or proficiency learned through practice (e.g. ability to use computer)	**Psychological** Mental process or skill that is required to perform the behaviour (e.g. decision making abilities)			
Physical Skills	Knowledge	Cognitive/interpersonal skills	Memory, attention and decision processes	Behavioural regulation

Opportunity	
External social & physical factors that make wanted behaviours more likely to happen & the unwanted behaviours less likely to happen	
Physical Anything in the physical environment that discourages or encourages the performance of the behaviour (e.g. availability of services)	**Social** Influences that come from friends, family, colleagues & other influential people that support the doing or not doing of a behaviour
Environmental context and resources	Social influences

Motivation							
The reasons for performing or not performing desired behaviour							
Automatic Emotional responses, desires and habits resulting from associative learning and physiological states		**Reflective** Beliefs about what is good and bad, conscious intentions, decisions and plans (e.g. planning future)					
Reinforcement (i.e. behaviour / beliefs that has been rewarded or punished before	Emotion	Social / professional role & identity	Beliefs about capabilities	Optimism	Intentions	Goals	Beliefs about consequences

Stimulus material

▪ Typical week data capture

▪ 'Wheel of life' printed on card A3

▪ Blank cards for 'first words to describe fostering/adoption'

▪ Blank A3 paper for journey mapping

▪ Blank cards for mapping exercise

▪ Selection of numbered images (positive/harmonious images from Cheryl plus some other images to show range of situations and emotions in family life eg messy, a bit chaotic, juggling lots of things, tired)

- Selection of recruitment materials (separate set for fostering and for adoption)

We will also have some suggestions of resources for participants who would like further support or information.

1. Introduction   5 minutes

- **Thanks and introduction**: Introduce yourself and Kantar (Public Division) – independent
research agency

- **About the client:** Research on behalf of DfE

- **Brief mention of research aims and purpose of discussion:** aim to understand what attracts people to foster/adopt and what the barriers can be

- **Ethical considerations:** Anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation – names will not be used in the reporting

- **Duration:** up to 150 minutes.

- **Reassurances:** No right or wrong answers - we are simply asking for people's views, we know that everyone's experiences and feelings will be different

- **Reminder about audio recording:** the discussion will be recorded so that we can accurately capture their views, and so researchers can listen back. The recorder is encrypted and only the research team will have access to the recordings.

- **Permission to take photos** and share consent form (already covered in recruitment screening). They don't have to agree to all uses of their data and select the ones they happy with by putting their initials against the relevant boxes and signing the form. If they consent to their pictures of them (i.e. their face) being shared with the client, while pictures will not be made public, they will no longer be anonymous - although all other personal details will be confidential. We are of course happy take anonymised pictures to be shared internally / with the client if they prefer.

- **Any questions/concerns?**

- **Start recording:** acknowledge consent for being recorded

2. Participant background   25 minutes

Objectives

- Warm the respondent up

- Start building a picture of their life – financial situation, social networks, amount of spare time and attitudes to family & how that might influence decision to foster / adopt

- Understand wider motivations, priorities and aspirations

- **Participant introduction and warm-up**
    - Name, what would you be doing if we weren't doing this today?
    - Initial introduction – family, home life, social life, work life
        - What does a typical week look like for you? If they struggle to articulate, ask about last week (data capture printed on card)
    - Personality – how would you describe this with a couple of adjectives? What would friends/family/colleagues say?

- Introduce **WHEEL OF LIFE** (printed on card) as a tool for building up a picture of what's going on in their life at the moment – using this with a light touch, keeping it conversational and anecdotal, until the participant is comfortable reflecting on things more deeply
    - Recap on the areas already mentioned, probing further 'what does that mean to you', 'why is that important to you'
    - Introduce other areas, exploring each one in turn
    - If helpful, give different areas a 'rating' (a mark out of 5, a smiley face, a tick/cross/question mark) to sum up what's going well and what could be better right now

- Build on discussion of wheel of life to explore future goals and aspirations, hopes and fears
    - If we met again in 5 years' time, do you think any areas of this will have changed?
    - Which do you think will have changed the most?
    - Which would you like to change? Why is that important to you?
    - Listen out for and probe and goals, aspirations, hopes
    - Listen out for and probe any fears, concerns, challenges, tensions

- NB Throughout, listen out for and note any references to fostering/adoption; references to the role of children in their life; references to what caring/parenting means to them; their financial situation (e.g. sources of income, current financial priorities, money needs); social networks (e.g. how connected are they, what support can they count on) - be ready to revisit these later during discussion of motivation

- NB Throughout, listen out for and note any particular fears, concerns, anxieties – be ready to revisit these later during discussion of barriers

- NB Throughout, make a note of language used in order to echo this where relevant during discussion

3. First thoughts/perceptions of fostering/adoption   20 minutes

> ### Objectives
>
> - Explore respondents' understanding of fostering and adoption and what influenced it
> - Understand respondents' attitudes to the idea of a typical foster carer / adoptive parent, what it means to them and how it compares to the view they have of themselves
> - Understand what being a good foster carer / adoptive parent means to them and how they feel it compares to them

- Introduce focus on fostering/adoption, acknowledging any references to this so far. While focus of interviews is specifically on either fostering or adoption, explore attitudes and associations with both with each respondent (even though high level).

- Let's imagine we started our conversation here… what are the first words that come to mind when you think of fostering/adoption – can be anything at all?
    - Write each one on a separate card (can revisit later if helpful)
    - Encourage participant to include adjectives, verbs and nouns
    - Where do you feel this idea comes from? **PROBE:** word of mouth / stories from friends or acquaintances, direct experience, adverts on tv / online, articles they read etc.
    - If respondent is in a caring profession: how do you think the work you do compares to fostering? What are the similarities / differences?
    - If respondent has children: how do you feel adoption could fit / fits in with your family?

- And what is the picture in your head when you think of fostering/adoption?
    - What can you see? Picture the scene… who is there? What are they doing?

- o   What is the atmosphere like? What are the feelings you associate with this picture?

- And does any impression come to mind of a 'typical person' who is ready to foster/adopt?

  - o   If so, explore further… what is this person like?

  - o   If not, why is that?

  - o   Probing for personality, skills, values, motivations

- If not covered above, do you have an impression of what a good carer/parent is like?

  - o   If so, explore further… what is this person like?

  - o   Probing for demographics, personality, skills, values, motivations

  - o   What does 'good' mean here?

  - o   NB Listening out for any references to the children involved and their needs.

- Reflect on any impressions above

  - o   Where do these come from?

  - o   Probing any references to forming impressions based on people they know/word of mouth/information and marketing materials/representation in media, culture/what else?

  - o   How do they compare to you / the people you know?

- Explore feelings about these impressions… 'so it sounds like you see a typical/good foster carer/adoptive parent as X Y Z… how does that make you feel?

  - o   Listen out for and probe any aspects of this that resonate with them or reassure them – e.g. skills or personality traits that they feel they have

  - o   Listen out for and probe any aspects of this that they don't feel they have – what impact does that have for them?

- **For those who have gone on to foster/adopt**, and for **those who have dropped out of the fostering application process**, explore any change in perceptions

  - o   Can you remember your first impressions?

  - o   Any difference in your impressions now?

  - o   Probe for any references to stereotypes, myths, misconceptions

- **Show range of images** (briefly)

- o Do any of these reflect your impressions of fostering/adoption?
- o In what way?
- o Probe further for impressions of what 'typical' or 'good' looks like

NB Make a note of images chosen, in case useful to compare these to recruitment materials later on

4. Their journey so far   30 minutes

Objectives

- Map key steps in respondents' journey through the recruitment process
- Revisit experiences and emotions throughout
- Understand triggers and drivers for key decisions and behaviours
- Explore enablers and barriers for quality enquiries (i.e. enquiries with a potential to convert in successful recruitment) and applications

Using A3 paper to work with the participant to create a map that reflects where they started on the journey, where they have got to, where they are headed to next (as applicable)

NB The purpose of this exercise is to explore motivations for and enablers and barriers to fostering/adoption, with a particular focus on facilitators and barriers that influence enquires and applications among different audience groups– revisiting the experience and emotions at different stages of the journey will be a good springboard for this.

It is likely that participants will want to share this experience if they have had problems or challenges along the way – listen to and acknowledge these but keep the goals and focus of this section in mind. We're really interested in their position/experiences before the enquiry is made, and the journey mapping is a way to get at that.

Researchers to keep in mind the broad stages of the recruitment journey and probing to uncover triggers, motivations and circumstances affecting decisions if necessary.

- Starting to consider the possibility of fostering / adopting
- Researching / getting information
- Choosing organisation
- Enquiring
- House visit
- Starting application process

- Application process / assessment / training
- Dropping out / going on to foster adoption

FOR THOSE AT THE START OF THE JOURNEY – PRE-APPLICATION

- Initial creation of the main journey points, marking these on a timeline
    - How would you describe where you have got to so far?
    - What was the very first step on your journey? How long ago was that?
    - What will the next steps be?
    - Is there a destination/endpoint? How far off is that?

- Exploration of key points on the journey (tailored to each participant)
    - How do/did you feel at this point?
    - Why did you decide to move to the next step?
    - Who, if anyone, did you talk about this with? Who, if anyone helped you make this decision?
    - What was going on in your life at that point?
    - Probing for the impact on motivation – was this experience encouraging/de-moralising, a spur/a setback etc
    - What support did you receive / feel was missing?
    - What challenges did you encounter?
    - How do you feel your journey compares to other people you know / others going through it? Why?

- Revisiting the very start of the journey
    - Casting your mind back to this point – can you set the scene for us, what was life like at the time, what else was going on (compare to their current 'wheel of life' if helpful)
    - Any sense of a specific trigger?
    - Had you thought about the possibility of fostering / adopting before? When?
    - If so, to what extent did you act on it? Why?
    - If not, why now?
    - Recalling feelings at this point – probing for any motivations, aspirations, hopes – also for any fears, concerns, uncertainties

- How do you feel your experience / feelings compare to others going through the same journey? Why?

- Building on the previous section, track how their impressions have formed at different stages
    - Any key moments that influenced whether they felt confident/concerned about their suitability to foster/adopt?
    - Any key moments that influenced whether they felt motivated/unsure that they wanted to go ahead?
    - How would you sum up your feelings now? And as you look ahead to the next steps?

FOR THOSE WHO WENT ON TO FOSTER/ADOPT

Acknowledge that this has been a long journey! Explain that we are particularly interested in revisiting the start of the journey

- Initial creation of the main journey points, marking these on a timeline
    - How would you describe where you have got to so far?
    - What was the very first step on your journey? How long ago was that?
    - Have you reached the endpoint?
    - If not, what are the next points on the journey?

- Revisiting the very start of the journey
    - Casting your mind back to this point – can you set the scene for us, what was life like at the time, what else was going on (compare to their current 'wheel of life' if helpful)
    - Any sense of a specific trigger?
    - Had you thought about the possibility of fostering / adopting before? When?
    - If so, to what extent did you act on it? Why?
    - If not, why now?
    - Recalling feelings at this point – probing for any motivations, aspirations, hopes – also for any fears, concerns, uncertainties
    - How do you feel your experience / feelings compare to others going through the same journey? Why?

- For each in the journey:
    - How do/did you feel at this point?

- o Why did you decide to move to the next step?

- o Who, if anyone, did you talk about this with? Who, if anyone helped you make this decision?

- o What was going on in your life at that point?

- o Probing for the impact on motivation – was this experience encouraging/de-moralising, a spur/a setback etc

- o What support did you receive / feel was missing?

- o What challenges did you encounter?

- o How do you feel your journey compares to other people you know / others going through it? Why?

- Reflecting on points of the journey that reassured them

  - o Any points that made you feel that you were doing the right thing?

  - o And/or that you were the right person to be doing this?

- Reflecting on points of the journey that unsettled them

  - o Any points that made you unsure that this the right thing for you?

  - o And/or that you were the right person to be doing this?

  - o How did you overcome these difficulties?

- Reflecting on any moments of confusion/misconception/misunderstanding

  - o Any points were you felt you had got the wrong idea about what was required? (Either to be a good foster carer/adoptive parent, or to make it through the screening)

  - o If so, how did these affect you?

  - o What could have been done differently to avoid this kind of confusion/misconception/
    misunderstanding

FOR THOSE WHO DROPPED OUT OF THE APPLICATION PROCESS FOR FOSTER-ING

Acknowledge that this may have been a difficult process - explain that we are particularly interested in revisiting the start of the journey

- Initial creation of the main journey points, marking these on a timeline

  - o How would you describe where you have got to so far?

- What was the very first step on your journey? How long ago was that?

- When did the journey end for you?

- Revisiting the very start of the journey

    o Casting your mind back to this point – can you set the scene for us, what was life like at the time, what else was going on (compare to their current 'wheel of life' if helpful)

    o Any sense of a specific trigger?

    o Had you thought about the possibility of fostering / adopting before? When?

    o If so, to what extent did you act on it? Why?

    o If not, why now?

    o Recalling feelings at this point – probing for any motivations, aspirations, hopes – also for any fears, concerns, uncertainties

    o How do you feel your experience / feelings compare to others going through the same journey? Why?

- For each in the journey:

    o How do/did you feel at this point?

    o Why did you decide to move to the next step?

    o Who, if anyone, did you talk about this with? Who, if anyone helped you make this decision?

    o What was going on in your life at that point?

    o Probing for the impact on motivation – was this experience encouraging/de-moralising, a spur/a setback etc

    o What support did you receive / feel was missing?

    o What challenges did you encounter?

    o How do you feel your journey compares to other people you know / others going through it? Why?

- Reflecting on points of the journey that reassured them

    o Any points that made you feel that you were doing the right thing?

    o And/or that you were the right person to be doing this?

- Reflecting on points of the journey that unsettled them

    o Any points that made you unsure that this the right thing for you?

- o   And/or that you were the right person to be doing this?

- Reflecting on any moments of confusion/misconception/misunderstanding

   - o   Any points were you felt you had got the wrong idea about what was required? (Either to be a good foster carer, or to make it through the screening)

   - o   If so, how did these affect you?

   - o   What could have been done differently to avoid this kind of confusion/misconception/
misunderstanding

FOR EVERYONE throughout this section listen out for and probe any references to sources of information, websites, marketing materials etc – revisit these later in Section 6

FOR EVERYONE throughout this section listen out for and probe any perceptions of what it takes to make a good foster carer/adoptive parent, and what it takes to make it through the application process

5. Further exploration of motivations and barriers   20 minutes

Objectives

- Reflect on motivations and barriers
- Understand any additional information needs

- Revisiting what has been said by far, what are all the possible motivations to foster or adopt

   - o   Write on cards, using participant's own language – probing for the full meaning where unclear. **PROBE if needed (can use flashcards printed on card):**

      - ▪ Money – Income

      - ▪ Family - extend family, replace older children, infertility

      - ▪ Social – friends/family adopting/fostering, stand out / fit in, help children of the same ethnicity / religious belief / background

      - ▪ Work – desire to stay at home, career/job, skills suited to this profession

      - ▪ Outer Motivations/ Altruism – doing a good thing, helping a child

- - Inner Motivations – satisfaction, sense of purpose, desire for status – being the kind of person who puts others first, desire for personal development, wanting to blaze the trail / stand out / fit in

  - Life experiences – own childhood, experiences, skills

- And what are all the barriers/things that get in the way?

  - Write on cards, using participant's own language – probing for the full meaning where unclear. **PROBE if needed (can use flashcards printed on card):**

    - Money – financially unable to support a child, afford a larger house

    - Family – support from partner/extended family

    - Social – stigma, support available

    - Work – career goals, work/childcare/flexible working etc, time

    - Children available – perceptions, preconceptions/stereotypes

    - Beliefs about capabilities, worries, concerns

    - Lack of knowledge –about process, what to expect, where to get information

- Mapping of barriers (assuming there are enough)

  - How would you group these? Ask participant to organise the cards into different groups and talk this through

  - Which group represents the biggest barriers for you?

  - What could help you to overcome these?

  - Are there any that you have overcome already?

  - NB Use this exercise to probe for C O M factors – which of these aspects could be holding people back?

- If not already covered, sum up perceptions of what it takes to foster/adopt

  - Probing for C O M factors, to build up a full picture e.g. personality traits / motivation (e.g. altruism, desire for a family, desire for status), capabilities (e.g. feeling comfortable with children, resilience, physical endurance), practical resources / opportunity (e.g. spare room, money, networks to support, school nearby)

- For participants who are at the start of their journey, how do they feel they compare to this picture?

- o For any aspects they feel are lacking, what could help them to address this?

- o Or, for any possible misconceptions, what if someone told you that this wouldn't be a problem

6. Recruitment materials   15 minutes

Objectives

- Explore respondents' reactions to marketing materials
- Identify any key messages that would have motivated them at different stages

- Recap on any materials they have come across so far
    - o First impressions, what stood out, key messages
    - o How did they make them feel?

- Show range of materials, printed out – ask participant to take a look and to select any that strike a chord with them, plus any that really don't work for them

- Focusing on the materials that strike a chord
    - o First impressions, words to describe
    - o What are the aspects that they can relate to?
    - o How do these make them feel?
    - o Who do they think these are targeted at? (If helpful build up a full picture here in order to explore motivations further: what kind of person? Why do they want to foster/
      adopt? What are their goals, hopes, aspirations? What are they concerned about?)

- Focusing on the materials that miss the mark for them
    - o Where have they gone wrong? What are they missing?
    - o Explore projectively if helpful – thinking about the person described above, what would they make of these? What would be missing for them?
    - o How do these materials make them feel?

- Thinking about their own motivations for fostering/adoption, do any of the materials capture these?
    - If so, how? What can we learn from these materials?
    - If not, can they imagine any materials that would do this? What kind of words, imagery? Would any of the images shown earlier be helpful here?

7. Further immersion   25 minutes

NB tailored to participant – in order to get a fuller picture of motivations and barriers / explore their journey further by recalling their actions. **Slot as applicable throughout the interview and combine with shot list guide**.

This could cover:

- Conversation with partner

- Tour of the house - respondent showing us around / bit of their house that are important to them

- 'Meet the family', observation of interactions with children (but not interviewing the children) – if the children are at home this may also have happened throughout the interview or on arrival

- Talking through their support network in more detail

- Explore how they go about selecting a website / provider they're interested in

- Looking back through their application files to reflect on moments in the journey

- Looking through the information and materials they have collected so far

- Going online to look at places they visited for information – what elements captured their interest / attention?

- Looking at 'myth busting' information online

- Carrying out some fresh searches online to see how they feel about different approaches. Suggested websites:

    - More info based LA websites: e.g. https://www.islington.gov.uk/children-and-families/adoption-and-fostering/adoption

    - More emotive, and myth busting: e.g. https://www.adoptsouthwest.org.uk/adopting-a-child/myth-busting/

    - Foster parent stories: e.g. https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/fostering/support/carers-stories; https://www.barnardos.org.uk/case-studies/jem (fostering)

    - Adoption & myth busting : https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/first-steps-quiz/#0

- Stories from carers in dif types of placements : https://five-rivers.org/fostering/fostering-stories/

- Stories from foster children: https://corambaaf.org.uk/fostering-adoption/fostering/fostering-stories/my-life-fostered-child-pips-story

- adopt siblings - videos from parents: https://www.pactcharity.org/adoption/about-adoption/adopt-three

- diary of a foster child: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-vMAk-VyfPw9TOfrqvtW0TW1-GgzfjIyu

8. Close   10 minutes

- How would they persuade someone to consider fostering/adopting?

- How would they reassure them that they are the right kind of person to do it?

- Based on their experiences so far, what would they want that person to know?

- For those who went on to foster/adopt, what do they wish they had known?
    - At what point and how?

- If you were in charge of recruitment for fosterers/adopters in this region/town/city, what would you do to get more people interested in / enquiring about fostering / adoption?

- Any other final words?

- Any questions from the participant (NB be ready to share resources if they would like further support or information)

- Remind them about incentive - it's £100 and it will be paid straight into their bank account through a BACS transfer.

- Signposting information for respondents if needed:

For fostering:

You can contact Fosterline for more information, advice and support. Fosterline is a free-to-access helpline and advice service for both prospective and current foster carers. Fosterline provides confidential and independent advice and information about topics such as how to become a foster carer, the training and support available, the assessment process, as well as advice and signposting on a wide range of issues of concern to current foster carers.

> -0800 040 7675
>
> -www.fosterline.info/
>
> -enquiries@fosterline.info

Alternatively, more information is provided on gov.uk (https://www.gov.uk/foster-carers), including a search function to find contact details for your local council's fostering service.

For adoption:

https://www.gov.uk/child-adoption, including the agency search function to find your nearest council or voluntary adoption agency (https://www.gov.uk/child-adoption/early-stages-of-adoption)

Thank and close

Shot list guide

Key aim: understanding respondents' context, priorities and life stories – how they live their home / family or caring role. **Take as applicable throughout the interview.** Please take pictures in landscape format, rather than portrait, whenever possible to include background.

- View of the house from outside / street view

- Wide shot of the living room and main spaces of the house (e.g. kitchen, dining room, playroom)

- Shot of the respondent, including background (at least one, but it would be good to have a few 'more natural' ones

- Anonymised portrait of the respondent

- If possible – portraits / anonymised portraits of partners / family

- If they already have children – spaces where children play / toys / books etc

- Anything they mention is important to them (e.g. hobbies, spaces, passions, support networks, work)

- Anything that shows what family means to them

- Anything that shows what caring role means to them

- Websites they have visited

- Materials they have consulted

- Any application materials (anonymised)

Appendix D – Group discussions topic guide

40311620 DfE Applying behavioural insights to fostering and adoption recruitment in England

Topic Guide for Group Discussions

120 minutes

Researcher information

Background

DfE wants to ensure that there are the right placements for children in the right place at the right time. Part of that is working to support LAs, RAAs and other agencies (IFAs and VAAs) in retaining and increasing the capacity in foster care and adoption places in England. This will involve recruiting more people to become foster carers or adoptive parents by raising awareness and understanding, addressing concerns and myths, leveraging motivations, and broadening demographics. It also means increasing specific types of placement and improving retention, so capacity more accurately maps onto demand.

Previous work has identified drivers/barriers and other important factors, and proposed plans which have been implemented. We now need to deepen this insight and develop new, evidenced recommendations for communications and other interventions.

This study has been designed to provide robust **insight into the facilitators and barriers** that influence enquires and applications among different audience groups; and actionable and tested **recommendations for communications/interventions** that will leverage and overcome these influencers, to drive action among these groups

Our research programme comprises 5 key stages:

- **Inception:** clarify and agree how the project will work, building on this proposal

- **Evidence review and scoping:** collect insight and recruitment materials from existing evidence and LA/agency experts to produce initial insight models and inform further research

- **Primary research:** exploratory qualitative approach involving household immersions and group discussions to deepen insight models, develop audience typologies, and inform recommendations development

- **Recommendations development:** workshop to develop and filter ideas and underpinning theories of change

- **Interventions development:** co-creation workshop to finalise ideas; quantitative effectiveness assessment using Behaviour Change Lab

About the group discussions

Group discussions follow and are designed to build on emerging findings from 30 household immersions.

The structure of the groups is as follows:

- Warm up / ice breaker activity to set the tone for the session and start identifying mentality of participants (planners vs. adventurers)

- Perceptions of and feelings about fostering / adoption (incl. any myth busting needs)

- Top of mind barriers and motivations through fostering / adoption journey, with focus on pre application & in the process

- Reactions to stimulus

Please note:

This guide is not a script and is intended to be used flexibly, with participant responses guiding the flow of the conversation and using probes as needed to uncover reasons for answers.

Start a dialogue between participants whenever possible, encouraging them to compare their views and thoughts and build on each other responses as applicable.

Familiarise yourself with objective boxes at the beginning of each section, as they break down insight we want to get out of the conversation.

Throughout try to identify whether respondents motivations are inner (personal fulfilment / development, family) vs. outer (helping children, sense of community), and whether have a planner vs. adventurer mentality. Please use this as a reference to analyse their answers and responses to stimulus / comms and for later analysis stages.

Materials / stimulus needed

- Final comms stimulus selection (for the galley exercise)

- Individual stimulus packs (for the following discussion)

- Individual response booklet

- Existing comms selection (to use if needed to complement the stimulus)

- Suggestions of resources for participants who would like further support or information

- Green sticker dots for gallery exercise

- Extra markers

- Recorder

1. Introduction/ groups set up   (5 mins)

- **Thanks and introduction**: Introduce yourself and Kantar (Public Division) – independent research agency

- **About the client:** Research on behalf of DfE

- **Brief mention of research aims and purpose of discussion:** aim to understand what attracts people to foster / adopt, what the barriers can be before the application and throughout the process, and what messages might be helpful to encourage people & eliminate concerns

- **Ethical considerations:** Anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation – names will not be used in the reporting.

   o Note for London groups: the client will be present / observing, but are generally interested in open views and conversation.

- **Duration:** up to 120 minutes.

- **Reassurances:** No right or wrong answers - we are simply asking for people's views, we know that everyone's views and feelings will be different

- **Reminder about audio recording:** the discussion will be recorded so that we can accurately capture their views, and so researchers can listen back. The recorder is encrypted and only the research team will have access to the recordings. Audio will be stored securely for up to 12 months.

- **Any questions/concerns?**

- **Start recording:** acknowledge consent for being recorded.

2. Warm up   (10 mins)

Objectives

- Warm the participants up & introduce each other

- Set an informal tone for the session

- Identify where participants would fit on the mentality spectrum (planners vs. adventurers) – moderators to keep in mind for the following discussion

- Moderator to ask participants to get in pairs & introduce themselves to each other. Afterwards they will introduce the other person to the group.
  - Name
  - What do they do for a living
  - What they would be doing if they weren't here / would would they like to be doing

- **Ice breaker activity**

  Moderator to choose 2 / 3 of the below and ask to the group. It might be tricky to pick one answer but participants should think of the one they identify with the most – no 'it depends'.
  - After a busy week do you recharge by staying in or going out?
  - When it comes to opening presents are you a peeler or a ripper?
  - When it comes to cooking do you just chuck everyting in or follow a recipe?
  - In life, are you more of a planner or an adventurer?

3. Perceptions of fostering / adoption   (15 mins)

Objectives

- Explore respondents' current idea of fostering and adoption and what influenced it – particularly associations with money / career or family.

- Unpick language used by respondent (e.g. is it foster carer or parent? What does that mean?)

- Understand respondents' attitudes to the idea of a typical foster carer / adoptive parent and any myth busting needs (particularly for cold groups)

Moderator to thank participants for being so great with the warm up. Explain that we would like to start by talking about their top of mind thoughts of fostering / adoption. Acknowledge that some of them might not have fully formed thoughts / knowledge while others might have thought about it a bit more – it's all fine.

We want to keep this section light touch, it's a temperature check. Be mindful that some people might want to share nightmare stories / things they heard / direct experiences. If that's the case politely shift the conversation back to the lead questions.

- **What are the first words or pictures that come to mind when you think of fostering / adoption – can be anything at all?**

Moderator to write each one on the flipchart and explore them in turn, comparing similar / different responses.

- o Why this word?
- o What feelings do you associate with it?
- o **Where do you feel this idea comes from?**
- o **PROBE:** word of mouth / stories from friends or acquaintances, direct experience, adverts on TV / online, articles they read etc.
- o Anyone has anything similar / different?
- o How does this compare to fostering / adoption? Explore whichever isn't the focus of the group

- **Is fostering / adoption something everyone could do?**
  - o Why / why not?
  - o If yes – who can do it? What is it about them?

- **And does any impression come to mind of a 'typical person' who is ready to foster / adopt?**
  - o If so, explore further… what is this person like?
  - o If not, why is that?
  - o Probe for demographics, personality, skills, values, motivations
  - o **How does this compare to you?**

4. Intro to the journey   (15 mins)

Objectives

- Get insight into participants' understanding of the process / journey to fostering / adoption

- Explore potential motivations and barriers, before the application and through the process

- Identify where participants would fit on the vision spectrum / their key motivation (inner vs. outer) – moderators to keep in mind for the following discussion

Moderator to introduce idea of a journey from hearing of fostering / adoption to going on to foster / adopt and draw it on a piece of flipchart paper. Ask participants to place themselves.

All respondents have been recruited to be at a fairly initial point – the most advanced should have been at information evenings.

- **Where are you in the journey between starting thinking about fostering / adoption and becoming a fosterer / adopter** (use respondents' language whenever possible)**?**

  - o Why? What considerations are you making?

  - o What is the next step?

  - o How far along do you feel the next step is?

Moderator to map the key stages of the journey (pre application and assessment) on the flipchart, building on participants' previous responses.

- **What sort of things or thoughts do you think would get in the way / prevent you (or others) from continuing at different points?**

  - o Map against before application & during assessment and explore reasons and influences in turn and cluster around C O M if possible

  - o **PROBES:** people like me don't do it, horror stories, lack of confidence in ability to foster / adopt, worries about assessment process, uncertainty around agencies (how to select them / level of support), worries about the right match, concerns about money

- **On the other hand, what do you think would help / get you (or others) to move forward?**

  - o Map against before application & during assessment and explore reasons and influences in turn and cluster around C O M if possible

  - o **PROBES:** desire for a family, desire for a challenge, wanting to do something good, encouragement / support from partner / friends / family / community, thinking about good times ahead, satisfaction to overcome challenges, support from the agency

5. Reactions to stimulus ideas   **(70 mins)**

Objectives

- Understand what motivations & barriers addressed / not addressed by comms ideas

- Get insight into what types of messages / tones work & tie back to participants' vision (inward vs outward) and mentality (adventurer vs planner). Particular tensions to look out for are:

  - Concrete vs. aspirational tone
  - Focus on the child vs. focus on the carer / parent
  - Focus on family motivation vs. need for children in care
  - Emphasis on existing individual capabilities vs. offer of support

- Identify any additional needs for comms / other interventions

Moderator to explain to participants that we'd now like to get their views on a range of possible ideas which are aimed at encouraging people to consider fostering / adoption. NB ideas A, B and C will be included in the gallery, while ideas D will be introduced half way through into the discussion.

Stress they should bear in mind that these are works in progress and highlight <u>types</u> of statements that could encourage people to consider fostering / adoption or help them feel more confident. They are not final communications. That's why we're asking for their would like feedback on these – what works, what doesn't and what the would change.

Ask respondents to go to the stimulus gallery where ideas laid out, have a read, and place a **green sticker on any idea that captures their attention / they think is interesting for whatever reason.** We'll then come back to the table for a discussion.

Give respondents a few minutes to familiarise themselves with the ideas and place the stickers. When they're done, collect the selected stimulus and bring it back to the table for discussion.

- **Which of the ideas have you found most interesting?**

  - *Why is it / what makes them memorable – what stood out? Why?*

Explore the elements below for each of the selected ideas. Make sure that respondents get a chance to re-engage with the concepts before discussing them – they will have a stimulus pack each for this purpose.

- **Why did you pick this one?**
    - What were your initial thoughts?
    - What did you like / dislike about it? Why?
    - What do you think is the key message here? Why?

- **Who do you think this is speaking to?**
    - Who is it aimed at? Why?
    - What are their motivations to foster / adopt?
    - What are their skills / abilities? What are they missing?
    - **To what extent do you feel this is relevant to you?** Why / why not?

- **Do you feel like you would pay attention if you saw something like this?**
    - Why / why not?
    - How similar / different from other campaigns / things you heard on fostering / adoption?
    - Where would you expect to see something like this?
    - **Who should be delivering it? (e.g. government / DfE / council / individual agencies / anyone else?)**
        - Why / why them?

- **How does it make you feel?**
    - Why?
    - What does it bring to mind? Why?
    - What, if anything, would you do as a result of seeing this?

- **Anything that doesn't quite convince you?**
    - Why is that?

Explore to what extent does / could this idea:
(Focus for ideas A, on motivation)
■ **Make you or might make others feel you / they would like to foster / adopt?** Why / why not?

> - **Bring fostering / adoption top of mind for you / others?** Why / why not?
>
> (Focus for ideas B, on capabilities)
>
> - **Make you or might make others think you / they could do it?** Why / why not?
>
> (Focus for ideas C, on urgency)
>
> - **Make you or might make others feel that now is the time to start the process / make the first call?** Why / why not?
> - **Help you or help others decide what the next step / best option should be?** Why / why not?
>
> (Focus for ideas D, on process)
>
> - **Make you / others feel confident you / they can go through the process?** Why / why not?
> - **Make you / others feel you / others will be supported?** Why / why not?
> - **Make you / others feel you / they will get the skills you need to go through the process?** Why / why not?

Moderator to refer back to the motivations and barriers identified in the previous discussion at different points of the journey. Please select additional pieces of stimulus as feasible to make sure we cover a selection of stimulus across all thematic areas. Please also refer back to previous questions to unpack new ideas.

- **Which of the motivations we have talked about do you think are covered?**
    - PROBE before application and during assessment
    - Why is that?
    - What about the others?
    - How important do you think it is to address them?
    - What messages / images could be helpful to do that?
    - Whom might they appeal to?

- **Which of the barriers / challenges / concerns we have talked about do you think are covered?**
    - PROBE before application and during assessment
    - Why is that?
    - What about the others?
    - How important do you think it is to address them?
    - What messages / images could be helpful to do that?
    - Whom might they appeal to?
    - What messages / images do you think would just not be helpful?

If not covered already, explore myth busting / messages normalising fostering / adoption and idea of inclusion for gay couples / BAME and ideas on fostering as a career.

Moderator to leave the last 10 minutes for participants to fill in their individual response booklet where they are asked to fill in private responses for the following questions. Explain we don't need anything long from them, a couple of sentences will do – we just want to recap on the discussion and make sure we don't miss any personal views that might not have come up.

- o Thinking back to the ideas discussed in the session, which which ones made them feel closer to moving forward with fostering / adoption – if appropriate for the group moderator to ask respondents to include when they think that will be & how

- o What information / support / anything else they's like to see would help them overcome the barriers identified today

- o If they were in charge of recruitment for fostering / adoption in their area what would they do to encourage people to enquire & what would they like people to know

6. Final thoughts / close   (5 mins)

- Anything else they would like to discuss / share / ask before we close

- Thank participants for their time

- Confirm incentive process - £60 paid straight into their bank account through a BACS transfer

Signposting information:

For fostering

You can contact Fosterline for more information, advice and support. Fosterline is a free-to-access helpline and advice service for both prospective and current foster carers. Fosterline provides confidential and independent advice and information about topics such as how to become a foster carer, the training and support available, the assessment process, as well as advice and signposting on a wide range of issues of concern to current foster carers.

0800 040 7675

www.fosterline.info/

enquiries@fosterline.info

Alternatively, more information is provided on gov.uk (https://www.gov.uk/foster-carers), including a search function to find contact details for your local council's fostering service.

For adoption:

https://www.gov.uk/child-adoption, including the agency search function to find your nearest council or voluntary adoption agency (https://www.gov.uk/child-adoption/early-stages-of-adoption)

Appendix E – Group discussions' stimulus and reactions

Respondents were presented with types of statements (stimulus) that could be used encourage people to consider fostering / adoption and asked for their feedback. Some of the ideas were tested for both fostering and adoption, while others were unique to one or the other. Stimulus was split into four groups, aimed at probing on effectiveness of concepts to inspire perspective applicants (marked with A), boost belief in their capabilities (marked with B), evoking a sense of urgency (marked with C) and reassuring them about the process (marked with E). Below are reactions to the stimulus.

Adoption stimulus

> **There are good days and bad days for every family, but when you're adopting you know that everyday you're making a difference**

- Considered relatable and realistic across groups.

- It normalises adoption, grounding it into the everyday and dispelling perfection myths.

- It implies reward beyond challenges, which participants found appealing.

- It taps into the motivation of making a difference making it seem achievable.

    "[By] not expecting that [adoption] is going to be perfect, it normalises it. It gets you to see the bigger picture." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

    "It gives a sense of achievement. You're helping that young person, helping them to go on. It's like normal parenting." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

    "Everyone has good bad days, it's very human. It won't be easy, but you're doing something phenomenal." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

    "It's not like keeping up with the Jones's. You're human and everyone is different." Focus group Manchester, Open to adoption in the future

> **"Seeing my brother with his daughter is a daily reminder of what a difference adoption can make"**

- It normalises adoption as a part of ordinary family life.

- It taps into the motivation of making a difference every day and having family, which participants found encouraging…

- It responds to an appetite for personal stories, which participants would however like to see those in more detail.

"I would like to see full page of a story, a video interview, not just a statement. Show challenges and benefits and that benefits outweigh them in an informal way." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

"Happy families as a result of the adoption, it's encouraging." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

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Be part of the caring generation. We welcome young adopters

- It taps into the motivation of making a difference making it seem achievable.

- However it didn't resonate for everyone. Some felt might not be experienced enough to make a difference, others felt left out because of their age.

- For this reason they felt unsure about 'caring generation'.

  "It doesn't imply that a lot of people are doing it. It could say 'so many young adopters have been welcomed already, you can do this at any age'." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

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Adopters are the best volunteers in the world

- Many, particularly among pre-family participants, didn't appreciate the association between adopting and volunteering - they didn't see work and parenting as comparable.

- However some parents thought they could see how parenting could be similar to volunteering.

  "Volunteers doesn't sound right. It's making it sound like a job. It's parenting." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

  "Being a parent is kind of thankless, you just do it and don't expect praise, and volunteering is the same. You don't really need recognition you just get used to it." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

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No two families are the same and adoption is no different – if you want to adopt, the chances are you can

---

- Message resonated across participants.

- Encouraging and inclusive, it felt like a call to action to adopt.

- Some thought that it may over-simplify the recruitment process, but overall it seemed it made adoption feel achievable.

"Family doesn't have to be two people, can be one person, two, man, woman. If you're the sort of person that wants to you probably can. So it bypasses the idea of being scrutinised based on family set up." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

"It's empowering and motivating. Not enough people are thinking about this. The process can seem like they want one type of person, but there are different types of people. It feels achievable." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

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Adoption to LGBTQ+ parents in England reached a record high in 2019 – and with your help we'll take that higher

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- It felt inclusive and provides helpful myth busting for LGBTQ+ community

- Some disliked being 'singled out' and would prefer a general message about everyone being welcome.

- Some disliked the statistical feel, being portrayed as part of a quota.

  "Historically the LGBTQ+ community have been side lined, stating that group specifically opens the minds of people that might not have realised that they could adopt." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

  "This breaks down barriers to a wider audience, same-sex couples might feel they're not allowed to adopt, but this shows them there are." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

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Last year new adoptive parents coming forward helped us to place *x number* of children in care – this year with your help we can take that even higher

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- A few found the personal call to action appealing.

- Some liked the use of statistics as it made the message feel more concrete, but felt it lacked context needed to convey a sense of scale

- Some disliked the competitive feel as it could be perceived as a government push to reach targets.

  "I like that it's calling you out, asking YOU to adopt, you feel like you can be part of that number." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

  "The numbers are good, but there's nothing to compare it to. Saying how many they need would give more of a sense of urgency." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> **We know that the thought of becoming an adoptive parent can feel a bit daunting, but if you are wondering about it, we are looking for you**

- It validates participants' concerns and reassures them that their emotions were not uncommon.

- It conveys support while acknowledging the challenge.

- It debunks idea that applicants need to be perfect from the start.

- Ending could be seen as pushy and could be reworded as encouragement to get in touch.

  "Everyone has doubts, makes you think it's okay, and they're used to reassuring people." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

  "The comment is reading your mind. You care about doing a good job, it gives you a bit of a push, acknowledges challenges and that it's ok [to feel a bit overwhelmed]. […] It's just a little bit corporate. It sounds like army recruitment." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> **Have you ever met a perfect parent? Neither have we. But we'll work with you to do the best you can**

- Relatable and inclusive, it conveys the idea of support.

- Debunks idea of perfection, which resonated with both parents and pre-family participants.

- Some suggested it would be more effective if backed up with real case studies to make it more believable.

  "Insecurities might stop you going for it, but no one's perfect. And they're going to support to you." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

  "It reassures you that you'll cope. Parents come in different shapes and sizes and deal with things as they come. It's about doing the best you can." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

  "They will support you and people worry about these things. It says 'your' best, not 'the' best." Focus group Manchester, Open to adoption in the future

> **Have you ever met a perfect parent? Neither have we. But we'll work with you to do the best you can**

- Message mostly struck a chord for those warmer to adoption.

- It broadly resonated, instilling confidence in abilities

- Some found it a bit 'salesy' and already heard but recognised it could be inspirational for some

  > "It reaches out, if you haven't considered adoption before, or if's someone with insecurities or doubts. You could be capable of this, do some research. […] When you look at a job description you look at it and [doubt yourself]. But if you're in that situation you're going to surprise yourself because things are going to come up but you're going to come out stronger and wiser." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

  > "'You might be capable of more than you know, we'll work with you to find out' might be a better one." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

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The hardest times in your past might lead to the best in a child's future

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- It reframes negative experiences and debunks perfection.

- Many found it empowering and motivating.

- Some felt it could be less effective for those who didn't have particularly difficult experiences.

  > "You don't have to have had a perfect upbringing to do it. Those tough times you've had could be an asset." Focus Group London, Interested in adoption

  > "Not as powerful if you haven't had those times but if you deed it turns the negative into positive. Not enough people are thinking to adopt and [this picks up] people you wouldn't consider because of the experience." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

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No-one feels ready to adopt until they find out they are

- It validates concerns around it 'being the right time'.

- The call to action could be encouraging, particularly for warmer audiences.

- Some disliked the tone, and felt it was too 'salesy'.

  > "Some might not feel they are ready until they think about it a bit more and start the journey." Focus Group London, Interested in adoption

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If you never ask you'll never know. Don't miss the chance to ask a question that might change your life. Contact us with no obligation.

- It taps into concerns around being judged for asking questions and not feeling ready.

- Opportunity to ask questions without pressure or obligation was appealing.

- 'No obligation' felt commercial for some and they would appreciate opportunity to talk to / hear stories of adoptive parents.

    "You don't need to have it all figured out." Focus Group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

    "There are lots of questions and it can seem like a daunting process to navigate, it's good to know there is support." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

    "You need stories of people who have done it, hear about the positives and downsides." Focus group Manchester, Open to adoption in the future

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You may not think it's not the right time, but for the child it's always the perfect time.

- Straightforward in debunking the idea of a perfect time which resonated with most participants.

- It provides some impetus for action.

    "It gives a sense of agency. Every day you're waiting you could be helping a child. But it's not guilt tripping, it's good, it focuses on what you could be doing." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

    "You may not think it, but they help you see it's not actually a bad time." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

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Adoption can take you to unexpected places. We'll be there to help you navigate the journey

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- Message broadly resonated.

- It conveys ongoing support, which was appealing for many.

- Some felt wording could be more concrete and straightforward.

- Idea of 'unexpected' evoked negative associations for some.

    "You might surprise yourself and there is help if you need it." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

    "'Unexpected' might spook a few people." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

> **The assessment stage can be tough but we want you to succeed. Don't be afraid to show us who you are.**

- Realistic and honest in acknowledging applicants' difficulties.

- It addresses concerns about process, preconceptions about requirements and fear of judgement.

- It conveys support and safe space for questions.

> "It's realistic. Open to everyone. It knocks out so many worries." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> "It's saying 'introduce yourself' isn't it. You think it would be tough, and it should be tough, no parent is a perfect parent, got to be scrutiny there, but they do want you to succeed." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

> **We know that some steps feel bigger than others. Big or small we'll support you every step of the way.**

- It validates concerns about starting the application process.

- It conveys support in a welcoming way

- Many found it relatable and reassuring.

> "Having the support there, and knowing it's there is good. Reassuring." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adopting

> "Some steps will feel bigger, daunting, might be a lot of info, big or small It's nice to feel supported." Focus group London, Interested in adoption

> **We'll work with you to find the perfect match.**

- While there were concerns about matching, idea of a perfect match was unrealistic for many.

- Some found it reassuring that they would be matched with a child that was right for them and vice versa.

> "You're there to help them, what do you mean perfect? It's misleading, it's never gonna be perfect." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

> "The perfect match for you, your family, the child. You put in time to get to that stage, last thing you want is for it to break down." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

> **We offer training for family and friends to better support you.**

- Did not stand out for most participants among other messages.

- Conveys support.

- Appealing, giving that everyone is going to be involved

> **Whatever your question, chances are we've heard it before. If not we'll work with you to find an answer.**

- Conveys support and opportunity for a safe space to ask questions, which was appealing for most participants.

- Approachable and positive tone.

    "They've heard it all before, no question is a stupid question." Focus group Bristol, Interested in adoption

    "Doubts and questions will be there. It's approachable. They're putting themselves in your shoes." Focus group Birmingham, Open to adoption in the future

Fostering stimulus

> **There are good days and bad days for every family, but when you're a foster carer you know that every day you're making a difference**

- Considered positive, honest and realistic.

- Leveraging challenges with sense of reward was appealing.

- Idea of making a difference everyday was motivating.

- Debunking perfection, relatable.

    "You're impacting their lives in a positive way, even if on some days you can't see that because it's a bad day, the good comes with the bad, it's all a learning curve, that's life. It's quite a good way of wording it, everyone has good days and bad days whether you're a family or [by] yourself." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

    "It makes you feel good about what you're doing. You don't have to be perfect. Foster parents aren't perfect." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

> **Have you ever dreamed about having an open home where everyone is welcome and accepted? Have you wondered about how you can give back and make a difference every day? Turn your house into a foster home.**

- Idea of open messy house resonated with some, particularly those with children.

- Appeals to a sense of vocation of being a foster care, focussing on every day and implying support.

- However, some thought it replicated messages already heard and language could be more straightforward.

  "I loved that it said turn your house into a foster home. Your house can be so much more, welcoming. And it's inclusive to all." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

  "You imagine the coming and going, when the children were young, and all the different things they were doing" Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

> **Any child who's had a difficult start in life needs case and stability. Foster carers play a unique role in starting to heal the hurt.**

- Appeals to shared motivation of doing something worthwhile.

- Realistic and plain worded.

- Idea of 'healing the hurt' could feel daunting, particularly for those with no parenting experience.

  "It's one of the most honest [stimulus]. No extra added frills, no marketing, [it says] exactly what it is." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

  "It makes you think you're doing something worthwhile, making a difference." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

  "It's daunting, it's a big task to take on. How do you begin? I wouldn't know if it's for me but it could be empowering if you've had experience of damage and tragedy yourself." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

> **Few things are quite as rewarding as being a foster carers. Call today for a consultation.**

- Overall, key message was appealing.

- Some were unsure this about the angle, other felt reward was an effective lever to encourage responses.

- Some didn't like the word 'consultation' because of associations with other services (e.g. insurance).

    "It could be reworded to say it can be rewarding or fulfilling. Twist on words could make it more appealing." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

    "I'm not sure about the word consultation,, it sounds too business-like." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

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With respite fostering, a small change to your life makes a big change to theirs.

- It taps into desire to make a difference.

- Helpful in promoting different options, with a stepping stone mentality.

- Some felt that there should be and explanation on what 'respite' means.

- It could seem a bit simplistic for some.

    "It's good that it promotes the respite option. If you're on the fence it's telling you that you can have a taster." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

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When I fostered a child, I gained a community.

- Not very appealing across the sample as the sense of community was not (and should not be promoted) as the main motivation.

- However, idea of receiving support from a network was valued.

    "If you're going to foster a child you should already have your own community, it's not a way to make friends." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

    "Instead of community it should say network, support. It takes a village but it should centre around care for the child." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

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Last year, new foster carers coming forward helped us place x number of children in foster care - with your help this year we'll take this higher.

- Overall, positive response but some thought it could be more precise about the commitment required.

- Some appreciated figure of children placed, but others felt it should be complemented by number of those in need.

- It gave some sense system is "doing something right".

  > "It feels a bit impersonal, too conveyer belt. I would like to know how many are in a position of need." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

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The number of LGBTQ foster carers in England reached a record high in 2019 - with your help we'll take that higher.

- Some questioned the truthfulness of the statement.

- While sentiment of inclusion resonated, some thought that calling on a particular group might have the opposite effect.

  > "It should convey that everybody's welcome, like a disclaimer, otherwise it can exclude people. Targeting should be through images." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

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Wanted: people who...

... can see the world through a child's eyes

... don't cry over spilled milk

... can see a silver lining

... don't worry too much about everything being perfect

... whose glass is half full

- Message that all kinds people wanted and that applicants don't have to be perfect resonated.

- Resilience and affinity with the children were seen as the most important traits for a foster carer.

- It could be reworded to sound more straightforward and concrete

  > "It's flowery but yes they want people who get on with it. If you don't understand what they're going through you can't help." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

  > "It's a bit long and wordy but it's quite realistic. You don't need to be perfect." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

> **You may be capable of more than you know. We'll work with you to find out.**

- Relatable and empowering.

- It provides some impetus.

- Communicates sense of support and nurturing

  "You won't be on your own. It gives a sense that you might be able to do it." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future.

> **The hardest times in your past might lead to the best in a child's future.**

- Could be helpful in reframing negative experiences.

- It provides a positive outlook beyond challenge.

- Could exclude / be less effective if people didn't feel they shared those experiences.

  "That's so true. People can be hard on themselves when they are resilient and can give so much" Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

  "That's I was thinking [whether what happened in past might rule you out]. I' m not perfect but I might be for somebody else." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

> **The hardest times in your past might lead to the best in a child's future.**

- Message could resonate and be appealing for some, depending on their confidence in their skills.

- For some message was unclear, particularly for those without children, who didn't feel they related to it.

  "Just get in contact with no obligation, it's encouraging. Come and have a taster so you can make an informed choice. And everybody welcome, all walks of life, all cultures." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

> **You don't need to be a parent to be a foster carer.**

- Could be interesting because encouraging and inclusive.

- However, it did not strike a chord with the majority of participants.

> **No-one feels ready until they find out they are. Start your journey today.**

- Did not appeal to most participants, as they found it a bit vague and self-evident.

- Some felt more positively about the call to action.

> **If you ever ask you'll never know. Don't miss the chance to ask a question that might change your life. Contact us with no obligation.**

- Didn't strike a chord with colder audiences, who had not considered asking questions before and were unsure where to go for information.

- Message tended to resonated with those interested in fostering.

- Some didn't like the closing 'no obligation', as it sounded too "business like".

  "You have nothing to lose and this triggers the thought to ask. But what support will you get? Most people don't know. […] No obligation stands out, but it sounds a bit like an energy provider." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

> **You may not be sure that the time is perfect to foster, but for a child in need it's always a good time.**

- Straightforward and relatable.

- Concern about perfect time existed among warm groups and message resonated

- Provides some impetus.

- Less effective for some in the cold groups who felt less ready.

  "This is speaking to me. I keep waiting for this perfect time but I just need to pick up the phone and do it." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

  "It may not always be the perfect time, that time might just be me enjoying being alone, that is not the perfect time, not about me personally feeling I'm not ready, it might just be circumstance." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

> **It's natural to worry about asking the wrong questions. But our approach is to welcome questions, not judge them.**

- Cold groups found this less relatable.

- It resonated with warmer audiences as the idea of a non-judgemental space, and potentially an informal chat to ask questions, was more appealing

- Some felt the message should be followed by the encouragement to get in touch and directions on how to do so.

  > "It's a big elephant in the room, questions you don't wanna ask. We get it. This friendly, positive, open. Just a bit beige." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

  > "I would feel that I would want to be transparent anyway, it's natural to worry but why are you then putting into people's mind 'is it the wrong question'. It's making me think I might be judged." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

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Fostering can take you to unexpected places. Through training and mentoring we can help you navigate the journey.

- Many appreciated the idea of receiving mentoring by foster carers who were seen as independent and reliable.

- Some felt the message sounded cold and could not relate to it.

- Message about 'unexpected places' resonated with some.

  > "It sounds businessy, like a career choice, like a full time job and that's not how I see it." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

  > "You can get an idea about it, not just them trying to sell [it to] you." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

---

We know that some steps feel bigger than others. Big or small we'll support you every step of the way.

- Message resonates and validates concerns about starting the application process.

- Participants appreciated the prospect receiving support every step of the way, which was reassuring.

- Honest, open tone.

  > "I would have some control, if I need a tiny bit of help it would be there. [They understand] Help would vary from person to person […] this sounds more tailored to each person." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

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We'll prepare you for the child who needs you.

- It implies support, which most felt positive about (although for some it made the prospect daunting).

> "It sounds like people are there to support you and provide answers and with training and all the help and advice you might need. So if you're in any situation with a child that you're not sure how to deal with, something comes up that you're unaware, there's always someone to go to, advice or support line to help you out." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

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Our foster carer buddying and mentoring network means you're never alone.

- Direct and honest tone, and straightforward language "not as old fashioned".

- Nice to have support, idea of informal network appealing to compare experiences and have honest conversation about challenges.

- Conveys multiple levels of support, and a sense of healthy system.

> "It implies multi layered support. Makes me think that they're organised, that the system is working." Focus group Bristol, Open to fostering in the future

> "You can compare experiences, have an honest, level headed conversation. It's nice to have support from someone who isn't official, a mentor who has fostered themselves. They could have a separate one with social workers as well." Focus group Manchester, Interested in fostering

> "They have experience, know what you are going through. You can meet for coffee, they've been there and it's fine. It's good to offer training and advice." Focus group Birmingham, Interested in fostering

> "It's reassuring, you're not alone. If you felt anxious about it or didn't think you were doing the right thing, or going through a bad patch. If it's your first child or a difficult teenager that you've not had that before, good to know you're not alone and would have guidance." Focus group London, Open to fostering in the future

Appendix F – Typologies' pen portraits

Planner/Outward
ADOPTION Preparing to parent a child in need

Prospective parents who see adoption as a way to create a better society, not just a family. Great conviction in their ability – and duty – to make a difference, but may delay action waiting for the timing to be perfect.

"We always knew we would adopt, why insist on putting our genes into the world when there are so many children in need?"
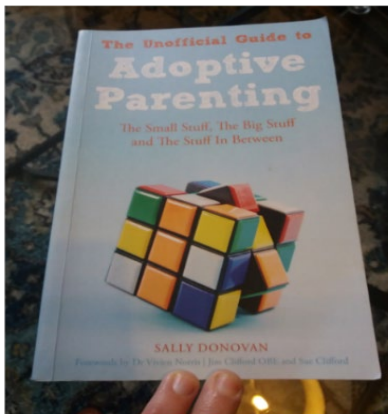
 "We already had a spare room but our flat wasn't in a great area so we wanted to wait to move and make the right first impression. And then for the house to be sorted. And for things to be more settled at work."

 "We know that some people couldn't take on a child with special needs but we aren't scared by that. I think we always knew that we could, through her work and my brother. And everyone tells us we'll be great, although not everyone gets why we would do it. But we realise now that if we had more space we'd love to adopt two children!"
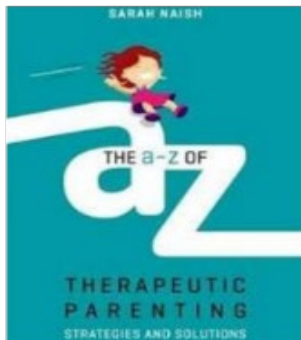
Planner/Outward
FOSTERING *Commitment to care*

Prospective foster carers who believe they can make a difference to vulnerable children, providing they feel equipped to deal with their needs and valued by the system
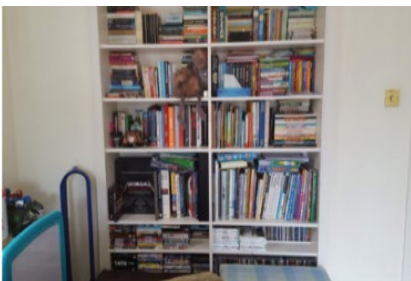
 "It's ultimately about not giving up, being able to see from a rational perspective even when things are difficult. And being able to see the long-term goal despite the journey set backs which could be fairly difficult."

"I always imagine that it would be a boy because have read that they are statistically harder to place."

"Being a teacher you have to be able to connect with young people, understand where they're coming from, and be good at behaviour management too. I have always worked with teenagers so they're the group I'm better with, or more experienced with."

"The learning curve of having our own kids is really important."
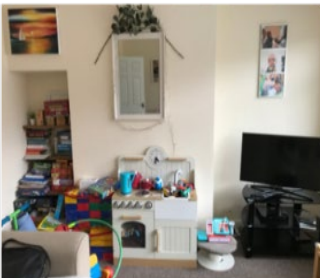
"Our church's religious ethos promotes and encourages ourselves as responsible for others who need our help, even those not in own family or friendship."

Adventurer/Outward
ADOPTION *Urge to make a difference*

Prospective who feel adoption would be a wonderful way for them to make a difference – but so might fostering. Feel they have something to give but need validation and focus to move forward
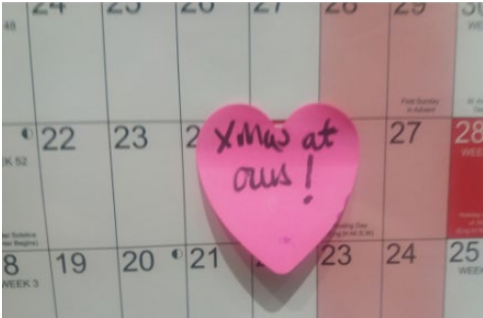
"Because of my duty and faith and responsibility, for me personally, changing the world is exactly what my faith teaches me to do, go out and repair the world."

"We've not done anything more in the formal fostering/adoption thing, because we know there's nothing we can do about that until we've done the bedroom."

"To me the only difference between fostering and adoption is the length of time, not the underlying principles."
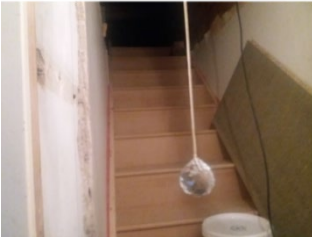
"[Not having a spare room] didn't feel like a problem, [children] are only here for three days, if family sleep over, our daughter just sleeps in our room… Well, I guess you could be fostering for three months, but we haven't gone into that level of detail, it's the idea of it."
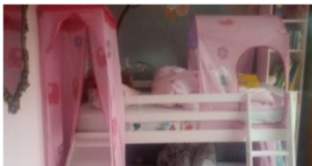
Adventurer/Outward
FOSTERING *Instinct to care*

Prospective foster carers who have a strong instinct to give back and feel that fostering could be a good fit for them – but are open to other suggestions while they figure it out

"Anyone can foster, if you've got the room, the love, the time and the commitment, anyone can foster. [It takes the same qualities to parent] patience, love and understanding. You don't need money. As long as they're out and they're with you and you're showing them love and you're there for them that's it. Give them structure, a lot of love and a lot of hugs. Being there, doing things for them, giving a nice clean warm home where they can feel safe and loved. […] I'm still young, I've got so much love to give".
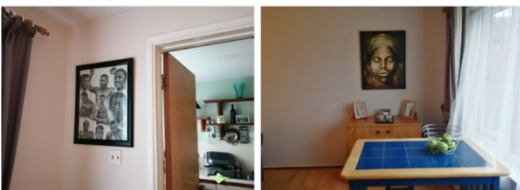
"You could make that difference to that one child, that's what I'd like to do."

"I don't really think ahead too much, don't think you can. Just go forward. I'm not one to plan, whatever will be will be. I live today, I'm not worried about tomorrow, I deal with it when it comes."

"You just have to choose one [agency]. I would probably choose the first one. If there are reviews, my gut instinct says I'm going to try this one. If they're sounding right I'll give it a go."

Adventurer/inward
ADOPTION *Urge for a child*

Prospective adopters with a strong impulse to become parents. Seeking reassurance and encouragement but may also need a reality check to equip them to move forward successfully

"I knew I wouldn't have a problem loving a child that wasn't mine because I've worked with children for years and I always love them […] My ideas of adoption were totally romantic, I just wasn't ready."

"I'm not going to say I'm massively altruistic, I'm not going to say I wanted to save a poor child that was having a bad time, because that's not true. I just really wanted to be a mother."

"I used to work at school and I think I once said to a friend 'these adopted kids seem to have massive issues', but I guess when you really want something you don't really want to think about that. Even if I'd met loads of adopters that had said it was horrendous, I still I would have done it, your drive to want to be a mum is stronger than anything."

Adventurer/inward
FOSTERING *Looking for direction*

Prospective foster carers looking to fill a gap in their life and wondering if fostering could be the answer. Could have great potential but could also be easily deterred if the reality doesn't match their vision

"You've got to [challenge yourself]. Otherwise you go a bit stagnant, you have to challenge yourself to do something that moves you forward."

"With the unknown of not being in control at all, steps like 'I've been to an information evening' are a step towards a but of action in a sea of not much else happening. I think it's exciting rather than daunting."

"I'd just be up for trying."

"Making a difference would be a bonus. We would love to provide a safe space and for it not to be a disaster."

"I think we're just not quite in the right place. It's not that you have to be perfect. If they just waited for perfect people then kids would never get placed."

Planner/inward
ADOPTION *Preparing for a family*

Prospective adopters with a strong desire to start or expand their family, carefully working towards this goal but can be stalled by feelings of anxiety or pressure or a failure to get all the answers
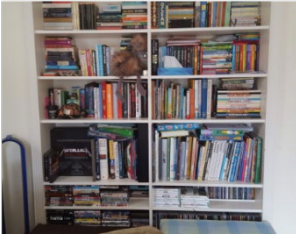
"They tell you it's normal to have doubts but it would be nice to hear an adopter saying 'I was sick, I was terrified, I couldn't eat' during the training."

"For me it wasn't an option to not have children."

"We were talking about future and families and he knew I always wanted to be a parent… I just remember him saying that he had this weird feeling it wouldn't work for us [biologically], I remember him saying it so clearly, and I remember saying 'well that doesn't mean we can't be parents. Adoption's something I'd be open to."

Planner/inward
FOSTERING Plotting a new direction

Prospective foster carers drawn to fostering as a route to personal fulfilment as they enter a new lifestage. Keen to put their skills and experience to good use, but weighing up the risk of disruption to their life.
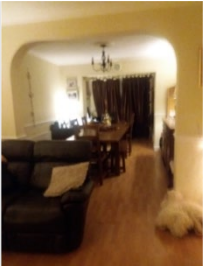
"Fostering is something I want to do. Not immediately, I'll wait until my daughter has finished university. And I am thinking of doing an extension to the kitchen. It would be nice to see children while I'm cooking."

"I'm really passionate about early intervention from my time in Early Years education. I'm really concerned about mental health, I'm considering doing a course at Place2Be."

"It's all about using my skills to make a difference. I know I can really engage well with young children and I love seeing their development at that age."

"I'll probably start with respite fostering. I would love to foster a baby and work closely with mothers who are adopting. I think an olde child would be more draining for me. But I wouldn't want to give up all of my other commitments and I don't know how that would work with a baby. Could I get a babysitter to go to pilates? And I don't know if they would accept me for a baby."
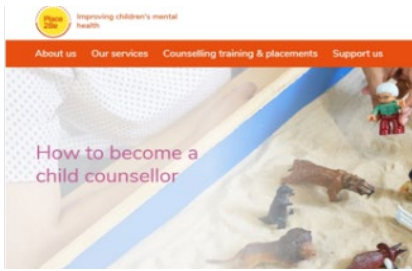
"You need to be prepared, going in with your eyes open. You need to understand all the different kinds of behaviours, and the support available."

Appendix G – BCL materials

Control – 'typical' recruitment message

Prototype 1 – introducing safe space for asking questions

Prototype 2 – introducing an element of challenge and support

Prototype 3 – presenting fostering and adoption in a continuum

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