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Evaluation of Foster with North East

Interim report

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Glossary

This report refers to the timelines of Hub delivery, including:

- **Year 1** = Financial Year 2023/24 (beginning September 2023)
- **Year 2** = Financial Year 2024/25
- **Year 3** = Financial Year 2025/26

Approved foster carer: An individual who has completed the necessary training and assessments to be legally permitted to foster children. This is following approval via a fostering panel.

Communications (comms) campaign: A planned series of communication activities designed to raise awareness or promote a specific message. This report refers to a dedicated campaign related to fostering and Foster with North East, also being evaluated separately by Verian.

Director of Children's Services (DCS): A senior executive within a Local Authority accountable for overseeing education and children's social services functions, including fostering services.

Foster with North East (FwNE)/Regional Hub: A regional initiative in the North East of England that oversees the recruitment and training of prospective foster carers across 12 Local Authorities.

Fostering social worker: A social worker specialising in supporting and providing guidance to foster carers.

Implementation and Process evaluation (IPE): An assessment of how effectively a programme or intervention is being implemented and whether it is following its intended processes.

Impact evaluation: An assessment of the overall effects and outcomes of a programme or intervention, taking either a theory-based or counterfactual approach.

Independent Fostering Agency (IFA): Independent fostering agencies are voluntary or private organisations registered by Ofsted to recruit, assess, approve, train, support and review foster carers who care for children looked after by local authorities.

Initial enquiry/expression of interest (EOI): An (initial) enquiry or expression of interest in becoming a foster carer or learning more about fostering. Initial enquiries about being a foster carer might include: booking onto or attending an information session, requesting information through email, post or phone, requesting or receiving

a home visit, requesting an application form that they have not yet submitted, or requesting information about a type of foster care not provided by the service. 2023/24 Ofsted guidance provided further clarification that an enquiry must have been 'actionable' and included name(s) and contact details, to meet data collection and monitoring requirements.

Local Authority (LA): A local government body responsible for providing services in a specific geographic area, including children's social care and fostering.

Prospective foster carer: An individual who is considering becoming a foster carer and is in the process of enquiring or applying.

Quasi-experimental design (QED): A research design that aims to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between variables, but without the random assignment of a true experiment.

Red Havas: A communications agency commissioned by DfE to lead on Foster with North East's visuals and messaging for the comms design and the public relations strategy prior to the launch of the Hub.

Regional Adoption Agency (RAA): A government-led initiative in which multiple Local Authorities collaborate and combine expertise to regionalise adoption services. Adoption services were regionalised in the North East in December 2018 through Adopt North East (a partnership between Newcastle, Gateshead, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Northumberland) and in April 2021 through Adopt Coast to Coast (a partnership between Durham and Sunderland Together for Children).

Regional data dashboard: As part of Foster with North East's design, a data dashboard has been developed for Hub staff and Local Authority fostering staff to access enquiry, progress, and demographic information at a local and regional level.

Residential care: Care provided to children in a residential setting, such as a children's home.

Skills to Foster training: Standardised, national training designed to equip prospective and current foster carers with the necessary skills to provide effective care. This training is licenced and owned by the Fostering Network.

Theory of Change: A framework that explains how a programme or intervention is expected to achieve its intended outcomes and the theory underpinning this.

Together for Children: An organisation that delivers children's services on behalf of Sunderland City Council. This is the lead Local Authority overseeing Foster with North East.

Executive Summary

Foster with North East is a regional foster carer recruitment support hub combining 12 Local Authorities in the North East of England to increase and improve foster carer recruitment. Ipsos UK and the Centre for Evidence Implementation (CEI) were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) in September 2023 to undertake an implementation, feasibility, impact and cost effectiveness evaluation of the Foster with North East Support Hub. This report provides an overview of Year 1 and most of Year 2 (up to January 2025) of the Hub's delivery although the impact evaluation only considers data from the first 6 months of implementation, up to March 2024. Data collection activities to inform this interim report took place between November 2023 and January 2025.

Aims of Foster with North East

The fostering recruitment Hub ('the Hub') launched on 27 September 2023 and established a regional service providing support to prospective foster carers from enquiry to approval. The primary goal of the Hub is to recruit and support new foster carers by focusing on three key objectives: increasing the number and diversity of high-quality foster carers who understand the realities of fostering and can meet the complex needs of children in care, improving the conversion rate of enquiries to approved applications through timely follow-up and support, and ensuring placement decisions are based on the child's needs rather than available residences. To achieve these aims, the Hub offers consistent support for prospective carers through a single point of contact and streamlined assistance, facilitates collaboration among Local Authority fostering teams to leverage local community knowledge, and strengthens the fostering community through initiatives like the Buddy Mentoring Programme. These efforts aim to collectively enhance foster care provision in the North East of England by creating a more supportive and effective environment for foster carers.

Methodology

The scoping and design phase of the evaluation was carried out from September to December 2023, informed by an inception meeting, meetings with key stakeholders, desk review of key documentation and data, refinement of research questions, development of the Theory of Change and a feasibility assessment of counterfactual methods.

The Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) focused on gathering qualitative insights from 72 participants, including prospective and approved foster carers, Local Authority (LA) staff and Hub staff. The IPE also involved data collection across all LAs, including round table discussions with LA Communications (comms)

Leads and LA Data Leads. These data collection activities happened at 3 main time points (November – December 2023, March – August 2024 and November 2024 – January 2025)

Short-term outcomes were captured using descriptive analysis of operational and monitoring data provided by the Hub.

The early impact evaluation used a quasi-experimental design (QED) to understand the impact of the Hub on addressing the shortage of foster carers. The QED did this by aiming to compare the number of applications received, number of approved households and number of carers approved in the 12 LAs participating in the Foster with North East Hub with 134 similar Local Authorities elsewhere in England that are not part of a Hub. The data was provided by Ofsted. It is important to note that this evaluation could not consider number of enquiries in the QED analysis because Local Authorities use inconsistent definitions of enquiries. Some LAs distinguish between 'hard' enquiries (serious interest) and 'soft' enquiries (casual information requests), whilst others do not make this distinction, making reliable baseline measurements and valid comparisons impossible.

The economic evaluation included a break-even cost analysis that assesses the magnitude of benefits required for the benefits of the Hub to outweigh the costs.

Limitations

This report has several limitations, mainly that large scale and complex interventions may need more time than was available for this evaluation to-date to show their true effect. In particular, the impact evaluation uses Ofsted data from 2023/24 as the post-intervention period. The Hub launched part way through this period in September 23, meaning only 6 months of delivery up to March 24 are captured and data is diluted by pre-intervention data, which may mask true effects. While these limitations do not invalidate the evaluation findings, they highlight the need for caution in interpretation throughout the report.

Key findings

Design, launch and implementation of the Hub

The Hub is the central point for all foster carer enquiries and expressions of interest to be directed to, prior to engagement with LA Children's Services. The first engagement by DfE with LAs to begin the process of setting up the Hub was in December 2022, and the Hub was subsequently launched on 28 September 2023.

- Fostering teams across the region viewed the initial launch of Foster with North East's services as largely positive. However, interviews with Hub and

LA staff found that initial use of the Hub was inconsistent across LAs and operational issues arose in relation to the data sharing requirements and processes.

- Facilitators identified by evaluators during this stage included early buy-in from LAs and support from senior leadership (e.g. Directors of Children's Services).
- Barriers at this stage identified by evaluators included initial confusion around roles and overlapping processes, LAs adjusting to cooperating rather than competing and misaligned data systems. Findings also highlighted that LA and Hub staff thought a test run of Hub systems and processes, and more time, would have been beneficial to the launch of the Hub.

To support the launch of the Hub a comms launch campaign was established in October 2023. Features of the comms campaign that LA and Hub staff perceived to have worked particularly well were the website, provision of comms resources from the Hub, utilising relevant case studies, and collaboration between LAs (e.g. ongoing monthly meetings with the 12 Comms Leads and the Hub Comms Lead).

- Areas for improvement identified by evaluators from interviews with Hub and LA staff include messaging clarity, increased utilisation of the dashboard to inform comms activities, clarification of roles and responsibilities in relation to comms activities, increased local partnerships, and developing comms messaging tailored to encourage high quality enquiries.
- The Hub has taken a number of steps in Year 2 of delivery in order to increase engagement. Such approaches have included more child centric messaging, more diverse imagery and a myth busting campaign to address the concerns of foster carers. It also has plans to capitalise on word of mouth by implementing a 'refer a friend scheme'.

Ongoing delivery of Hub services

The Hub provides 4 services: Enquiry/referral services, Skills to Foster training, the buddy mentoring programme and hand holding support.

- **Enquiries and referrals services** were well received by foster carers due to fast response times.
- **Skills to Foster training** received positive feedback on its content from foster carers, however some LA staff expressed concerns about training cancellations by the Hub due to insufficient uptake.

- The **Buddy Mentoring system** was perceived by foster carers as offering valuable informal support, however its uptake was inconsistent.
- The **‘hand holding support’** (post enquiry check-ins) was initially delivered inconsistently. During early delivery most carers interviewed felt that post enquiry check-ins from the Hub were minimal, that they did not add significant value to their application journey, and that, in some instances, the Hub lacked awareness of foster carers’ progress. DfE internal communications confirmed that the Hub reviewed and made some changes to this service, and later fieldwork indicated that post-enquiry check-ins had increased in frequency.

Facilitators to delivery identified by evaluators from interviews with Hub and LA staff included effective communication and filtering information within LAs; tailored data sharing and working arrangements; trust and confidence in the Hub staff and their service; and continued and integrated recruitment activities by LAs and the Hub.

Barriers to delivery included insufficient personal information collected by the Hub at the enquiry stage; varied awareness of the Hub services amongst prospective foster carers; short-term centralised funding (DfE funding) provision; and case management and data sharing limitations.

Progression towards intended outcomes

Impact of the Hub on applications received and approved

The early assessment (at 6 months of implementation) of outcomes such as applications received, newly approved households, and newly approved foster carers found no statistically significant effects. In fact, the estimated effects were not only non-significant but also far from conventional thresholds for statistical significance. The analysis did find a slight, non-statistically significant decrease. Interviews with Hub and LA staff suggest that any potential decrease could be due to a slowdown in LA promotional activity whilst the regional Hub was being set up, alongside the Hub being new to residents and therefore taking time to gain recognition as a new actor within the sector. These early impact findings are to be considered with caution due to several limitations:

- The lack of individual-level data on foster carers and their progression through the system limited the depth of analysis possible.
- Misalignment between the Hub’s start date (September 2023) and Ofsted's data collection cycle (April 2023 to March 2024) may have diluted some of the measurable effects, as a portion of the post-intervention period preceded the programme's implementation.

- The post-intervention period (23/24) only included 6 months of Hub implementation from September 23 to March 24.

The primary purpose of assessing impact at this early stage was to test the feasibility of the method. QED analysis has demonstrated mixed results for Difference-in-Differences methodology. A key assumption of this method is that before the intervention, outcomes in Hub and non-Hub areas followed similar trends over time – known as the ‘parallel trends’ assumption. This assumption is important because it allows us to attribute any post-intervention statistically significant differences to the Hub itself, rather than to pre-existing differences between areas.

Parallel trends validation succeeded for applications received, supporting this approach for estimating the impact of the Hub on applications. However, household approvals ($p=0.0466$) and carer approvals ($p=0.0102$) showed violations of parallel trends assumptions. This means findings regarding the Hub’s impact on household approvals and foster carer approvals should be treated with caution. Additional baseline covariates are needed to improve future estimation of the impact of the Hub on approvals. This analysis establishes a methodological foundation for future evaluation, identifying both where the approach works well and where refinements are required. Future analysis using 2024/25 data, which captures a full year of Hub operation, will incorporate enhanced controls to strengthen parallel trends assumptions.

Enquiries and applications analysis

- **Readiness to apply:** In most LAs, there was a higher proportion of enquirers ready to apply than those seeking more information, though the exact ratio varied between authorities. The percentage of enquiries from ready to apply applicants ranged from 47.3% to 70% across the 12 LAs. Those who were ready to apply initially generally progressed further in the application process at each stage compared to those who initially contacted for some more information about fostering.
- **Types of fostering Interest:** The most commonly expressed interest among enquirers was in short-term placements (367, 32.2%), followed by respite care (288, 25.3%). Fewer than 30 enquirers indicated interest in more specialist arrangements including disability care, UASC, and supported lodging, indicating limited interest in providing these more complex placements.
- **Age of enquirers:** Most primary enquirers across all authorities fell within the 51-55 (15%) and 41-45 age range (15%), with fewer enquirers in the youngest (21-25, 4.1%) and oldest (over 65, 2.9%) categories.

- **Age of foster children:** Enquirers were generally interested in fostering children aged 5-8 years (30.0%), followed by children aged 0-5 years (26.8%) and 8-12 years (26.1%). There was lower interest for children over 12 years old (17.2%).
- **Number of foster children:** The data revealed a clear pattern for the overall Hub, with nearly 2 out of 3 of enquirers expressing interest in fostering one child (65.78%), whilst just over a quarter indicate willingness to foster two children (27.49%).
- **Ethnicity of enquirers:** Most identified as White British (91.4%), roughly similar to the North East Population in 2021, with Black or Black British being the next largest group (3.4%), albeit significantly smaller. All LA staff and Comms Leads interviewed have not perceived a notable change in the type of enquiries and demographics of applicants their LA is receiving.
- **Location of enquirer:** Most enquirers expressed interest in fostering in their home LA, but there are some exceptions. Some LA staff interviewed theorised that LAs with more bordering LAs may experience a higher number of enquiries from residents living close to the borders.

Increasing LA capacity and timeliness

The IPE analysis highlighted progress increasing LA capacity and timeliness, and increased collaboration across the region. The Hub's services were perceived to have resulted in a reduced workload for LA recruitment teams and in turn has increased LA staff capacity to focus on other aspects of the application process. Interviewees perceived that response times had improved and therefore had enhanced the initial experience for prospective carers.

Regional collaboration between LAs

The Hub also fostered increased collaboration and knowledge sharing between LAs. The regional model was generally well accepted by interviewed LA staff and was largely perceived to have positively impacted the collaboration and knowledge sharing within the region. The lack of standardised foster carer fees across different LAs is considered an ongoing structural barrier that hinders regional collaboration and recruitment. This is perceived to undermine the sustainability of regional partnerships and reduces staff buy-in for the collaborative approach to recruitment.

Foster carers' experiences

Prospective foster carers have largely had a positive experience of their enquiry and application journey. They felt well-supported during their initial enquiry, citing the

dedicated Hub staff as a key reason for their positive experience and the efficiency of the process.

Monitoring, collection and sharing of data

The regional dashboard was not yet deemed suitable for effectively tracking foster carer journeys, service provision, or children's outcomes and has seen limited use due to challenges with access, training, and engagement.

Economic analysis: break even analysis

A break-even approach was adopted for the economic evaluation. Based on the difference between treated and non-treated areas in 2023/24 and comparing the costs of the Hub up to August 2024 with projected savings, we estimate that for the Hub to have achieved a break-even on costs and benefits, the Hub would have needed to recruit 88 approved foster care households in the first year of operation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report we recommend the following:

- Allow sufficient time for the regionalised approach to show its potential impact, by continuing to evaluate the Hub.
- Continue to maintain a diverse range of marketing with a focus on word-of-mouth strategies, as these are seen as leading to higher-quality applications.
- Enhance the usability and benefits of the dashboard for LAs (e.g. address licencing issues, provide tailored training and support, develop an engagement strategy).
- Consider steps towards fee and offer harmonisation in order to have more sustained regional working.

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Ipsos UK and the Centre for Evidence Implementation (CEI) in September 2023 to undertake an implementation, feasibility, impact and cost effectiveness evaluation of the Foster with North East Support Hub (referred to throughout 'the Hub').

1.1 Policy context

In March 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) report into the children's social care market recommended government support for increasing local authority foster care provision and reducing reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022). This report was shortly followed in May 2022 by the publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (The Care Review), which highlighted a concerning shortage of foster carers in England and a growing need for places. The Care Review highlighted that as a result of the shortage, children can often be placed in provision that is poorly matched for their needs, including children whose needs can be met in foster care, but are allocated to residential placements or Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements that can incur a significantly larger cost to the social care service than Local Authority foster placements. The Care Review recommended a 'new deal' for foster care, with emphasis on recruiting more foster carers and providing a high level of support to people going through the foster carer application process.

In response to the CMA report and the Care Review, DfE invested £36 million in foster carer recruitment and retention, with £3.4 million invested in a pathfinder fostering recruitment Hub in the North East of England. The North East pathfinder is the first step in DfE's broader plan to enhance and regionalise children's social care provision. As of January 2025, nine additional fostering recruitment hubs have been implemented in regions across England. In 2025/26, the Government are investing an additional £15 million in foster care recruitment and retention to support the vision for foster care set out in Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive (DfE, 2024) which includes the commitment to ensuring every Local Authority has the offer of a regional fostering recruitment Hub.

Wider fostering sector

Over the 5 years from 2019/20 to 2023/24, 54% of filled mainstream fostering places have been with local authorities and 45% have been with IFAs (Fostering in England 2024). IFAs are private or voluntary organisations registered by Ofsted to recruit, assess, approve, train, support and review foster carers who care for children looked after by local authorities. At 31 March 2024 the majority (91%) of IFA fostering

places were offered by private IFAs, while voluntary IFAs offered 9% of places¹. Local authorities commission IFAs to provide placements where the local authority is unable to meet demand through in-house carers. They often specialise in placements for children with complex needs or challenging behaviours.

1.2 Aims and objectives of Foster with North East

To address the urgent need for more foster placements, DfE invested £3.4 million in 2023/24 towards establishing a pathfinder fostering recruitment Hub in the North East of England. The fostering recruitment Hub, known as 'Foster with North East' launched on 27 September 2023 and is currently operational. Foster with North East established a regional service providing support to prospective foster carers from enquiry to approval. The North East region was selected as the pathfinder region following an internal data exercise which showed particularly high sufficiency pressures in the region

The Hub is a collaborative partnership among 12 LAs in the region: Sunderland, Durham, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Darlington, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Northumberland, Stockton-on-Tees and Redcar and Cleveland. This initiative marks a pioneering approach in the region, where prospective foster carers benefit from a unified support system. It is being led by Sunderland City Council's children services partner, Together for Children.²

The core objective of the Hub - to help recruit and support new foster carers - can be broken down into three sub-aims:

- Recruit a greater number and diversity of foster carers across the region who are high quality, have a realistic idea of fostering, and are able to meet the (often complex) needs of Children Looked After (CLA). This in turn seeks to facilitate greater foster carer retention.
- Improve the conversion of enquiries made by prospective foster carers to approved applications by ensuring enquiries are followed up in a timely manner and support is provided throughout the assessment process.
- Ensure placement decisions are determined by the needs of the child, not based on what residences are available through increasing number and quality of foster carer placements. This aims to reduce unplanned disruptions and moves.

The Hub represents a significant step in enhancing foster care provision in the North East of England, aiming to create a more supportive and effective environment for

¹ [Largest national providers of private and voluntary social care \(March 2024\) - GOV.UK](#)

² Together for Children delivers children's services on behalf of Sunderland City Council as some local areas have converted to Children's Trusts to run independently of Local Authorities.

foster carers and the children and families they serve. The key components of the Hub are described below:

- **Consistent support for prospective carers:** the Hub provides a single point of support for individuals considering fostering, enhancing the fostering process with streamlined and unified assistance, including Skills to Foster Training. It is the central point of contact for all foster carer enquiries and expressions of interest, prior to engagement with LA Children's Services, via email, phone call or enquiry form.
- **Collaborative Local Authority effort:** LA fostering teams across the North East region collaborate, leveraging their deep understanding of local community needs to better support families, children, and young people. This includes a regional communications campaign, development of a regional brand, and data sharing functionalities developed to help monitor and support foster carer recruitment.
- **Strengthening the fostering community:** The Buddy Mentoring Programme connects new foster carers with experienced ones for knowledge sharing and support.

The programme's Theory of Change is outlined in Table 1 and provides more detail about the activities and anticipated outcomes for the Hub.

A comprehensive evaluation, running from September 2023 until March 2026, was commissioned to assess the Hub's implementation, feasibility, and impact. The Hub is the first step in DfE's broader plan to enhance and regionalise children's social care provision. The Hub was launched as a Pathfinder, and 9 other regions involving 99 LAs (representing over 60% of LAs in England) subsequently rolled out their own regional hubs between April and June 2024. The 9 regional clusters took inspiration from the Hub model, but there are some differences in approach. Findings in this report should not necessarily be considered generalisable to the wider Hubs programme.

Overall, the Hub and its evaluation are integral to DfE's strategy to enhance foster care recruitment, inform policy decisions, and address the pressing issues in children's social care.

Table 1: Theory of change model (Dec 2023)

Inputs and activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
<p>Inputs</p> <p>NE Regional Support Hub delivery is led by TfC and includes 12 Local Authorities. Hub staff recruited to manage and support enquiries and assist in data collection and management.</p> <p>External consultant hired to support buddy scheme.</p> <p>LA staff time (particularly from leadership and senior operational managers) to assist in hub set up and delivery, managing and sharing data, and contributing to hub work streams.</p>	<p>Hub model established and operational.</p> <p>Clear co-working and data sharing agreements established across the region.</p> <p>A consistent support service for prospective foster carers developed and delivered by hub staff.</p> <p>A buddy scheme provided to prospective foster carers. Consistent skills to foster training provided.</p> <p>Timely responses to enquiries from prospective foster carers.</p>	<p>Short term</p> <p>Increased timeliness and frequency of support for prospective foster carers.</p> <hr/> <p>LA capacity released to focus on assessment and approval processes</p> <hr/> <p>Increased number of appropriate prospective foster carer enquiries.</p> <hr/> <p>Better regional understanding of what comms work for recruiting foster carers. Increased and improved foster carer recruitment.</p> <hr/> <p>Improved experiences of prospective foster carers across their application journey; foster carers feel more aware and confident throughout the process.</p> <hr/> <p>Increased conversion of prospective foster carer enquiries to assessments to approvals and less drop out.</p> <hr/> <p>Improved timescale of application to approval.</p> <hr/> <p>Improved demographic variation in foster carer applications.</p> <hr/> <p>Improved data collection:</p> <p>Data shared more easily across LAs in the region and monitored in a central dashboard.</p>	<p>Impacts for children:</p> <p>More children cared for in homes that best meet their needs and decreased unplanned moves and decreased use of out of region homes.</p> <hr/> <p>Economic impact:</p> <p>Working towards more children in foster care and lower reliance on higher cost residences.</p>

Inputs and activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
<p>Funding to establish a pathfinder hub in the NE. Funding from DfE for a communication campaign.</p> <hr/> <p>Data working group, operations group, and communications group to support the set-up of the Hub.</p>	<p>Ongoing regional communications campaign that compliments individual LA campaigns, and development of a regional brand.</p> <hr/> <p>Monitoring and evaluation of communications campaign.</p> <hr/> <p>Data sharing functionalities developed to help LAs and DfE monitor the hub operations and outcomes: A data platform, website linking LAs to hub and case management system</p>	<p>More, and improved, data collected and better use of data to improve foster carer recruitment (e.g. through a better understanding of the recruitment process).</p> <p>Long term Stabilise and potentially increase and improve foster care provision: Maintain or increase approved foster carers across the region.</p> <hr/> <p>Maintain or increase spaces available in homes including carers able to meet a variety of needs e.g., siblings, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.</p> <hr/> <p>Improved collaboration across the region through knowledge exchange, shared services and joint problem solving. and reduced competitiveness.</p>	

1.3 The new model and enquiry process

Prior to the introduction of the Hub model, prospective foster carers directly contacted their LA fostering team. The full process from enquiry to application and approval was managed by the LA, although specific practices varied.

In the new Hub model, enquirers can contact the Hub and submit their enquiry through several formats (e.g., phone call, online portal, or an in-person meeting with a member of the Hub's team). They are also provided with additional information on the wider process and journey to becoming a foster carer. Once the Hub has received an initial enquiry the staff arrange to speak with the enquirer via telephone, in person or online. In this conversation the Hub's fostering social workers discuss enquirers' interest in fostering and personal circumstances. Personal information is collected by the Hub (e.g. name, age, address, some background information) during this call and the enquirer's LA of choice is also documented. At this stage, the enquirer is given more information on the application and panel process before they begin the application to become a foster carer with the LA. If the enquirer feels that they are ready to proceed and the Hub is satisfied, they complete the Expression of Interest (EOI) form, and the information is passed onto the LA for deciding whether to begin the application process (e.g. home visits and subsequently Phase 1). The foster care application process involves two main stages: Stage 1 covers initial assessment and statutory checks, whilst Stage 2 includes detailed assessment and home visits. A more recent development in the enquiry process has been establishing a verbal screening process and the Hub supporting LAs with conducting initial visits. This is explored in the 'Screening and Initial Visits' section of 5.1.

The new Hub model includes the design and implementation of a regional data dashboard, designed to be an interactive system for both Hub and LA staff to track enquiry progression towards approval. Fostering staff across the 12 LAs were provided access through their local data analyst, and licences have been distributed to some fostering staff. Upon design, the dashboard was intended to provide LAs with both local and regional data, including: the number of enquirers, progress updates, and the number of approvals. The dashboard is updated by both the Hub staff and LA fostering teams on a monthly basis, though ongoing challenges with data sharing between organisations are discussed further in Section 3.4 and Section 8.5.

1.4 Research and evaluation context

The evaluation and the Hub were launched concurrently (from September 2023) in a context in which additional and complementary learning and evaluative work was ongoing, including:

Communication campaign evaluation: Verian evaluated the regional communication campaign in the North East, assessing awareness levels, attitudes towards fostering, and the campaign's impact. Their methodology involved pre/post online surveys with residents in the North East. This report integrates Verian's (2024) quantitative findings with Ipsos and CEI's own qualitative and quantitative data.

Working groups and the Fostering Advisory Board: The evaluation benefits from advice and support from a number of working groups and advisory board. The Evaluation and Research Advisory group provides expertise across policy and research, including academia. The evaluation team also engaged with members of the FRAP (Fostering Retention Advisory Panel) established by Mutual Ventures and with the FAB (Fostering Advisory Board) established by DfE that includes members with lived experience.

2. Methodology

This interim report presents findings from the first 16 months of the evaluation and is informed by data collection activities that ran from November 2023 to January 2025. The methodology followed the evaluation plan, developed during the scoping period. This section will outline the aims and research questions, methods and sample sizes as well as limitations.

2.1 Aims and research questions

The evaluation has 4 key aims:

- To assess the implementation and feasibility of the Foster with North East Hub.
- Analyse the impact and cost-effectiveness of the Foster with North East Hub.
- Generate learning and evidence on effective strategies for recruiting and retaining foster carers.
- Assess the feasibility of a monitoring dashboard for managing service provision and tracking outcomes and the overall journey of foster carers and children looked after.

The evaluation is underpinned by 15 research questions:

Implementation and process

- Q1: How was the Hub set up, what are the barriers and enablers to offering a regionalised service, what adaptations have been made?
- Q2: How have LAs adjusted to working regionally? What are the barriers and enablers to any systems, processes and cultural changes that have taken place?
- Q3: What was the content of the communications campaign, and the channels and reach of the campaign?
- Q4: What was the experience of prospective carers of the regional communications campaign?
- Q5: What is the experience of service from prospective carers? Is there consistency of support across LAs, individuals and time?
- Q6: How acceptable is the 'Hub' model both to foster carers and to staff as a means for improving the journey of foster carers from enquiry, application and approval?

- Q7: How feasible is it to use the monitoring and regional data dashboard to track (prospective) foster carers' journeys, service provision, and children looked after's outcomes over time? What is the accuracy of this data and how is it used?

Short-term outcomes

- Q8: Has the campaign contributed to increasing the number of enquiries and broadening their type (e.g. sibling groups, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, respite)? Is it perceived to improve the quality of enquiries?
- Q9: Is the Hub able to respond to the level of enquiries they receive, including after the communications campaign?
- Q10: Does the Hub improve conversion rates across the region and within LAs?
- Q11: Do foster carers and staff see it as an improvement on the previous system?
- Q12: How is the wider fostering market reacting to the Hub and comms campaign? Are there unintended consequences to the regionalisation of services?

Longer-term impact

- Q13: Is there an improvement in foster care provision in the region and individual LAs? (i.e. increased number of approved carers, higher proportion of children looked after in foster care).
- Q14: Can foster carers and children looked after journeys and outcomes be tracked over time?
- Q15: What are the cost and benefits of the regional support hub model?

2.2 Research methods and sample sizes

Stage 1: Scoping and design

The scoping and design phase of the evaluation was carried out from September to December 2023 to inform the evaluation plan and revise the Theory of Change (ToC). The ToC was refined by the evaluation team, building on DfE's draft ToC and perspectives from DfE, Hub and LA staff, and wider stakeholders. Scoping stage activities included: a ToC workshop, individual interviews, meetings with the Fostering Advisory Board, a data mapping workshop (with LA Data Analysts) and a desk review of relevant documentation and the regional monitoring dashboard. A feasibility assessment of the counterfactual impact evaluation was also undertaken.

The revised ToC model is shown in Figure 1, with additional information on scoping methodology outlined in Annex 1.

Stage 2: Data collection and analysis

This section outlines what data collection has been carried out for the process, impact, and economic evaluation. Data was collected between November 2023 to January 2025. All data collection took place online, except for the focus group with prospective foster carers.

Implementation and process evaluation (IPE)

Qualitative data to inform the IPE was collected from 72 participants. This included interviews/focus groups with individuals in strategic roles, interviews with Hub staff, case study interviews with LA staff, interviews and a focus group with prospective and approved foster carers, and interviews with fostering experts. Some participants were interviewed at two points in time. The detail of this data collection is outlined below.

Strategic staff interviews (N=28 interviews with 22 staff)

Between December 2023 and January 2024 (wave 1), qualitative interviews were conducted with 7 LA representatives (mostly in managerial roles) across 6 LAs as well as a focus group and interviews with 7 Hub staff in a range of leadership, managerial and frontline roles.

Between November 2024 and December 2024 (wave 2), interviews were conducted with 6 Hub staff members (accounting for some staff turnover) and 10 LA representatives (in managerial roles) across 9 LAs. Some LA and Hub staff participated in both waves of strategic interviews, dependent on staff turnover and engagement.

LA staff case study interviews (n=17 LA staff across 4 case studies)

In-depth qualitative case studies included 5 LAs purposively selected to include the lead LA (Sunderland, Together for Children) and different selection criteria based on factors influencing local children's services. These included: size and budget, location in the wider region, whether it is part of the new North East Combined Authority, number of neighbouring Hub LAs, income deprivation percentage, and geo classification (e.g. rural/urban). This report includes insights from 4 of the 5 LAs as one of the LAs was unable to participate in fieldwork.

Case study interviews with LA staff were conducted in 4 LAs, including interviews with LA staff in both leadership and frontline roles. These interviews took place from May 2024 to December 2024.

Interviews with prospective foster carers (n=21) and approved foster carers (n=4)

Initially prospective / approved foster carers who had enquired through the Hub were recruited for interviews from the 5 case studies. Recruiting foster carers proved

challenging so the recruitment was broadened from the case study approach to all 12 LAs.

In-person focus group with prospective foster carers (n= 9)

A 1-hour in-person focus group was conducted with prospective foster carers, during a Skills to Foster training course in January 2025. This approach increased the sample size and reduced the time burden on participants.

When discussing 'foster carers' throughout this report, this refers to both prospective and approved foster carers that participated (n=34) unless otherwise clarified.

Interviews with fostering experts (n=5) and Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) (n=5)

Interviews were conducted between November 2024 and January 2025 with a range of fostering experts and IFA staff. Interviews with IFA staff provided perspectives from private and voluntary IFAs, both within the North East region and nationally. The IFA interview participants included representatives from 2 private companies, representatives from 2 voluntary organisations and 1 representative from a national fostering organisation. IFAs are important actors when considering service provision at LA and regional level, through involvement with the recruitment, preparation, assessment, training and support for foster carers. Interviews with fostering experts included professionals within the fostering charity and support sector, both within the North East region and nationally. Most experts acted independently from Local Authorities through advisory or lobbyist functions, though the sample included Department of Children Services (DCS) representation from two county councils within England.

Additional qualitative activities

Alongside the main IPE qualitative data collection, important discussion took place with other stakeholders. These included:

- A roundtable discussion with DfE Communications Team was conducted in May 2024, to discuss the Foster with North East communications campaign.
- Secondary data has also informed this report with respect to the Communications Campaign, including the Verian comms evaluation (2024) and DfE's comms engagement data.
- A roundtable discussion with LA data analysts in September 2024. The topics of discussion related to the functionality of the Hub's monitoring dashboard, how they are using and benefitting from the dashboard, and suggested improvements that could be made going forward. This session was important to better understand LA perspectives on data sharing with the Hub.

- A brief online interview with an existing buddy and accompanying LA staff member was conducted in June 2024 as part of the case study research.

An outline of the qualitative analysis can be found in Annex 2

Short-term outcomes

We collected monitoring data from the Hub to conduct a descriptive analysis on short-term outcomes. This analysis covers September 2023 to December 2024 and examines:

- Whether the campaign has broadened the demographic profile of foster carers
- Changes in regional foster care provision

The monitoring data provides valuable insights into enquirer characteristics, application types, and application status. LAs and the Hub collect this data, which is then consolidated by the Hub and shared with our evaluation team. Table A.1 in the annex displays the full list of variables with their respective definitions.

Impact evaluation

The impact evaluation focuses on outcomes expected in the longer term. The early impact evaluation to-date primarily tests and assesses the methodological approach to inform future impact evaluation over the long term. It used available Ofsted data, only covering the first 6 months of Hub operation when these outcomes would not have been expected to materialise. For example, the process from enquiry to approval can take 6-9 months.

The impact evaluation will assess the Hub's impact by comparing outcomes between 2 groups: the intervention group (the 12 LAs forming the Foster with North East Hub) and a matched comparison group (LAs not part of the Hub). This approach, known as counterfactual impact evaluation, helps us determine what would have happened without the Hub's intervention.

We measured impact on 3 key outcome indicators from Ofsted data:

- Number of applications received
- Number of newly approved fostering households
- Number of newly approved individual foster carers

The Ofsted data provided outcomes data across all LAs, allowing for comparison between Hub and non-Hub areas.

To analyse this data, we used a quasi-experimental design to attempt to compare changes in outcomes before and after the Hub's implementation, although this was limited by data misalignment meaning some of the 'after' Hub period included 'before'

Hub data. Our feasibility assessment confirmed this approach was appropriate given the available data and implementation timeline. By comparing the 12 LAs in the Hub with 134 similar LAs elsewhere in England, we could identify changes that, if statistically significant, can be reasonably attributed to the Hub rather than external factors³.

Our data analysis approach

We analysed Ofsted data spanning 2020-2024, covering periods both before and after the Hub's launch. The aim of this was to enable us to:

- Compare how key outcomes changed in North East LAs after the Hub was introduced, relative to their pre-Hub performance⁴.
- Measure these changes against similar LAs elsewhere in England that did not implement a Hub model, creating a valid comparison group.
- Account for important differences between areas, such as population size and socio-demographic factors, to ensure fair comparison.
- Apply doubly-robust Difference-in-Differences analysis, an established statistical method that isolates the Hub's effects from other factors that might influence outcomes.

This approach combines robust statistical methods with clear, measurable outcomes to evaluate the Hub's early impact while acknowledging that 6 months is too soon to see significant changes in some outcomes, particularly approvals, which typically take 6-9 months⁵ to complete.

Detailed findings are provided in Section 5 and full technical details of this analysis are available in the appendix (Annex 3).

Exclusion of enquiry data

Although increasing enquiries was part of the ToC for the Hub, it was excluded as an outcome measure from the impact evaluation. The enquiry data presented significant reliability issues that would have undermined the analysis. The main issue was inconsistent definitions across LAs in how they classify and record enquiries. Some LAs distinguish between 'hard' enquiries (those showing serious interest) and 'soft' enquiries (more casual information requests), whilst others do not make this distinction. These inconsistencies existed both in the Hub data and in non-Hub LAs across time. It was therefore impossible to establish reliable baseline measurements or make valid comparisons between Hub and non-Hub areas.

³ Although these 134 Local Authorities were not part of the Foster with North East Hub or any other DfE-funded regional fostering Hub, they might have had other regional working arrangements that the evaluation team is not aware of.

⁴ The Ofsted data labelled as 'post-intervention' may contain some records that predate the intervention, as Ofsted's annual data collection cycle (March to April) does not align with the hub's September launch.

⁵ This is a DfE assumption based on a combination of sources.

Economic Evaluation

A break-even cost analysis was conducted as the impact evaluation has not yet been able to capture the full effect of the Hub on the recruitment of foster carers. It assesses the magnitude of benefits that would have been required for the benefits of the Hub to outweigh the costs in its first 11 months.

The costs and benefits are compared using 2 metrics:

- **Benefits Cost Ratio (BCR):** a ratio of the present value of benefits to the present value of costs providing a measure of the benefits relative to costs.
- **Net Present Value (NPV):** the present value of benefits less the present value of costs providing a measure of overall impact.

The cost assessment includes costs associated with the investment in the Hub, including initial capital expenditure, operating expenses, maintenance costs, and any other relevant expenses. The costs included in this analysis provide an estimate of the spend up to August 2024 which represents the set-up costs from March 2023 to September 2023 and running costs from September 2023 to August 2024.

The benefits of the Hub are estimated based on the cost savings of LA foster care compared to IFA foster care and residential care. To estimate the cost per child of care in different settings we use publicly available unit cost estimates.

Important assumptions

Assumptions are needed to model the cost savings from increasing foster household approvals. The key assumptions used are:

- **Foster carer length of service:** Estimates in national statistics show that foster carers, on average, provide 8 years of care. We assume the Hub will provide a length of care in line with this.
- **Children per active foster household:** The number of children in foster care and the number of foster households in England suggest around 1.44 children per active foster household. We assume that households recruited through the Hub will care for an equivalent number of children on average.
- **The ratio of counterfactual accommodation between IFAs and residential care:** We cautiously assume that for every ten new foster households, the counterfactual would be that nine placements would have been in IFAs, and one would have been in residential care.
- **Correction factor of 20%:** Given that the unit costs are averages, they may not represent the trust cost savings from the Hub. For example, residential care

placements will include children with complex needs who would not be appropriately cared for in a foster care setting. To account for this and other limitations from the unit costs, we reduce all cost savings by 20% to provide a more conservative estimate.

2.3 Limitations

There are several limitations to this report. While these limitations do not invalidate the report's findings, they highlight the need for caution in interpretation throughout the report.

Implementation and Process Evaluation

We have engaged with all 12 LA at points within the evaluation and used a case study approach to deep dive into the experiences of staff and foster carers. The evaluation plan intended to work across 5 LAs. However, due to a lack of engagement with one LA we were only able to conduct 4 case studies.

Whilst we collected insights from a total of 34 foster carers (25 interviews and 1 focus group with 9 foster carers), only 4 of these were approved foster carers. As a result, this report only gathers limited perspectives from foster carers on the full process from enquiry to approval stage. Furthermore, the prospective foster carers interviewed were still engaged in the process and therefore this report does not include the views of applicants that have dropped out.

Short term outcomes

The monitoring data from the Hub used in the short-term outcomes analysis covers the period September 2023 to December 2024. This data should be treated with some caution, as it represents a snapshot in time and may be subject to retrospective amendments not captured at the point of receipt. The specific processes around data cleaning and validation have not yet been confirmed for this analysis but will be clarified as part of future evaluation activity.

Impact evaluation

The impact evaluation faced several methodological constraints due to data availability and timing factors that affected our ability to measure the Hub's full impact.

The most significant limitation stems from misalignment between the Hub's launch date and Ofsted's data collection cycle. The Hub began operating in September 2023 across 12 North East local authorities. However, the available 'after Hub' data covers April 2023 to March 2024, meaning only six months of this period reflects actual Hub operation. The remaining six months contain pre-Hub data, which contaminates our treatment period. This contamination occurs because Ofsted provides annual data totals only, preventing us from identifying which specific outcomes occurred before or after the Hub's launch.

We could not make methodological adjustments to address this timing issue because the data structure was predetermined. Despite this limitation, we proceeded with the quasi-experimental design for several important reasons. Our feasibility assessment confirmed that meaningful analysis remained possible, albeit with reduced precision. The evaluation provides crucial baseline evidence. Most importantly, this timing misalignment will resolve naturally in future data waves as more post-implementation periods become available, making this early evaluation an essential foundation for longer-term assessment. The evaluation was also restricted to Ofsted data as the only source providing consistent measurement frameworks across both Hub and non-Hub areas necessary for robust comparison. This constraint limited our analysis in several ways. We could only examine local authority-level aggregate data rather than individual-level information, which prevented tracking individual applicant journeys. This restriction reduced our understanding of how different groups experience the Hub's services and limited the analytical depth we could achieve. Finally, complex interventions of this scale typically require extended periods to demonstrate their intended effects. Given the Hub's short operational timeframe of 6 months during our study period, this evaluation may not fully capture the programme's potential long-term impact on foster care recruitment and retention.

Economic evaluation

The economic evaluation faced several constraints that affected the precision of our cost-benefit calculations. The assessment relies on average unit costs to estimate expenses for local authority foster care, independent fostering agencies, and residential care. Whilst these figures represent the best available information, using averages omits crucial detail about individual contexts and care needs. For instance, the average unit costs for residential care include all types of provision, yet many children in residential care would not be appropriately placed in foster care due to their complex needs. This averaging approach may overestimate potential savings from increased foster care placements.

Additionally, the unit costs derive from different sources across care types, which could create inconsistencies in our comparisons. We conducted careful assessment of available unit costs to select the most appropriate figures and reduce these inconsistencies where possible. However, recognising these methodological limitations, we applied a conservative 20% corrective factor to our estimated unit savings to account for potential overestimation.

Best efforts have been made to choose the most appropriate and accurate cost assumptions however using unit costs does come with limitations. There are several examples of publicly available estimates of children's care unit costs across LA foster care, IFAs and residential care. This assessment utilises the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT) estimates using s251 data for the relevant Local Authorities. This is the preferred source as it provides the most specific costs to the relevant local authority areas of interest. This is preferred over national averages, however LAIT LA spend is

known to include LA spend on both in-house provision and IFA provision and therefore is likely to overstate the estimate of LA costs.

As the LAIT estimates do not estimate the cost of IFA foster care, we have estimated the IFA foster care costs for each LA using the ratio between the LA foster care unit cost for England for LAIT to the unit cost estimate of IFA foster care from the Narey and Owers review of Foster Care in England⁶. The Narey and Owers IFA unit costs are based on a sample of 8 IFAs and may not fully represent the broader population of IFAs and therefore caution should be exercised when generalising costs to all IFAs. In addition, the estimates which are based on s251 returns, do not include as comprehensive of an assessment of the overheads for LA foster care unit costs as they do for IFAs reducing the comparability of LA and IFA costs and potentially overstating the cost difference with IFAs. In any assessment of cost savings, it is important to account for the marginal costs. This is pertinent to children's social care as some costs, particularly for residential care, are fixed and therefore would not increase with an extra child. To account for this the estimates do not include any land or building cost estimates for residential costs.

The assessment was also unable to capture the full range of welfare benefits that improved foster care allocation might generate. These additional outcomes were not included in the impact evaluation scope, yet we might reasonably expect that better matching of foster carers to children's needs would yield improved wellbeing and educational outcomes. The exclusion of these broader benefits means our economic evaluation likely underestimates the Hub's total social value, providing a conservative estimate of returns on investment.

In addition, the estimated number of households that would have needed to be recruited by the Hub in Year 1 to break-even should be treated with caution because of different reporting periods used. Specifically, the Year 1 costs cover the period September 2023 to August 2024 while the ratio between the treated and untreated areas is based on Ofsted data from the period April 2023 to March 2024, and the approved households recruited by the Hub in year 1 are based on monitoring data from September 2023 – December 2024. In addition, the estimate is calculated using the difference in approvals between the treated and untreated areas in 2023/24 data, which was not a statistically significant difference.

⁶ [Foster care in England - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/reviews/foster-care-in-england)

3. Design and implementation of the Hub (December 2022 – January 2024)

This section covers the Hub's design process (December 2022 – September 2023), followed by a focus on the barriers and facilitators encountered during set up and implementation (October 2023 – January 2024).

3.1 Design and implementation of the Hub

The design and implementation of the Hub followed 5 key stages and was generally considered a collaborative and informed process involving DfE, Together for Children and staff in strategic roles from all 12 LAs. The design stage followed the following process:

- Deciding the scope of the Hub, including the role and services to be provided.
- Business mapping and arranging resourcing needs, to inform recruitment strategy.
- Establishing the work streams of the Hub, featuring ICT/Tech, data procedures, information and governance structures, and communications strategy. This included the development of the data dashboard, designed to track enquiry progression towards approval.
- Finalisation of staffing requirements, to inform the recruitment of staff and induction.
- Complete set-up of the Hub, prior to launch in September 2023.

Clear mechanisms of communication were established promptly between the Hub, DfE, the Lead LA and the other 11 LAs, but engagement with individual LAs varied. Communications included regular meetings with LA senior leadership and team leads (e.g. communications and marketing leads, data leads).

A general reflection made by Hub and LA staff interviewed was the limited time given to set up the Hub prior to launching. The first engagement was in December 2022, and the Hub launched on 28 September 2023; this was considered a relatively short timeframe for a project involving important changes to ways of working. Some aspects of the design demanded more time to finalise. At the time of the launch, the data sharing procedures for once a referral was transferred were not yet finalised between the Hub and LAs. Launch and access to the regional data dashboard had not been completed as a result, with delays continuing into early stages of delivery. Similarly, there was no clear agreement about allocation of foster carers to LAs when an area of preference was not provided, and the final branding of Foster with North East was not completed. The hard deadline for launching the Hub was considered a barrier for the complete design, with

some Hub staff stating they would have benefitted from a longer set up period. Many felt this would have facilitated a smoother launch as a result.

“I think if we’d had more time to do that trial and error before going live so we could have made those mistakes in a controlled environment, that would have been much better.” - Hub staff

3.2 Staffing

Roles within the Hub have changed between launch in September 2023 and January 2025, becoming more independent from Together for Children. For example, the Hub manager’s role was initially joint between the Hub and Together for Children. As the Hub became more established, the role became embedded in the Hub. Other roles have evolved with time, notably the Communications Lead position that was initially provided by Sunderland City Council and only partially focused on the Hub. Using the opportunity of staff turnover, the remit of this position changed and became fully dedicated to the Hub.

The Hub has a core team of 5 staff members, including 3 fostering social workers, an assistant social worker, and a data analysis assistant. The Hub staff work closely alongside all LA fostering teams.

Recruitment for the Hub team intentionally targeted skilled professionals, with extensive experience of foster carer recruitment. Due to staff turnover some of these positions (e.g., Comms Lead) are vacant as of January 2025.

3.3 Facilitators and barriers during the design and implementation stages

The section below outlines the key facilitators and barriers encountered by the Hub during the design and early implementation stages. The evidence here is based interviews conducted with Hub and LA staff, between December 2023 and January 2024.

Facilitators

Several factors facilitated the successful implementation of the Hub, including early buy-in, communication, and Hub staffing.

Early LA buy-in amongst LA staff

Interviews with Hub and LA staff found that early buy-in was considered important for all levels of seniority across fostering teams and children’s services more widely.

Senior leadership

Hub staff thought that securing buy-in from senior LA leadership, especially Directors of Children's Services (DCS), was crucial for fostering trust and participation in the Hub. Having a respected Director at the Hub with strong regional relationships proved beneficial. The importance of senior engagement with the Hub was emphasised by an LA staff member in particular:

“[a key piece of advice would be to] have a strong single powerful central regional lead for this. Ours liaises with the other DCSs at an appropriate level. They are well-respected by the region, and that matters so much. People listen to them and know that they have their head screwed on right, and they deliver the collaborate not compete messages so clearly. They are a key player and everybody knows it. That is the key thing for me, and I think this project would have failed from the outset if we hadn't had that.”
- LA staff

Frontline staff

LA representatives emphasised the need to engage frontline staff, particularly social workers, from the beginning. Their buy-in is essential for successful delivery, as they work directly with foster carers. While senior engagement was prioritised and largely achieved by the Hub's launch, less attention was given to other LA staff. A staff member stated that greater inclusion of frontline staff in regional meetings prior to Hub launch would have enhanced the necessary perspective sharing, as social workers play a vital role in delivery and interaction with foster carers and Hub staff.

LAs that actively participated in initial meetings and workshops developed a sense of ownership and commitment, leading to greater engagement and cooperation. Smaller LAs generally found it easier to implement new processes as it required fewer structural adjustments within their smaller teams.

Transparency in the Hub's decision-making, straightforward processes, and clear communication to LA staff about the benefits of regionalising foster care recruitment secured early support from some LAs, according to Hub and LA staff interviewed. While some expressed concerns about the practicalities of a cross-LA case management system and the increase workload in implementing the model, they generally recognised the long-term benefits of regionalisation.

Communication

Interviewees noted that negotiation and flexibility were also important, particularly regarding communication and marketing activities. Many LAs insisted on continuing their own awareness-raising efforts, contrary to the original plan for the Hub. Ultimately, it was agreed that LAs could conduct awareness-raising alongside the Hub, with all prospective foster carers directed to the Hub.

LAs' concerns were addressed throughout the process, resulting in a Hub model aligned with their needs. The importance of open communication and relationship-building was evident when 1 Hub social worker met with an LA team at the Hub's launch, which LA staff appreciated. An LA staff member noted that this initial communication "cemented the relationship" between the 2 organisations, highlighting the importance of this communication and transparency on themselves and the wider fostering team:

"I could see the anxiety and uncertainty just disappear [...] I feel extremely strongly about this, that it takes some time to establish as a team and just to establish those systems... They [the Hub] have been extremely passionate and optimistic and enthusiastic about wanting to make this work." - LA staff

Regular communications from the Hub, such as newsletters and check-ins, were also valuable for maintaining LA staff buy-in across all levels. Some of the LA management staff noted that these updates kept staff motivated by demonstrating the Hub's tangible impact and practical outcomes.

Hub Staffing

The approach to staffing was considered, in many ways, an effective aspect of the Hub's design stage. Hub staff thought they were able to work effectively as a team immediately following recruitment, particularly when all staff were available to work in-person in the Hub's new facilities (based within Together for Children). The recruitment of three qualified social workers, that had in-depth knowledge of the process and requirements for becoming a foster carer, was viewed by participants as important for the Hub's initial success and early reputation with both LA fostering teams and enquirers.

Barriers

Several barriers hindered the implementation of the Hub. These barriers included inconsistent use of Hub processes, challenges tracking enquirers, misaligned data systems, competition mindset, fixed term employment contracts, formal screening capacity, and the short-term centralised funding.

Initial role confusion and overlapping processes

The initial implementation phase faced challenges due to a lack of clarity about the Hub's role and responsibilities amongst some of the LA fostering teams. Some LA representatives expressed confusion over overlapping processes, leading to unnecessary burdens and inefficiencies. For instance, the Hub's allocation protocol for residents in border areas was not initially clear, especially if enquirers didn't specify a preference.⁷ One Hub staff member felt that better insight into LAs' screening decisions

⁷ Allocation protocol (based on interviews conducted before January 2025) assigns enquirers to their 'home' postcode Local Authority, unless they specify otherwise.

could help tailor responses to enquiries (e.g., spare room requirements) and improve communication with re-enquirers who may have been previously rejected by an LA. Many staff from both the Hub and LAs believed streamlining information collection could reduce bureaucracy as enquirers transitioned from the Hub to their chosen LA:

“Only yesterday we had an LA email us and said, ‘I have spoken to a couple they are approved we’ve been out and visited them’, and we [the Hub] knew nothing about it. We then have to make contact with the couple and say we know you’ve already been visited by your LA, but we now need to record you on our Hub system. It makes us look a bit silly.”
- Hub staff

Confusion over LA recruitment activities and their compatibility with the Foster with North East communications campaign also hindered the initial launch:

“Initially, there was an expectation for LAs to pause on recruitment, but we did not feel like we could do that. As a small LA, we have a community-based and flexible approach to recruitment that works for our community that we want to maintain.” - LA staff

Inconsistent use of the Hub processes by LA staff

LA and Hub staff noted that use of the Hub was inconsistent across LAs in the early stages as some did not follow the established process from the start. For example, on occasion some LAs had not sent initial enquiries through the Hub and instead handled the enquiries themselves. This initially resulted from LA staff concerns over ‘losing’ enquirers that contacted the LA directly. They feared that the momentum of their enquiry would be lost or that enquirers would be frustrated by the process if redirected to the Hub. This was especially common in smaller LAs and among enquirers who were already in contact with LAs before the Hub launch (and were unaware of the new process).

Challenges tracking all enquirers

During set up of the Hub, some LA staff shared that they were unsure about tracking and conducting follow-up processes for enquirers that had expressed an interest but were not yet ready to apply. Some LAs retained records of those individuals with the intention to reach out to them a few months later but expressed confusion if this was the Hub’s or the LA’s responsibility.

Furthermore, a LA staff member was unsure how more experienced foster carers who had previously fostered with IFAs would be transferred through the Hub and whether the enquiry process would be appropriately tailored.

Misaligned data systems

The incompatibility of data systems and record formatting between the Hub and LAs presented a significant barrier as it meant manual data entry was required to update

either party. This burden resulted in many LA staff feeling frustrated with the time implications. Though these issues were eventually resolved and only experienced as a result of the data dashboard delay, this was a considerable concern amongst LA staff for the initial few months. Some Hub staff were aware of these challenges:

"Importing data from a Word doc into a case management system is causing frustration for Local Authorities who have to input information manually. We don't want to create more work for LAs. LA processes will look very different to what the Hub system looks like and what the LAs do when they get enquires. Ideally the Hub and LA systems would mirror each other more so all the LA has to do when they get a referral from the Hub is just contact the enquirer." - Hub staff

Some Hub staff reflected that a potential improvement for the design phase was to ensure the Hub and LA systems mirrored each other. Some Hub staff also felt that they should have been more involved in the development and configuration meetings for the case management system. These issues were exacerbated by the lack of time for collaboration prior to launching:

"It [case management system] could have been a lot better if they had us involved from the start." - Hub staff

Competition mindset among LAs

The pre-existing competitive mindset between LAs towards foster carer recruitment and retention presented a significant cultural barrier to the collaborative ethos of the Hub. The scarcity of foster carers within the fostering landscape and variation in fees and support among LAs, as well as between LAs and IFAs, contributed to the development of this competition mindset. Prior to the Hub's launch, LAs had invested resources to develop their own fostering brands to support recruitment in a competitive market.

During early implementation, some LAs felt it remained their priority to find placements for children living in their LA and as a result have struggled with buy-in to the perceived benefits of collating resources and a regional approach to foster carer recruitment, since the Hub launched. LA staff discussed their concerns that enquirers may be lost if they are not directly signposted to an LA and were hesitant to invest resources in a system that did not guarantee a direct benefit to their own fostering needs. This initial challenge to fully embed a collaborative approach to recruitment was apparent amongst some LA staff and was recognised by Hub staff too:

"If I'm working in the LA on a Thursday afternoon and get an urgent phone call that we need to place siblings and I've got no carers to ring, my primary concern is that we really need to be recruiting more carers for my service." - LA staff

“You will always struggle to regionalise the recruitment for foster carers because you will always have a level of Local Authorities being precious about their own carers and getting people into their own areas. I'm not saying it's unachievable, but I'm saying that it's a seismic cultural shift within finding placements for children in care.” - LA staff

Concerns that the Hub would cause LAs to lose prospective foster carers was apparent amongst some LA staff:

“We are still concerned about missing out on prospective foster carers from outside the Local Authority area.” - LA staff

“We have done marketing work that reaches people outside of our LA, but these people have not been sent back to us by the Hub. We've done the work, but another LA has taken these foster carers from us.” - LA Staff

Nevertheless, buy-in to the regional approach of the Hub has been increasingly apparent. There has been increased acceptance of the wider goals of the Hub – to improve the outcomes for children and young people in care – as the Hub has progressed in delivery. Reducing sector competition is a core aspect of the Hub's objectives and has been a core priority for the Hub staff to convey throughout early delivery. The cultural shift required for the Hub, from a competitive mindset to a collaborative one, was achieved gradually amongst some LAs and their staff.

Responsibility for conducting all checks was formally allocated to LAs

The Hub is part of Together for Children Sunderland. Together for Children's fostering service is registered by Ofsted as an independent fostering agency which enables the fostering service to undertake all aspects of the fostering process. As the Hub operates within Sunderland, it also has the capacity to conduct pre-screening⁸ of prospective foster carers. However, the agreed process is for the nominated LA to progress all checks and references including DBS. The DBS check is done at the point of Registration of Interest (the formal application to progress with checks and references, different to the prior and more informal EOI stage). This was perceived as inefficient by some Hub staff interviewed as the hand-off to the LA for all checks and references introduced an extra step, potentially increasing the application timeline. Nevertheless, the Hub are continually taking steps to carry out manual screenings in line with manual information provided by the individual LA. As a result, though the Hub cannot conduct all

⁸ Stage 1 involves LA checks and references on prospective foster carers and other members of their household. This is a legal requirement and includes DBS checks, medical and police checks, employer reference as well as personal references. Once stage 1 has been completed, LAs make the decision whether to move to stage 2 where a dedicated assessing social worker will conduct a full assessment. Some LAs run the stages concurrently.

checks required to continue onto the assessment stage, steps are being taken to mitigate this perceived inefficiency.

Short-term centralised funding provision

At the strategic level, some LA staff considered the initial short-term financial commitment (the funding cycle was April 2023 – March 2024) insufficient for long-term progression and buy-in, with funding discussions for the next year of delivery taking place in December 2023. The short-term funding was therefore a barrier which resulted in some LA staff feeling they were unable to make an informed decision on their future involvement and funding of the Hub model, as the potential impact of the Hub was not yet apparent. An LA staff member proposed a longer-term central funding model to reduce the pressure on LAs to make funding decisions, allowing for the pathfinder to be a “much more positive project” for the 12 LAs.

More recent interviews with LA staff (between September and December 2024) have raised concerns around the current population-based funding model and the implications for internal LA staffing. Some LA staff considered the population-based funding model (in which LA contribution is based on population percentage in the region) to be inappropriate for the Hub. Some felt that some LAs would be contributing more for the same service. They felt the approach needed to be changed but were unable to propose an alternative solution. LA staff also highlighted that as the Hub continues to expand its service, potentially increasing costs for LAs, it will impact their future fostering team capacity and recruitment needs. As a result, many LA staff felt establishing a long-term funding strategy would ease clarity around internal budget and staffing in the future.

Fixed-term employment contracting

The short-term funding of the regional Hub presented recruitment challenges in the design phase, due to the fixed-term employment contracts. The fixed-term employment requirements were a barrier to attracting sufficiently skilled professionals. Initial resources, especially for communications and management, was drawn from existing resources where people had multiple roles. In addition to this some Hub staff thought that an increase in funding would have enabled them to recruit more staff, thus potentially alleviating resourcing challenges (e.g., staff turnover, prolonged sick leave) they anticipated during delivery.

4. Communications Campaign (October 2023 – March 2024)

In October 2023, a communications campaign (comms campaign) was launched to promote the Hub. This campaign delivered core promotional activities until March 2024, with a total investment of £300,000, including £100,000 allocated directly to the Hub for media buying. Further funding (i.e., £200,000) was allocated for 2024/2025, but this is out of scope for this evaluation report.

Findings presented in this section combine primary data collection from the IPE and findings from a separate evaluation of Foster with North East's comms campaigns conducted by Verian. Sections 4.1 - 4.3 focus on core activity between Oct 23 and March 24 and section 4.5 addresses changes made to the coms campaign up to Jan 25.

4.1 Communications campaign core activity

Aims of the Foster with North East comms campaign

The Comms campaign activities aimed to drive enquiries to the Hub, targeting those who may be able to offer homes for children and young people for whom it is more difficult to find homes, such as siblings, those with additional needs and older children. The campaign targeted adults aged 25+, based in the North East, with a diverse range of backgrounds (e.g. spare nest/'empty room', settled/established/active in the community, financially secure, homeowner/long-term renter).

Different parties were involved in the design and launch of the campaign:

- DfE commissioned the comms campaign and provided guidance to Red Havas and the LAs based on the policy aims and what the communications activity is intending to achieve.
- Red Havas are a comms agency commissioned by DfE to lead on the visuals and messaging for the comms design and the public relations strategy. They had no involvement post launch.
- The 12 LA comms leads represented each of the 12 LAs who were part of the Hub. The comms leads' main role was to provide feedback to Red Havas during the design process to ensure LAs had an input on the campaign materials. Post launch they were responsible for carrying out comms activities in each of their LAs.
- Hub Comms Lead oversaw the implementation of the comms campaign and the ongoing development of comms materials after the launch. They were responsible for comms strategy post launch and chaired monthly meetings with comms leads

from the 12 LAs. Additionally, they occasionally acted as a liaison between 12 LA comms leads, and Red Havas, and DfE.

Core campaign activity and delivery

Core campaign activities were live between October 2023 and March 2024 and delivered through 3 different channels:

- Pay Per Click (e.g. digital campaigns on social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, paid search via Google ads).
- Out of home advertising (OOH) such as buses, bus shelters and supermarkets.
- Digital audio channels.

More detail about the specific activities involved for each channel can be found in Table A2 (Annex 2).

Additional comms activities under Foster with North East have continued following the initial launch and include continued online advertising and Hub staff attendance at community events.

4.2 Facilitators and barriers of the comms campaign

Facilitators

Hub and LA staff perceived the regionalisation of the communications campaign enabled them to better understand what is effective in increasing awareness of fostering in the region. They also highlighted some good practice during implementation and delivery including the website, case studies, shared resources, and collaboration.

The website

The Hub website was highlighted as particularly beneficial and there was consensus amongst LA staff interviewed that it was useful having 1 primary website for the region, as it was a centralised point of information. LA staff have received feedback from foster carers that described the website as informative, user friendly and easy to navigate, and that the enquiry form was easy to fill out. The Verian evaluation aligns with these qualitative findings, as it found that 3 in 10 of those aware of Foster with North East had visited the website, and this was higher amongst the campaign's target audience (Verian, 2024).

Relevant case studies

Case studies of real-life foster carers from the North East featured on the Foster with North East website. Case studies endeavoured to represent the broad range of types of

foster carers and resonated with prospective foster carers and LA staff. The Hub and LA staff learnt from foster carer feedback that case studies of foster carers and real-life stories resonated with the public. An additional £25,000 was provided by DfE, which was used to develop advertising specific to Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, including case studies and videos that were showcased via the Foster with North East website and social media platforms.

The case study stories were not at LA level, however LA staff thought there was a 'general Northeastern identity' that the case studies were able to reflect, thus allowing them to resonate with residents.

Some LA staff shared that prospective foster carers' feedback highlighted that the real-life stories were positive, relatable and helped address some of their concerns about fostering.

Shared comms resources and streamlined messaging

The Hub comms lead provided resources for LA comms leads, such as events kit that included posters, leaflets, freebies, and social media post templates. LA comms leads thought the resources helped towards consistent messaging across the region and were beneficial to those who, due to time constraints or other responsibilities, could not carry out all the activities proposed by the Hub comms lead.

One IFA stakeholder also highlighted how a regional approach could streamline recruitment messaging. Currently, the fostering sector is saturated with varied and often conflicting messages, making it difficult for LA communications to stand out. Aligning marketing efforts across LAs could help cut through this noise, presenting a more coherent and compelling message to prospective foster carers

Collaboration

LA comms leads interviewed found that monthly meetings with the comms lead from the Hub and 12 LAs provided opportunity for collaboration and learning. They reported that regionalisation of the communications campaign led to increased collaboration and resource sharing between LAs and enabled Hub and LA staff to experience the benefits of regionalised working. Comms leads reported becoming more comfortable sharing their own local knowledge and expertise. The regionalised comms campaign also provided a bigger combined budget. Comms Leads and LA staff interviewed from smaller LAs felt this increased the ability for smaller LAs to compete effectively with IFAs.

Barriers

Hub and LA staff interviewed identified challenges, unintended consequences, and potential improvements that have implications for future communication campaigns and

the Hub. These included complex messaging, tension between quantity and quality of enquiries, clarity of roles and responsibilities.

Complex messaging

Some prospective foster carers highlighted the importance of advertising content that conveys the impactful and positive aspects of fostering. They highlighted the importance of portraying the positive outcomes of fostering for children (e.g. outcomes on health, development, and educational attainment). The Verian evaluation (Verian, 2024) found that attitudes towards foster care were generally positive, and unchanged post-campaign. Survey participants recognised the positive impact fostering could have on a young person's life (93% pre-campaign; 93% post-campaign), and that it would be rewarding (84% pre-campaign; 85% post-campaign).

Prospective foster carers also emphasised that the content messaging should not imply anyone can be a foster carer because fostering is challenging and requires specific skills. Foster carers interviewed highlighted that this could result in a perceived relaxation of standards, quality and professionalism. This highlights a key challenge for the comms campaign that needs to find a balance between broadening the profile of foster carers beyond traditional stereotypes without conveying the message that anyone can foster.

Some foster carers interviewed felt that the messaging did not address people's concerns around fostering clearly enough. The Verian evaluation (Verian, 2024) found that the biggest barrier to becoming a foster carer was concern about potential behavioural issues or traumatic pasts, followed by worry that they would become too attached to the foster child. These concerns were not addressed in the campaign messaging. In addition, foster carers interviewed had concerns about the application process that they felt were not addressed in the campaign, such as the length of the process.

Tension between quantity and quality of enquiries

Hub and LA staff highlighted the importance of targeting comms to higher-quality applicants with relevant skills. Promoting foster care in a way that increases enquiry numbers will not necessarily provide quality enquiries that will convert to approvals and improve provision for categories of young people for which there was more acute shortage of carers. However, it may also be that recruiting new foster carers, no matter the profile, will allow existing foster carers with more experience to foster teenagers, sibling groups, and children with more complex needs. It is important that all involved are clear about the theory of change including objectives of the Hub's campaign and how they intend to achieve them.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities

The comms campaign is intended to complement other comms activities at LA level. However, there was some uncertainty amongst some LA staff and Comms Leads about the extent to which they should be carrying out in-house comms and awareness raising activities. A minority of LAs have significantly reduced their activities as they viewed marketing and awareness raising as the responsibility of the Hub, not the LA. Participants suggested having a clear protocol that outlines roles and responsibilities in relation to the different activities would be beneficial.

More tailored messaging

As a result of their first year of delivering the regionalised comms campaign and comms activities, Hub staff, LA staff, and prospective foster carers proposed tailored local comms and partnerships as a potential focus for future communications by the Hub. For example, moving into the second year of Hub delivery (Sept 2024 to Sept 2025) all LA Comms Leads suggested utilising more local partnerships with organisations such as grassroots football clubs. The Hub Comms Leads suggested that future partnerships with well-known and trusted local organisations and brands would in turn help increase trust in the Hub brand. They also thought guerrilla marketing (see quote below for explanation) would have helped generate interest at a local level and increased brand awareness. Both local partnerships and guerrilla marketing were seen as marketing techniques that could have been more easily tailored to better resonate with residents in that LA.

“Guerrilla Marketing, so that would be stuff like hanging poetry by foster children up in the street or do it on the ground, those sorts of things. We really liked the idea, but we didn't have the budget to implement it. There were a couple of LAs that looked at doing it independently, but really didn't have the capacity to do it.” - Hub Staff

The importance of targeting communications towards certain groups and communities, and the associated challenges of this, was another consideration raised by LA and Hub staff. LA staff thought prospective foster carers who were 'on the fence' or further along in their fostering decision-making journey were not being sufficiently targeted by the comms campaign. This included individuals that may already be exposed to foster carers, via personal and professional networks. They considered this target population would be more likely to make meaningful enquiries that will result in applications and lead to conversions.

“We need to think about where we pitch the comms campaign, because you need to pitch it somewhere you need a clearer call to action. But it’s tricky due breadth of fostering, but campaign needs be to more targeted...Nobody hears one advert on the radio and decides to become a foster carer. It just doesn’t happen. What does happen is a sister-in-law, who knows I am foster carer and who has the kids and who has been thinking about it for a long time will decide right now is a good time to become a foster carer. That’s how it typically happens.” - LA Staff

In addition, LA staff described the remit of fostering as broad, ranging from caring for babies with special needs to caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking teenagers. This made decision making around the messaging and imagery of the comms campaign complex, as there needed to be clear targeting, however the subject matter (fostering) was wide-ranging. Nearly all LA staff, Hub staff and Comms Leads interviewed thought more consideration was needed to make the campaign more targeted.

Varying capacity amongst LA Comms Leads

The evaluation highlighted that LAs with Comms Lead working full time on comms were more active in comms activities than LAs in which the Comms Leads were in a hybrid role. It is possible that having a regionalised campaign means that those with limited capacity to work on comms may feel that they can de-prioritise these activities. The Hub Comms Lead perceived that there was a risk that those LAs see a decrease in their local outreach activities. Furthermore, it is important to note that the Hub now has a Comms Lead position that is a distinct role rather than a hybrid position. This shift is relevant to other Hubs as it shows the importance of having a dedicated staff overseeing comms across the region.

Utility of the dashboard to monitor performance of the campaign

LA Comms Leads expressed a need for better utilisation of the Hub’s dashboard data. They wanted regular access to enquiry and conversion data to understand how the campaign was performing within their own LA. They also wanted to record how enquirers heard about the Hub to monitor channel and platform performance.

Other potential improvements to the campaign according to participants

Participants made further suggestions to improve the campaign. For example, some LA comms leads wanted more agency over content and partnerships with organisations at a local level. They felt this would enable the campaign to appeal more to local residents.

Some foster carers interviewed suggested that OOH adverts may be effective in locations where people sit and have time to fully read the communications, compared to traditional OOH locations which target audiences during periods of movement.

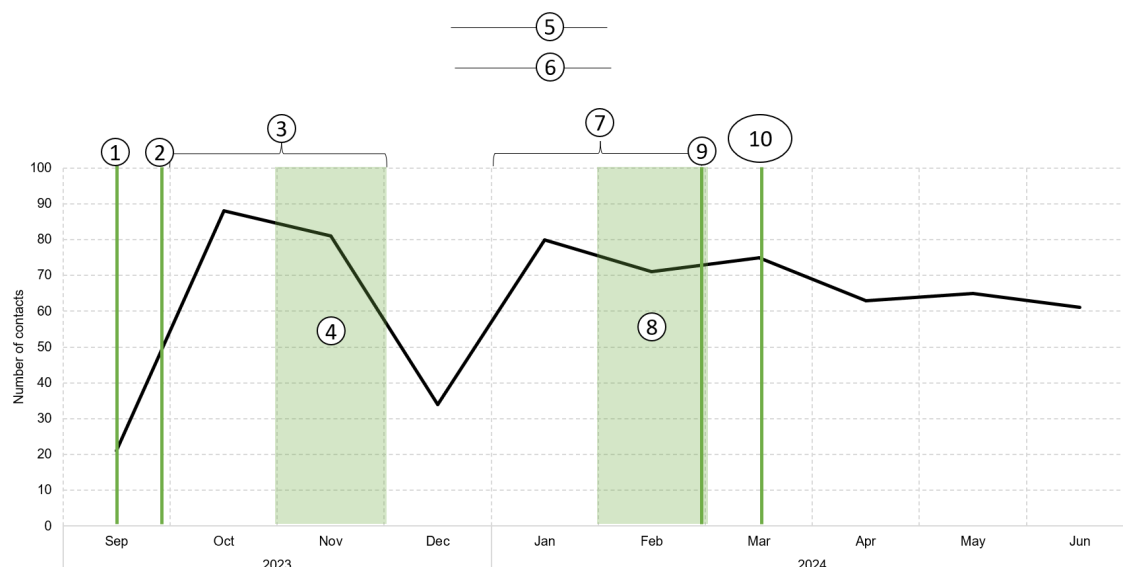
4.3 Promoting the Hub and fostering in the region

Hub and LA staff considered the comms campaign successfully raised awareness of the Hub and promoted fostering in the region. The Verian evaluation (Verian, 2024) found that awareness of any publicity about becoming a foster carer had increased from 20% (pre-campaign) to 25% (post-campaign), mainly driven by OOH advertising. It also found that 1 in 10 residents surveyed recognised the 'Foster with North East' campaign activity. This indicates that the regional campaign was effective in increasing awareness through advertising.

As Figure 2 shows the number of contacts fluctuated throughout the period the comms campaign was live with no clear relationship between timing of comms activities and contacts. It is important to stress that we cannot infer causal links between contacts and campaign activities but rather correlations, and this is recognised internally amongst Hub staff:

"I don't think we can correlate that in the impact of the comms campaign and the marketing activity directly to enquiries. [...] We cannot really make a direct correlation because I think that's link in between hasn't been robustly made so far and we are working on it. But even if we asked every single individual [...] "Where did you hear about us?", the likelihood is they are going to say the last place they heard us- which would have been in 80% of the cases online." - Hub staff

Figure 1: Graph depicting enquiry trends over time, based on DfE timepoints and Hub enquiries



Source: Hub Monitoring data

Figure 1 Note: The figure shows monthly fostering enquiries from September 2023 to June 2024, with key marketing activities indicated by numbers: 1) Launch press release and regional media interviews (early September 2023); 2) 27-Sep Comms campaign launch; 3) Paid search and paid social ads (October-November 2023); 4) Paid media partnership with Newsquest titles (October-November 2023); 5) Radio ad across Bauer and Global stations (December 2023-January 2024); 6) Out of home advertising (bus rears, bus stops and supermarkets) (December 2023-January 2024); 7) Paid search and paid social ads (January-February 2024); 8) Paid media partnership with Reach PLC titles (January-February 2024); 9) Metro Centre promotional event (March 2024); 10) Eldon Square promotional event (March 2024).

There was an initial spike in contacts in late September, possibly related to the communications campaign launch involving a press release and media interviews. However, contacts then increased further in October, reaching a maximum peak. This suggests additional campaign activities in October might have been highly effective in driving contacts. Interestingly, the number of contacts dipped back in November despite initiating paid search and paid social ads that month. This pattern could indicate those digital tactics were less impactful initially. Contacts hit a low point in December before rebounding sharply in January. The January upswing coincides with the radio ad campaign across Bauer and Global stations, suggesting this broadcast strategy had a significant positive impact. From January through March, contact volumes plateaued at

this higher level. The paid media partnerships, out-of-home advertising, and promotional events during this period had sustained the momentum gained in January. Rather than a continuous upward trajectory, the patterns reflect peaks and valleys related to the timing and apparent effectiveness of the various channel activities employed. Broadcast radio advertising catalyses the most significant increase, while paid media partnerships and event promotions helped maintain elevated contacts after that critical spike. It is important to stress that we cannot infer causal links between contacts and campaign activities but rather correlations.

Early interviews (November 2023) with Hub staff indicated that initially some enquirers contacted the LA they intended to foster with before contacting the Hub, even if they were aware of the Hub and the campaign. LAs raised this was an ongoing issue but indicated that they perceive the proportion of initial contacts being made to the Hub versus the LA was gradually increasing towards the Hub. Subsequent interviews with foster carers (November 2024 to January 2025) found that the majority of foster carers interviewed contacted the Hub directly first and not their LA. The Verian evaluation found that when shown the ads, almost 2 out of 3 felt they were from the government or their Local Authority (as opposed to a private fostering agency or don't know) (Verian, 2024). Some foster carers interviewed recalled seeing the Hub's comms materials. The OOH marketing and Facebook were the most recalled. However, all the foster carers interviewed indicated that the comms campaign did not influence their decision to foster or their decision to enquire with the Hub specifically, as fostering was something they had been considering years prior to the Hub being launched.

“I don't think, we can correlate that in the impact of the comms campaign and the marketing activity directly to enquiries. Becoming a foster carer does not stem from a single ad” - LA Staff

In addition to this, after the launch of the communications campaign some LA and Hub staff interviewed perceived there to be a decrease in enquiry numbers. Staff from these LAs had feedback from residents that the new branding was unfamiliar, and other residents thought that Foster with North East was a new IFA. Hub staff also suggested that communications may not necessarily result in an immediate enquiry. Hub and LA staff perceived the Hub may have a presence in a community through local comms and recruitment events and residents may engage with these, however the Hub may not see that initial engagement translate to a phone call or even enquiry for approximately 6 months.

4.4 Changes made to the comms campaign

This section highlights how the comms campaign and marketing activities have evolved in 2024/2025 according to Hub staff interviewed from July 2024 to January 2025. Due to

timelines, the evaluation did not capture how these changes were perceived by prospective foster carers.

Dedicated Hub comms lead

In July 2024 the Hub established a comms lead position that is a distinct role rather than a hybrid position that included other responsibilities. Previously, the Hub comms lead was also part of Sunderland LA comms team and as a result had limited capacity. Hub and LA staff highlighted the importance of having a dedicated staff member overseeing and sustaining the delivery of comms across the region.

Seasonal campaigns

Following on from the core campaign activity (October 2023 to March 2024), the Hub also delivered several seasonal campaigns at specific times in the year such as 'back to school' in September or the Christmas period.

The September 2024 campaign focused on addressing common misconceptions around fostering (e.g. the misconception that single people cannot foster). The campaign aimed at encouraging those that have never considered fostering to think about the possibility of doing so through highlighting the positive impact being a foster carer could have on a child. The campaign used rhetorical and emotive questions such as 'Can you help a young person grow in confidence?'. Hub staff found that people respond to messaging that is child centred, highlights the positive impact of fostering, and speaks to the motivations of those considering fostering.

"I think that hits the audiences of the people that are already thinking about it or have thought about it in their lives. And it's like making, you know, that little step between them thinking about it then making the action" - Hub Staff

The January 2025 campaign aimed to capitalise on the family sentiment after Christmas, positioning this towards fostering. Given timings of the fieldwork evaluators were not able to evidence how these campaigns were received by foster carers.

More diverse imagery

The Hub has made significant efforts to enhance the diversity in its communication imagery based on feedback. The campaign always aimed to focus on diversity, but a desire to include 'real foster carers' and constraints related to time and budget meant this was not possible in the early campaign.

LA comms leads identified key areas where they felt the campaign required more diverse representation for both foster carers and looked after children. This included better

representation of foster carers with diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, as well as children with additional needs or disabilities, children with siblings, older children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

4.5 Intended changes and future comms activity

Foster carer referral scheme

Hub staff intend to capitalise on word of mouth by utilising carers in the recruitment space through implementing a 'refer a friend scheme' in 2025/2026. Most LA staff interviewed agreed that people who had proximity to fostering often converted into good quality foster carers. This could be people who had relationships with foster carers, people who looked after the foster children of close family or friends, or people who had spoken to their LA's social workers a number of times about fostering. This is supported by existing literature which highlights that foster carers are often motivated by altruistic reasons and knowing a fostered child or foster carer (Gouveia, Magalhaes, & Pinto, 2021; Kantar Public UK, 2022; McDermid, Holmes, Kirton, & Signoretta, 2012; Sebba, 2012).

Staff interviewed thought the 'refer a friend approach' was the best way to recruit good quality foster carers and improve conversions. Prior to involvement with the Hub model, some LAs had a 'refer a friend scheme'. The Hub's new 'refer a friend scheme' will involve approved foster carers referring individuals they know are potentially interested in fostering to their LA. If the referred individual becomes approved as a foster carer the person who referred them would receive a financial reward provided directly to them from their LA.

'Word of mouth is the strongest. what really matters is the network, the carers, their friends, their family, they are the ones who will become the next carers.' - Hub Staff

4.6 Impact of the comms campaign on the wider fostering market

There was no consensus amongst IFA interviewees about the potential impact the Foster with North East campaign had on enquiries and applications to IFAs. While some IFA interviewees reported a rise in enquiries and applications, others claimed to be experiencing little change or even noted a decline, which is in line with broader trends. Some LA staff and IFA representatives interviewed felt that an increased awareness about fostering in general has the potential to increase in enquiries and applications with IFAs. They speculated that the Hub's marketing efforts may have contributed to a general rise in fostering awareness across the region. However, they also noted that they did not change their comms strategy as a result of the Hub's campaign, and their increase in

enquiries was attributed to their internal efforts such as enhancing their social media presence and re-engaging with local communities.

It is important to note that there is no evidence to suggest that any change in enquiries to IFAs is caused by the Hub and may be due to other factors.

5.Ongoing delivery of Hub services (January 2024 – January 2025)

This section outlines how the Hub and its services work and identifies facilitators and barriers to delivery. Findings are based on qualitative research (i.e., interviews and focus groups) conducted between January 2024 to January 2025 with Hub and LA staff, and foster carers.

5.1 Delivery of Hub services

Enquiries and referrals

Overview of delivery

The Hub is responsible for receiving and processing initial enquiries before these are referred to 1 of the 12 LAs. Making an enquiry is the first step taken to becoming a foster carer. Some enquirers chose to contact their chosen LA's fostering team prior to completing an enquiry (e.g. through a recruitment event), however the Hub has full responsibility for receiving and processing these enquiries across the region. Based on interviews with LA staff, the awareness of this core change to the process, particularly amongst individuals that had considered foster care for a prolonged period prior to enquiring, was gradual but is now embedded as business as usual.

How enquiry and referrals services were received by foster carers

There was consensus amongst foster carers interviewed that the regional Hub model was of benefit, citing positive experiences with Hub staff and a sense of feeling well-supported throughout the initial enquiry process. They appreciated that there were dedicated staff for handling enquiries and felt that this led to quick and efficient responses (with interviewees receiving responses from the Hub within 48 hours). Prospective foster carers that had previously experienced the enquiry process, either with an IFA or LA, considered the Hub's service to be as quick (and in some instances quicker) when processing their enquiry. Foster carers interviewed thought a central hub promoted consistency and standardisation in the application process across different LAs, thus potentially reducing discrepancies and ensuring all applicants receive the same information and support during the enquiry stage, regardless of their location. A centralised hub also acted as a central and single point of contact for enquirers and was perceived by some foster carers to be easier for them to access information and resources. For some foster carers that were deciding between multiple LAs, the Hub also eliminated the need to navigate multiple LAs directly. In addition, one foster carer felt that a regional approach was a logical solution to addressing the resourcing challenges in foster care across the North East. They believed that the centralisation of enquiry

management and training provided much-needed support to LA staff, who are “under so much pressure”.

However, some prospective foster carers felt the Hub could have provided more information at the enquiry stage. The main information ‘gaps’ identified related to clarification on fees and payments for each LA, and the step-by-step process for becoming a foster carer.

Skills to Foster training

Overview of delivery

The Hub delivers compulsory training (Skills to Foster training) that is required once prospective foster carers are in the assessment process and have begun their application. The training course was developed to help prepare attendees for fostering, with a focus on: how to support children’s needs, working with social workers and other professionals, and developing a better understanding of the experiences and expectations of foster carers. The training is primarily delivered by Hub social workers, but also includes input from trained social workers, approved foster carers, and care-experienced individuals. The sessions are designed to be informative, and therefore all information and material is shared with attendees following the training.

Skills to Foster, previously delivered by LAs, is now delivered through the Hub, with the aim to reduce burden on LA fostering teams and provide more flexibility and frequency in training dates. It is a 2-day training programme and is delivered by the Hub in times and locations that are accessible for prospective foster carers. The training sessions are delivered at a range of times to work around employment and other commitments, being offered in the evenings, weekends, within school terms and within school holidays. Training is delivered at locations across the region to ensure local provision is available for all prospective foster carers, though the option to travel further is provided if the individual wants earlier access. Training is therefore delivered to prospective foster carers from a range of LAs at once and is only delivered once a session has a sufficient number of applicants registered to attend.

Beyond compulsory training delivery, a Hub staff interviewee indicated that the Hub was expanding training services to include optional development opportunities for prospective foster carers. This included ‘Children in Care Council’ training (facilitated by carer-experienced young adults) that aims to debunk myths around fostering teenagers and encourage foster carers to extend the age range of children they are open to fostering following approval. The Hub also provided optional training sessions for existing children of enquirers to attend to provide more information on trauma-related behaviour and stable home dynamics.

How Skills to Foster training was received by LA staff

With Skills to Foster delivery no longer under LA remit, staff and stakeholders had mixed perspectives on whether the regionalisation of mandatory training is an improvement over the previous system.

In some instances, LA staff felt that they benefitted from Skills to Foster training being delivered independently, because it reduced the workload of some LA staff, and supported the assessment journey of foster carers:

"It [Skills to Foster training] is completely independent to ourselves which then supports our applicants and their journey of assessment because it can be really tricky when if you are the trainer and then you are assessing them. [...] so, it's been an absolutely fantastic setup." - LA staff

Some LA staff felt they (or recently recruited LA staff) could benefit from shadowing the training to experience delivery firsthand, so these staff could have an opportunity to better understand the recruitment process. LA staff also highlighted the benefit of having a streamlined training approach, which involves consistent independent assessors. Training provided independently from the assessment process provides clearer boundaries and removes a layer of complexity according to some interviewees. LA staff also reported that it was useful to receive feedback from the Hub staff on attendees' engagement levels over the 2-day course as their application to become foster carers progressed.

"It's completely independent to ourselves [the LA] which then supports our applicants and their journey of assessment because it can be really tricky... if you are the trainer and then you are assessing them to say well actually I've picked up on this, where actually it's easy to have someone independent." - LA Staff

Some interviewees were very positive about the speed at which the Hub was getting prospective foster carers through the training.

"Training is great, as it is delivered much more frequently through the Hub. The turnaround and pace is impressive. Feedback from foster carer training is good and it reduces staff burden to deliver this, often at weekends. They are turning things around really quickly." - LA staff

However, some LA staff felt that in-house LA training facilitated relationship building between social workers and foster carers and enabled better matching between foster carers and children after approval. Staff in a small number of LAs also expressed concern over frequent cancellations of training sessions and the potential negative impact on the application process and morale of prospective foster carers as a result. The Hub determines the timing of training and requires sufficient registrants for it to be delivered, aiming to deliver three programmes a month across the region. Low sign-up levels can result in delayed or cancelled training, meaning that some prospective foster

carers had long waits to receive training locally or had to travel further distances (requiring access to a car) to reduce waiting times. Some staff from these LAs expressed frustration as solutions were not provided in instances of delayed or cancelled training. One LA staff member explained that delays and/or cancellations were holding up applicants. They were particularly frustrated by the fact they could not run the course themselves in order to speed up the process.

"I'm still upset about it, to be fair, because I think [LA] is doing very well. And it feels like it's holding up our approvals now because there's nothing in it. Now, I understand they've got staffing issues, but we are paying for this service now. I did say, can I just put my own course on for the carers that I've got waiting? – 'No, you can't do that'." - LA staff

Despite these challenges, examples of cancelled training sessions were less apparent in the second wave of qualitative data collection (October 2024 to January 2025), indicating delivery is increasingly more consistent.

How Skills to Foster training was received by foster carers

Prospective foster carers' views on the support and guidance provided through the Skills to Foster training was largely positive, indicating that the Hub provides a positive experience and application journey for enquirers. A few foster carers highlighted the Skills to Foster training as a particularly valuable element of the regional model. They appreciated the opportunity to engage with prospective foster carers across the region. The diversity of experiences shared by participants deepened their learning, and they appreciated the space to connect with carers at various stages of the process and from different areas of the region. Moreover, learning firsthand about the challenges and successes other carers had faced during their fostering journey generated a sense of community and camaraderie within and following the session. For example, one prospective foster carer spoke about how the training was a good opportunity to build a support network as they had shared their number with other participants:

"We've obviously been to training with [LA name] and met foster carers specifically within our Local Authority, but it was nice just to widen that branch a bit [at Skills to Foster training]. I really, really like it. I like that it's centralised." - Prospective foster carer

There were, however, some instances in which prospective foster carers felt they lacked sufficient briefing, from either the Hub or their LA social worker, regarding what to expect from the training programme and how to prepare. Additional information on the content and format of the training would have been useful prior to attending the sessions, for some enquirers.

Buddy mentoring programme

Overview of delivery

The buddy mentoring programme (buddy scheme) is an optional service provided by the Hub, designed to provide informal 1-on-1 support to prospective foster carers. Buddies are approved foster carers within 1 of the 12 LAs and are either invited by their LA to become a buddy or can choose to put themselves forward. The Hub offers a financial payment (£50 per week 'on call') to buddies providing support. The Hub is responsible for notifying enquirers of this provision and matching them with a locally based experienced foster carer. This system was designed to provide informal peer support to better equip applicants with the necessary knowledge and skills. It also provides an opportunity for applicants to develop connections within the fostering community, particularly if they do not have existing personal connections.

The buddy receives basic application information such as prospective foster carers name and type of fostering they are interested in. Communication between the buddy and the prospective foster carer largely takes place via WhatsApp. After any contact with their prospective foster carer, a buddy fills out a summary form outlining what was discussed and any safeguarding concerns about their prospective foster carer. This summary form is shared with the prospective foster carer's social worker. A current buddy explained an example of how they navigate and communicate potential concerns prospective foster carers are experiencing prior to Panel:

"I would say, you know, [prospective foster carer] maybe felt a little bit worried about the application process as in how personal the information was going to be asked about throughout her life. So, I was able to then share with them [the Hub] that I was able to talk to [prospective foster carer] and give the reasons why it is important to talk about this information and it is not to catch you out."- Buddy in the mentoring programme.

There is an established recruitment approach for acquiring new buddies for the service, but the Hub have faced some challenges in both recruitment and engagement of buddies. Potential buddies (i.e. approved foster carers) are identified by respective LAs, and the Hub is responsible for contacting these individuals. Sufficient engagement to recruit buddies, and the time required when 'on-call' has been varied. Some Hub staff suggested that changes to the mechanism in which buddies are paid (currently per week 'on call') to account for the number of interventions/contact they provide may improve engagement and the overall quality of the service.

How the buddy scheme was received by foster carers

Buddy matching

Qualitative findings indicate that generally, prospective foster carers who have taken part in the buddy programme (i.e. have enrolled and been matched with a buddy) considered

it to be a useful opportunity for additional, informal support. Prospective foster carers were sometimes matched with a buddy from outside their own LA. Despite this misalignment, some foster carers felt other aspects of the pairing were suitable (e.g. demographics, career/job, relationship/household dynamic). The suitability of buddy-foster carer matching was variable because buddy capacity restricted matching options. As a result, particularly successful 'matches' were unintentional according to LA staff. Hub staff interviewed noted that one challenge of inter-LA buddy matching was that buddies did not necessarily have knowledge of the application process for the different LAs and thus struggled to answer specific questions posed by their prospective foster carer. To help address this, the Hub established a support and networking group (via WhatsApp) for the buddies participating in the scheme.

Awareness of the scheme

Foster carers interviewed revealed a mixed level of awareness of the scheme. The majority of interviewees (n=16) reported receiving insufficient information about the scheme or how to participate, while some enrolled in the scheme (n=7) or declined the offer (n=6)⁹. Those who declined the offer already had close relationships with approved foster carers, who acted as 'informal buddies'.

Notification of this service amongst those progressing was fairly consistent, with the service most commonly introduced to individuals at either the initial enquiry stage or at Skills to Foster training sessions. However, the sign-up procedures and access to the service was inconsistent as expression of interest in the service did not guarantee prospective foster carers a buddy.

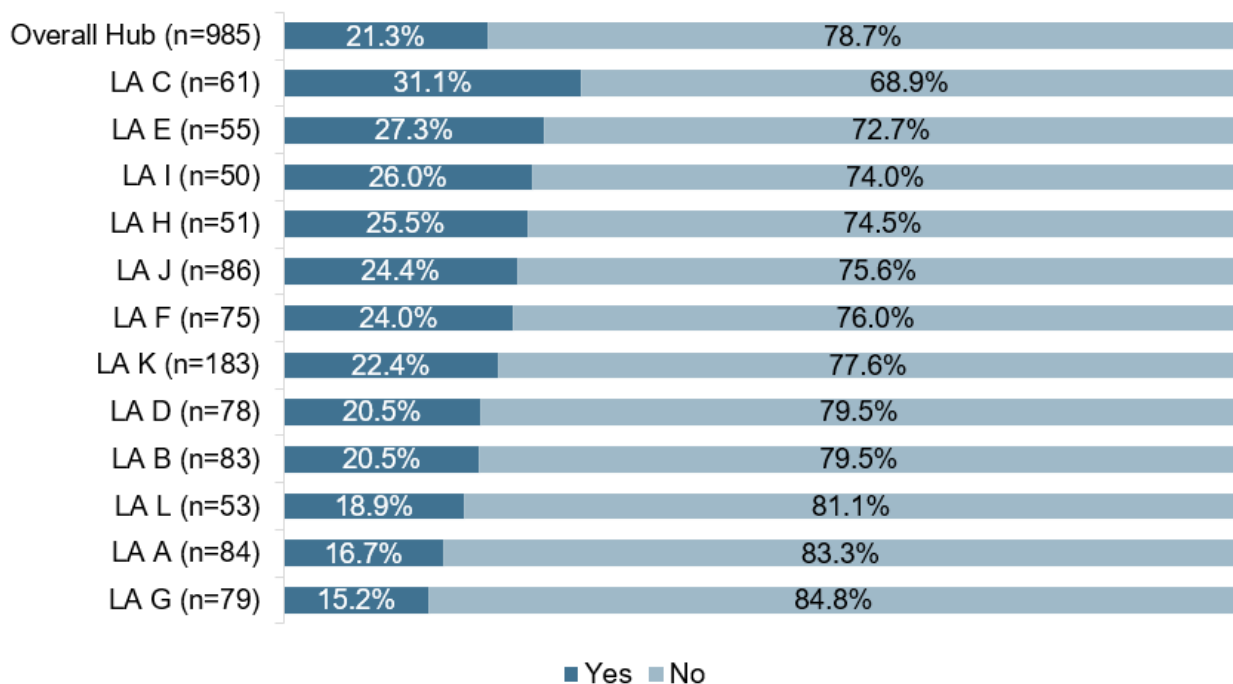
Enrolment

Figure 2 shows the proportion of enquirers who were enrolled in the buddy scheme (i.e., have been matched with a buddy) in each LA and for the Hub as a whole (all 12 LAs) by December 2024. Overall, the majority of applicants across all LAs were not enrolled in the scheme (78.7%). Enrolment rates in LAs ranged between 31.1% and 15.2%.

This low enrolment does not account for the potentially low awareness of the opportunity mentioned previously. It also does not capture the extent of engagement with the buddy scheme and appropriateness of the matching process.

⁹ This information is not available for 3 interviewees.

Figure 2: Prospective foster carers enrolled in the buddy scheme by December 2024



Data source: Hub monitoring data.

Evaluators were informed by DfE and Hub staff that following on from an internal review of its services the Hub has endeavoured to provide more consistent notification of the buddy service amongst those enquiries progressing. As a result, the buddy system is now most commonly introduced to individuals at either the initial enquiry stage or at Skills to Foster training sessions.

‘Staying in touch’ support

Overview of delivery

The Hub provides intermittent check-ins for applicants as they proceed through the assessment stage to Panel. Whilst the LA and dedicated social worker remain the main point of contact and support for prospective foster carers following referral of their case, the Hub offers ‘staying in touch’ support through regular phone calls. The option for prospective foster carers to recontact the Hub with additional questions on the application process is also available, though not advertised as a core offering of the Hub.

In September 2024, following preliminary findings from this evaluation, the Hub revised their case management system to improve the ‘staying in touch’ support offered according to Hub staff interviewed. This was confirmed through internal communication from the Hub to DfE. Staff turnover during the first year of the Hub resulted in inconsistencies in this service. As of December 2024, there is a clearly established check-in process that is tracked through monthly snapshot monitoring. Check-in support

is provided fortnightly in the initial stages and reduced to monthly check-ins during the application stage and build up to Panel. The content of the check-in calls will remain under review to ensure ongoing contact remains appropriate. The Hub introduced a monthly “reporting-up” process in which all details surrounding time taken to respond to enquiries will be shared with Project Board members (senior LA managers). According to Hub staff interview participants, this ongoing review aims to help Hub staff monitor individual LA time related performance and practice issues to ensure they are escalated and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

How the ‘staying in touch’ support was received by foster carers

Challenges in early delivery

Foster carers’ experiences with post-enquiry support from the Hub were generally mixed. Beyond Skills to Foster training, most carers interviewed early in the evaluation felt that the Hub's post-enquiry provision did not add significant value to their application journey. Many prospective foster carers mentioned that their contact with the Hub became minimal once they started their application. They generally felt that ongoing support was primarily provided by their respective LAs instead.

Several prospective foster carers stated that when they did receive post-enquiry contact, the Hub was unaware which stage of the process they had progressed to. In one case, the Hub contacted a prospective foster carer a few months after their initial enquiry to check if they had received a response from their LA, whilst they had already progressed to the assessment stage. Another carer did not hear back from the Hub until 2 months after their initial enquiry. Challenges with LA-Hub data sharing processes may explain these examples, as discussed further in Section 5.3 and Section 8.5.

Some LA staff felt that sometimes enquirers were provided insufficient guidance on what to expect between enquiry and Panel approval, in turn creating a barrier for processing beyond the initial enquiry stage. Both prospective/approved foster carers and some LA staff felt applicants would have benefitted from more information on the local fee rates and payment processes prior to referral with the LA. Interviewed foster carers that were considering multiple LAs stated that it would have been useful to compare LA rates if living on a border to improve their understanding of the payment system.

Updated support

Qualitative interviews conducted with foster carers between November 2024 to January 2025 highlighted a greater frequency of the ‘staying in touch’ service, though many continued to consider their LA social worker as their primary support contact. Nevertheless, those interviewed following the Hub’s adaptations felt they received regular check-ins, particularly at the start of their journey:

"It's been quite nice. It's been good knowing obviously that we haven't been forgotten about and they [the Hub] check on us to make sure we are getting the help and support that we need to be foster carers and to go through what we need to go through." - Prospective foster carer

Screening and initial home visits

Overview of delivery

The introduction of a formalised screening process and piloting of initial visits (November 2024) is the most recent expansion of the Hub's services. The Hub initially conducted limited screening that was LA-dependent. This was updated to include a formalised screening process with standard requirements across all 12 LAs (i.e., enquirer's household, lifestyle, and personal background). The requirements are explored in an initial conversation between Hub staff and prospective foster carers. A few of the 12 LAs have provided the Hub with more detailed screening protocols in relation to specific LA requirements. Examples of this include new regulations around vaping (in line with smoking), and housing stability (discouraging upcoming relocation or property changes). LAs that have provided the Hub with clearer screening instructions consider this an efficient process to ensure appropriate enquirers are screened. This, in turn, improves Hub-LA working relationships. This approach is dependent on LA instruction.

Another addition to the Hub's service since November 2024 is the piloting of scheduling and conducting initial home visits, either alongside or without LA assistance. As of December 2024, 8 LAs are participating in the pilot of this new service. Hub staff indicated that LA involvement and buy-in for this service was gradual but anticipated this would be rolled out in line with some other regional Hubs across England. Hub and LA staff are currently co-attending initial visits to ensure there is a smooth transition of this service, though the Hub holds responsibility for scheduling all visits with participating LAs to reduce the lag-time between the initial enquiry and application processing. To accommodate the expansion of Hub services, Hub officers/social workers were supported by 3 additional support staff that were employed by Together for Children as of November 2024.

How the screening and initial visits were received by Hub and LA staff

The introduction of Hub screening approaches has been well received amongst Hub and LA staff. Both Hub and LA staff felt that clear requirements during the initial screening stage done by the Hub ensured enquirers processed are sufficiently briefed on expectations, which reduces the amount of low-quality or inappropriate contacts passed onto LAs. This in turn contributed to a perceived reduction in LA workload and strong working relationships between LAs and the Hub. One Hub staff member highlighted that whilst the addition of screening protocols has been useful, it remains advisory in nature:

"We are not decision makers and we can't make decisions. We can only recommend. So, we can only say like to an applicant [that is moving house] "Actually, the local authority, they probably won't proceed with this at the moment just because of the circumstances that you are in. But I would definitely recommend reapplying when you feel like when you have moved in and when you settled in your house, for example." Usually they are very, very receptive and [...] we always say if you'd like to speak to the authority, you can, but this is sort of what we would recommend. [...] So, it's [screening] helped [LA-Hub] relationships, I think, one hundred percent to say that we are not trying to waste their time and we actually know what we are talking about as well." - Hub staff

In comparison, Hub and LA staff's initial expectations on the regionalisation of initial visits have been mixed, with one concern relating to Hub capacity. Both Hub staff and LA staff acknowledged the large geographical area the Hub covers and the potential strain this could place on Hub staff. As a result, most staff emphasised the importance of piloting initial visits and ensuring sufficient Hub recruitment to support the long-term sustainability of this service. Despite these concerns, Hub staff believe that the number of initial visits (as of December 2024) have been manageable and allowed for high-quality delivery:

"We've got to let this time to embed and become kind of normal practice. But because the numbers are this low, we are not doing 5 a day, [...] we are looking to do kind of 5 a week. [...] So, the numbers are really quite low. So, I mean it's important that experience is really positive. [...] Because this, this process is new for us. It won't be new for the applicant, it'll just be how they experience it. So, it's really important that they don't feel it's new." - Hub staff

Another concern, particularly amongst LA staff, is the potential impact regionalised initial visits may have on the relationships LAs have with foster carers both during and after approval. LA staff emphasised the importance of relationship building at the early stages of the application, when enquirers are required to share personal information and history. They stressed the importance of building these relationships to facilitate retention once an applicant becomes an approved foster carer. Some LA staff perceived the relationship between LA staff and foster carers as more important compared to adoption services due to the ongoing communication and dynamic nature of fostering post-approval. Some LA staff members speculated that outsourcing of initial visits to the Hub could result in missed opportunities to inform prospective foster carers about the specific support and professional development opportunities available within that LA. As a result, many LA staff demonstrated hesitancy towards the regionalisation of initial visits because of its potential to delay or disrupt relationship-building:

"For fostering, it's about relationships and for me it's about building those relationships. [...] I don't want to delay my Local Authority building that relationship up with our foster carer." - LA staff

Despite such concerns around capacity and relationship development, some LA and Hub staff perceived the regionalisation of initial visits to have the potential to make the recruitment service more streamlined, efficient, and in turn make the Hub better value for money.

5.2 Facilitators and barriers to Hub service delivery

Foster with North East has delivered its services largely as intended, retaining the original Hub model established during the design phase. Interviews with both LA and Hub staff indicated that delivery has aligned with the agreed objectives and model approach that was established prior to implementation. Changes made to service provision are outlined in Section 5.1. Interviews with both LA and Hub staff provided examples of the enablers and barriers to delivering the regionalised service. Some examples were consistently expressed across multiple LAs, demonstrating common facilitators and barriers to delivery.

Facilitators to delivery

This section outlines key facilitators to delivery, including: effective communication between the Hub and LA fostering team staff, tailored working arrangements between the Hub and LAs, LA staff trust in the Hub's service delivery, integrated recruitment activities, and senior leadership buy-in. These findings are based on the perspectives and experiences of Hub and LA staff shared in interviews conducted from May 2024 to December 2024.

Effective communication and filtering information within LAs

LA staff felt that effective communication and the relaying of information concerning the Hub was an important facilitator for the day-to-day delivery and embedding of the Hub model. Filtering information about the Hub processes and any adaptations (e.g. data sharing and dashboard developments) was a priority for some LA staff, as direct communication from the Hub is often via the regional manager meetings. Internal communication was particularly effective amongst smaller LA fostering teams, with some LA staff stating they were regularly updated by the team manager. Strategic interviews with both the Hub and senior LA staff highlighted the importance of frequent communication for improving both buy-in and involvement, through newsletters, formalised meetings and informal check-ins as required.

Tailored data sharing and working arrangements

Interviews with LA staff highlighted the importance of tailoring and developing working arrangements around LA preferences to ensure smooth delivery. Some of the LA staff, within the selected case studies, were able to establish agreements with the Hub regarding specific needs that would support future application processing. For example, one LA requested the Hub collect certain information at the enquiry stage in order to facilitate screening processes, including lifestyle and household information. Other LA staff benefitted from having additional meetings with the Hub to establish clear working arrangements and expectations which in turn helped ensure regionalised delivery was more effective and tailored:

"I think it's just adapting from doing the recruitment [as an LA] for a number of years to then adapting to someone else doing that initial stage and then coming over to us, [...] it's letting that make sense." - LA staff

"Right in those early stages when they shared all of the expression of interest forms and things that they would be working from, yeah, I think that was really, really helpful. So, they did all of that with us so that we were then able to have oversight and really unpick it within our team meetings to say, 'this is what they'll be doing and this is what we'll be doing'." - LA staff

Trust and confidence in the Hub staff and their service

A sense of trust and confidence relying on the Hub to process enquiries and deliver Skills to Foster training amongst LA staff was a crucial facilitator to delivery. Some LA staff felt they had successfully developed a trusting and positive relationship with the Hub, which enabled open and frequent communication. One LA staff member commented that they felt confident in the service and skills of the Hub, describing them as "experts at the front door" consisting of a "very skilled team". There was strong agreement amongst LA staff that the Hub provided a good service and first impression for enquirers:

"It's [the Hub's service] a very positive, friendly response, which is key to getting people hooked in and wanting to move forward with the process." - LA staff

Confidence in the Hub staff and their service was also underpinned by prospective foster carers' testimonials following enquiry:

"They've [Foster carers processed through the Hub] all been really, really positive [...] Right from the very start when the Hub picked the telephone up, things have been really positive, really straight forward, really smooth." - LA staff

Continued and integrated recruitment activities

Many of the LA staff that were interviewed continued to invest in LA-own recruitment activities to ensure awareness of fostering continued in their local area. This includes recruitment events and continued local advertisement. Some staff expressed the importance of continuing this in conjunction with Hub events, particularly as there were initial concerns over marketing role job losses when the Hub was launched. One of the Hub staff felt that “business as usual” was important for LAs to maintain alongside Hub activities. Some LA staff felt empowered to continue promoting their LA brand alongside the Hub’s communications to facilitate delivery further:

“We see it as another tool in our tool bag... because we are not totally relying on it.” - LA staff

Examples of when recruitment events have been attended and ‘co-hosted’ by both the Hub and an LA were cited as having worked particularly well, helping to ensure recruitment is holistic and embedded within wider Hub messaging. However, this was only evident amongst the lead LA, with staff in other LAs expressing greater collaboration (through events and general recruitment) would have further facilitated local events

Sustained LA senior leadership buy-in to the regional model of fostering

As the Hub continues to expand its services, interviews found that ongoing LA senior leadership (e.g. Director for Children’s Services) buy-in to regionalisation remains important. Interviews with LA staff highlighted that benefits and challenges may be different for LAs depending on their size. For example, larger LAs may have more influence on the direction of the Hub whilst smaller LAs may benefit more from pooled resources in the comms campaign. Visible senior buy-in to systemic change was considered a core enabler amongst some interviewees to overcome these persistent concerns. One LA staff member emphasised the variation amongst senior leadership (including DCSs) across the 12 LAs. Interviewees emphasised how senior leadership is central to facilitating an important cultural shift:

"Culturally, that is where the challenge will lie, not only in our region, but across the country, if this is to be rolled out on a bigger footprint.

Culturally, you need to buy in. And one of the challenges is people paying lip service, buying in nominally, buying in even financially, but not buying in in terms of culture change. And that's the major challenge. [...] So, one of the challenges I think is that people are almost running dual systems. [...] We are running the Hub across the region, but people are also trying to do the work independently as well. Now, my view is you jump in with both feet and you really commit to it, it's the best outcome." - LA staff

Barriers to delivery

This section covers barriers to delivery, as identified by interviewees. They include insufficient personal information collection by the Hub at the enquiry stage, varied awareness of Hub services amongst foster carers, short-term centralised funding provision, and case management and data sharing. These barriers are additional to varied awareness of the Hub's service and allocation of formal screening responsibility to LAs as detailed in Section 5.1

Insufficient personal information collected by the Hub at the enquiry stage

While not a universal barrier for all enquirers, LA staff reported that some individuals were hesitant to share personal information during their initial contact with the Hub and therefore the 'light-touch' screening that is attempted is not always feasible in practice. In particular, collecting sensitive data—such as information related to mental health or involvement with children's services—posed challenges. According to LA staff, some enquirers were uncomfortable disclosing this information to staff with whom they had no established relationship or rapport. Other LA staff felt that the Hub's screening process lacked the rigour of the screening system previously used by the LA prior to the introduction of the Hub. Consequently, there were instances where the Hub provided insufficient information, which limited LAs' ability to effectively plan for future engagements, such as home visits and screening. This issue was highlighted in several interviews:

"Usually we'll get the information [from the Hub] to be fair, there's a wealth of information there, so then you will just make a decision or get a bit more information, or information might come up on the system, that obviously they haven't shared with the Hub because people don't always share the fact that they are involved with children's services, for example, or share that they've had some mental health issues, and that's a very sensitive area, because it doesn't necessarily rule people out, but if someone's got a very complex mental health issue, you've obviously got to really consider that." - LA staff

Nevertheless, most LA staff and foster carers interviewed felt that the Hub were able to collect sufficient information in most cases. Some LA staff also provided examples when the Hub have signposted potential topics that may require further probing when the LA conducts the home visit and screening.¹⁰

"There's never anything that when I read the initial enquiries, I think [...] would have missed that or you know, there's never any gaping holes for me. I'm absolutely satisfied with the scope of questions." - LA staff

¹⁰ Based on an interview that was conducted before Hub-led home visits pilot was launched.

Case management and data sharing

Issues with access to the regional monitoring dashboard and LA fostering teams' understanding of how to effectively use and interpret the platform were barriers for smooth case management and data sharing between the Hub and LAs. As a result, the interactive format and intended benefits of accessing 'live' regional recruitment data was not consistently accessible for all LA foster carer recruitment staff as of August 2024:

"We've actually been struggling to get access for our managers in the dashboard because they haven't had the pro-licenses. So, actually, it's only been our data team that's been able to use the interactive element of it. So, we've just been sending PDF snapshots of it to the managers at the moment. But we've spoken to our team this week and hopefully that's going to be rectified." - LA Staff

Nevertheless, recent developments have meant the regional dashboard is somewhat more functional for both LAs and the Hub. The inadequate number of software licences has been raised, meaning more LA staff can access the dashboard. Staff within LAs and the Hub presented a strong demand to access live, relevant data to assess the impact of the Hub on conversion rates and foster carer progression, however, it remains a challenge to ensure the data available is regularly updated and consistent across LAs, as 'online' and 'offline' versions continue to be used:

"It's about us tracking our data appropriately and then ensuring we understand what the Hub are tracking so we can match up." - LA staff

Challenges around case management and the dashboard are explored further in Section 6.6.

6. Progress towards intended outcomes

This section examines the Hub's progress towards achieving the outcomes outlined in the Theory of Change using a structured mixed-methods approach.

Section 6.1 presents our impact evaluation using Ofsted data, assessing the causal effects of the Hub compared to non-Hub areas through rigorous counterfactual analysis.

Sections 6.2 and 6.3 analyse short-term outcomes using descriptive analysis of Hub monitoring data from November 2023 to January 2025, supplemented with qualitative insights. These sections examine enquiry patterns, application progression and demographic variation in applicants.

From Section 6.4 onwards, we shift to predominantly qualitative analysis from interviews with Hub and LA staff, foster carers, fostering experts and IFA representatives. This explores aspects of the Hub's performance that cannot be fully captured through quantitative metrics alone.

6.1 Impact of the Hub

This section presents findings from our counterfactual impact evaluation. The ToC outlines that in the long term, the Hub is expected to increase foster carer approval numbers. The impact evaluation examines early indications of long-term outcomes using Ofsted data.

A quasi-experimental design was employed, specifically Difference-in-Differences analysis, to attempt to measure the Hub's impact on the number of applications received and the number of foster households and foster carers approved during its first 6 months of operation up to March 2024¹¹.

The analysis shows consistent patterns across all measured outcomes (Table 2). The analysis found no statistically significant effects. The coefficients indicate a statistically insignificant slight negative effect on the number of applications received and foster carers approved when comparing Foster with North East Hub LAs to LAs not part of a Hub. These values represent the estimated difference between what actually happened in Hub LAs and what would have happened without the Hub intervention.

These are comparative differences rather than absolute decreases over time. Our analysis controls for pre-existing differences and broader trends affecting all areas. Findings should also be viewed with caution due to the methodological limitations set out

¹¹ The Ofsted data labelled as 'post-intervention' contains some records that predate the intervention, as Ofsted's annual data collection cycle (March to April) does not align with the hub's September launch. This may dilute the effects.

in Section 2.3 and the violations of parallel trends for the two approvals outcomes, as detailed in this section.

Table 2: Results of the estimation

Outcome	Effect	Standard error	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Interpretation
Applications received	-2.51	9.12	0.783	-20.38	15.36	Not statistically significant
Households Approved	-1.94	2.63	0.463	-7.10	3.23	Not statistically significant
Foster Carers Approved	-3.22	4.32	0.456	-11.70	5.24	Not statistically significant

Significance levels: * $p \leq 0.05$ * (significant), ** $p \leq 0.01$ * (highly significant), *** $p \leq 0.001$ * (very highly significant)

The early findings of no statistically significant effects are consistent with patterns seen in new programmes, where changes take time to materialise and become measurable. The absence of statistically significant effects likely stems from the short implementation period of 6 months and the natural time lag between recruitment efforts and completed approvals. This delay is typical in fostering recruitment where the journey from initial enquiry to approved foster carer typically takes 6-9 months.

In addition to this, interviews with Hub and LA staff suggest that any potential decrease could be due to a slowdown in LA promotional activity whilst the regional Hub was being set up, alongside the Hub being new to residents and therefore taking time to gain recognition as a new actor within the sector. Any potential decrease would also align with findings from the evaluation of Regional Adoption Agencies, which saw a small negative effect associated with the availability of adoptive families when regional agencies went live (Ecorys and Rees Centre, 2022). As the Hub becomes more established and more prospective foster carers move through the system, the evaluation will be able to build a clearer picture of its impact. This section discusses these findings through impact charts, which help understand the emerging patterns.

Understanding the impact charts: a guide

The impact charts compare Hub and non-Hub areas. The charts present effects using dots and confidence intervals using bars.

The dots represent the average measured effect. Dots above the zero line indicate Hub areas performed better, whilst dots below zero show Hub areas performed worse. The vertical bars display the confidence intervals—if these cross the zero line, the effect is not statistically significant. Blue elements show data from before the Hub implementation,

and red elements show results after the Hub began, while acknowledging that part of the 'post-treatment' period includes data from before the Hub launch.

This simple visual approach lets us quickly identify whether the Hub has had positive, negative or inconclusive effects on measured outcomes.

Statistical significance and effect size

Across all outcomes examined in this evaluation, we observed no statistically significant effects of the Hub intervention. This means that while we see some small decreases in the numbers, we cannot confidently attribute these changes to the Hub rather than to random chance or other factors.

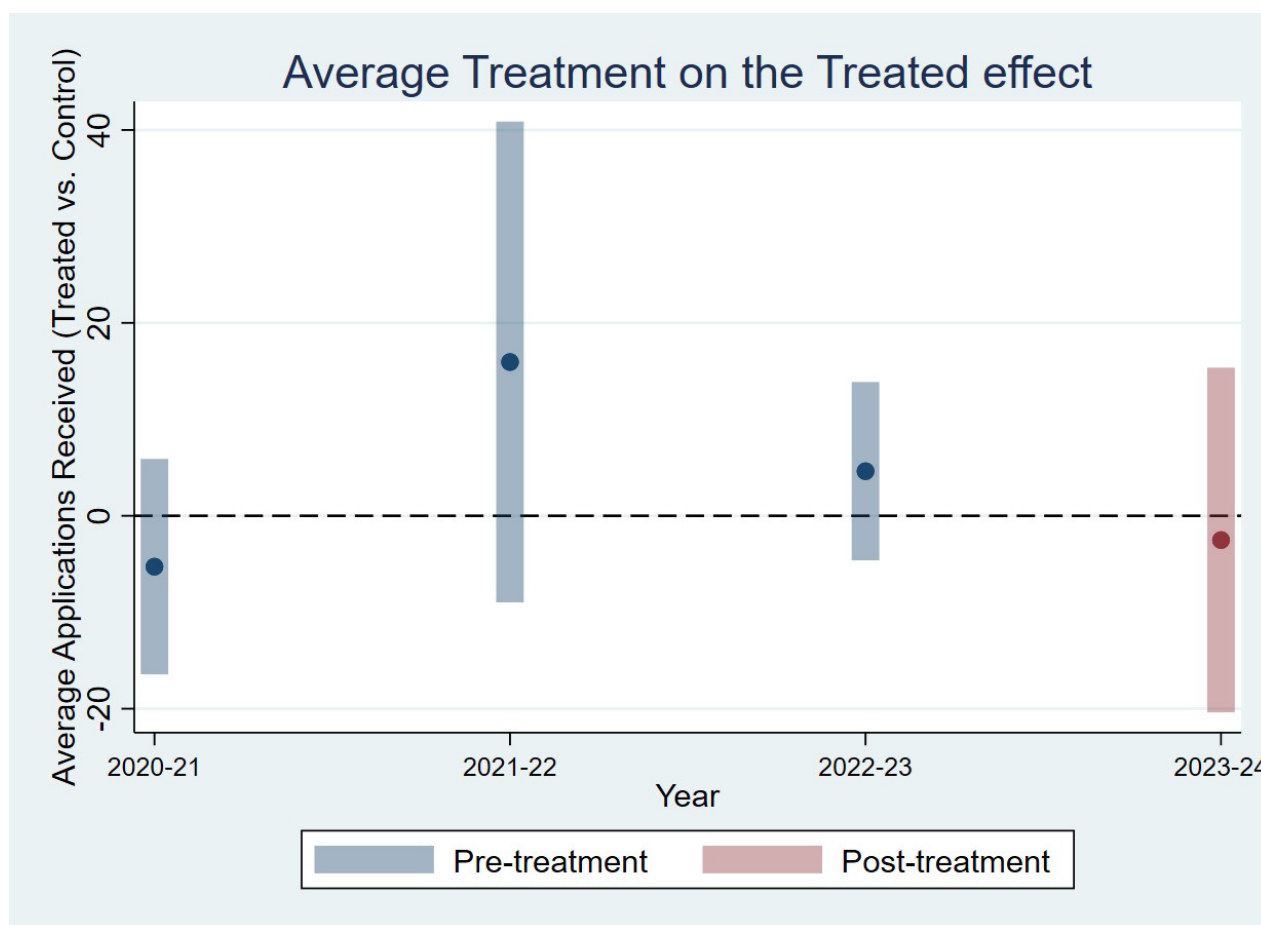
It is important to note that the lack of statistical significance at the early stage of 6 months into delivery does not necessarily mean the intervention is ineffective. Continued monitoring and evaluation over a more extended period will be crucial to understanding the true impact of the Hub.

Number of applications received

The early assessment of impact on number of applications received showed no statistically significant effects. Figure 3 indicates a slight decrease in the number of applications received following the implementation of the Hub intervention, with an estimated reduction of about 2.5 applications per year in treated LAs. However, the wide confidence interval encompassing zero indicates that this effect is not statistically significant and the p-value ($p=0.783$) is far from the conventional threshold for statistical significance, suggesting that it is not possible to attribute any change in application numbers to the Hub.

Notably, the pre-intervention trends in applications for the treatment and control groups were generally similar, indicating that both groups followed comparable trajectories before the intervention. There was no statistically significant difference in Hub and non-Hub application outcomes before the intervention. This supports the validity of the control group as a counterfactual and strengthens confidence in the parallel trends assumption, a key requirement for this analysis. This finding supports the appropriateness of the Difference-in-Difference method for analysing this outcome in future evaluations.

Figure 3: Number of applications received



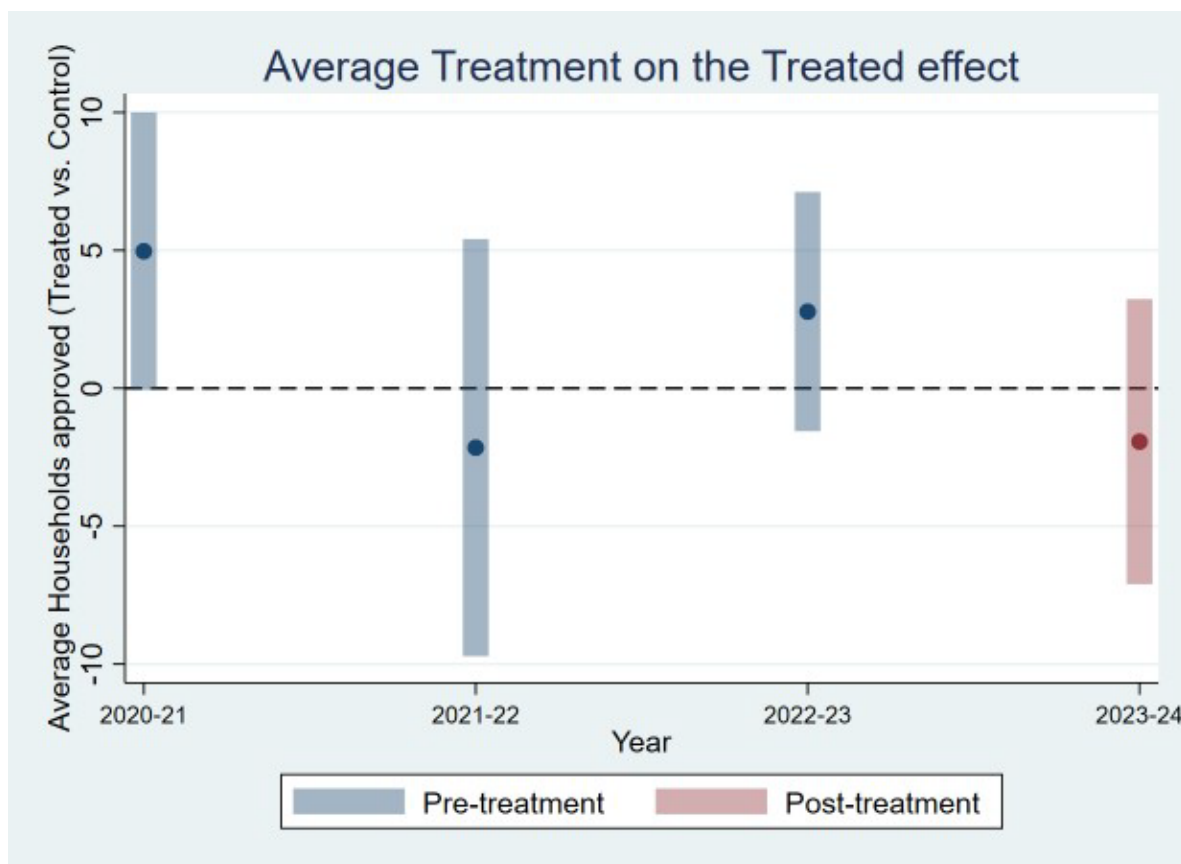
Data source: Ofsted annual data. Sample: 12 treated Local Authorities in the NE Region, 134 control Local Authorities in the rest of England.

Number of approved households

The early assessment of impact on number of approved households showed no statistically significant effects. Figure 4 demonstrates a slight decline in newly approved households after the launch of the Hub, with an estimated decrease of about 1.94 households per year in treated LAs. The effect, however, is not statistically significant and the p-value ($p=0.463$) is far from the conventional threshold for statistical significance suggesting that it is not possible to attribute any change in approval numbers to the Hub.

Pre-intervention trends for approved households show some fluctuation. Formal testing shows a statistically significant difference in approved households between Hub and non-Hub areas in 2020-21, indicating some deviation from ideal parallel trends. This suggests findings should be treated with caution, but does not entirely invalidate the analytical approach as the p-value ($p=0.0466$) sits just within conventional thresholds for significance ($p<0.05$). The approach should be refined before repeating future analysis on this outcome variable.

Figure 4: Number of approved households



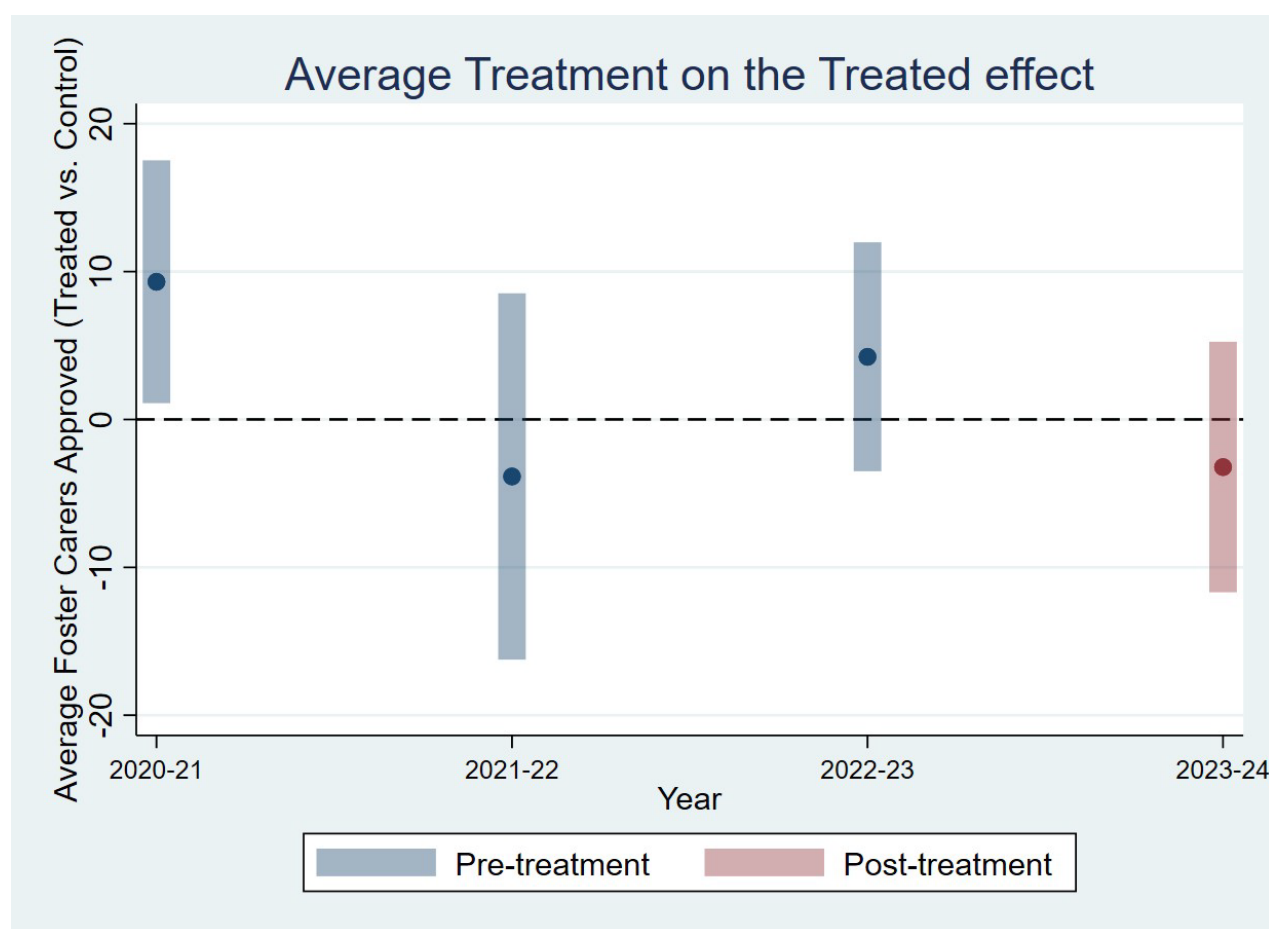
Data source: Ofsted annual data. Sample: 12 treated Local Authorities in the NE Region, 134 control Local Authorities in the rest of England.

Number of carers approved

The early assessment of impact on number of approved households showed no statistically significant effects. Figure 5 shows a decrease in newly approved foster carers following the Hub intervention, with an estimated reduction of about 3.22 per year in treated LAs. The effect is not statistically significant and the p-value ($p=0.456$) is far from the conventional threshold for statistical significance, suggesting that it is not possible to attribute any change in application numbers to the Hub.

Pre-intervention trends for approved carers show some variability in trends. Formal testing shows a statistically significant ($p=0.0102$) difference in approved carers between Hub and non-Hub areas in 2020-21, indicating some deviation from ideal parallel trends. The p-value is close to the threshold of high statistical significance, indicating the need for even stronger caution when interpreting the post-intervention effect on approved carers, as there may have been pre-existing differences between treatment and control areas. The approach should be refined before repeating future analysis on this outcome variable.

Figure 5: Number of carers approved



Data source: Ofsted annual data. Sample: 12 treated Local Authorities in the NE Region, 134 control Local Authorities in the rest of England.

6.2 Enquiries and application analysis

This section analyses short-term outcomes using Hub monitoring data from November 2023 to January 2025. We examine fostering enquiries and applications through four key dimensions: volume of enquiries across different areas, quality of enquiries based on applicant readiness, progression rates through the application process, and geographical patterns of applications. This analysis combines quantitative monitoring data with qualitative insights from interviews to assess the Hub's effectiveness across the North East region.

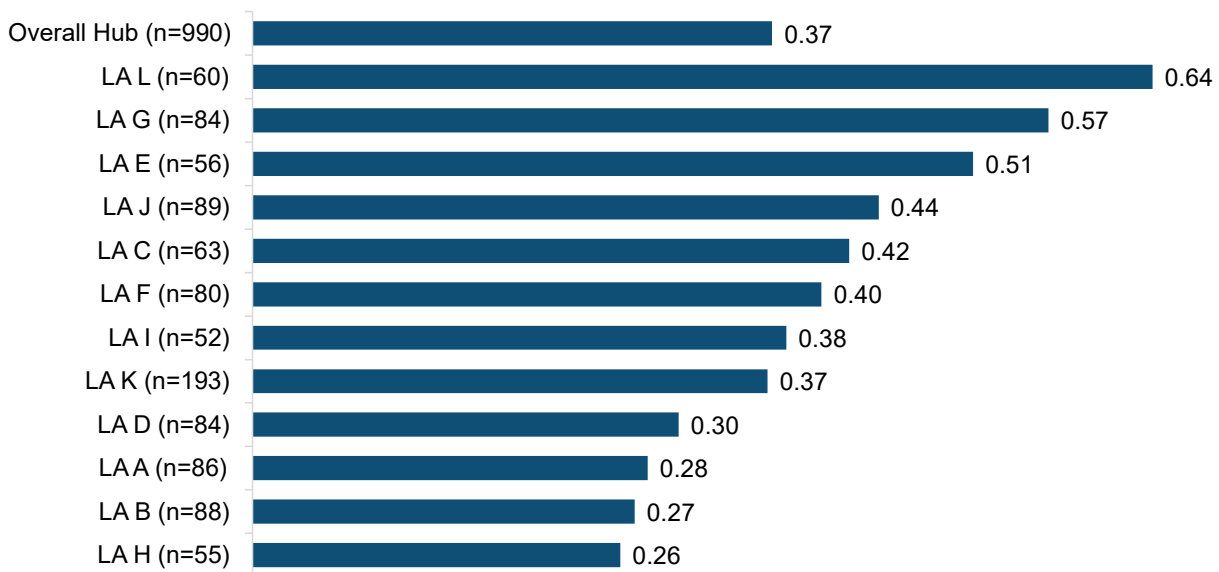
Volume of enquiries

During the reporting period (September 2023 to December 2024), the Hub received 1,041 enquiries from prospective foster carers across the North East region. This included 51 enquiries from residents applying outside their home Local Authority area. Of the 1,041 enquiries received, 129 progressed to formal applications representing an enquiry to application conversion rate of 12%. By the end of the reporting period, 62 applications had been approved, indicating that approximately half of all applications submitted during this timeframe achieved approval. This progression from enquiry to approval demonstrates the Hub's role in both generating interest in fostering and supporting applicants through the assessment process. Of the 1,041 enquiries received, 129 progressed to application (12% conversion rate) and 62 achieved approval (6% conversion rate), whilst highlighting that the majority of initial enquiries have not progressed to formal application stage. See Annex 4 for detailed breakdown by Local Authority.

Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of fostering enquiries per 1,000 people across the North East region, reported by the Hub up to December 2024. The overall Hub average stands at 0.37 enquiries per 1,000 people.

The data reveals significant geographic variation, with rates ranging from 0.26 to 0.64 enquiries per 1,000 people. Some areas demonstrate enquiry rates more than 70% above the Hub average, whilst others record rates approximately 25% below the regional norm.

Figure 6: Number of enquiries (per 1,000 people) by Local Authority



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. Of 1,041 total enquiries, 990 were from North East residents. We excluded 51 'out of area' enquiries because we lacked population data to calculate rates per 1,000 people.

Quality of enquiries

Many interviewees indicated that the Hub's impact on the quality and appropriateness of prospective foster carer enquiries could not be assessed as it is too early. Many individuals processed through the Hub were yet to be approved or only recently approved. Interviews conducted with prospective foster carers included individuals with experience of fostering (through IFAs and LAs) and broader care-related experience which may indicate some applicants are of a strong calibre.

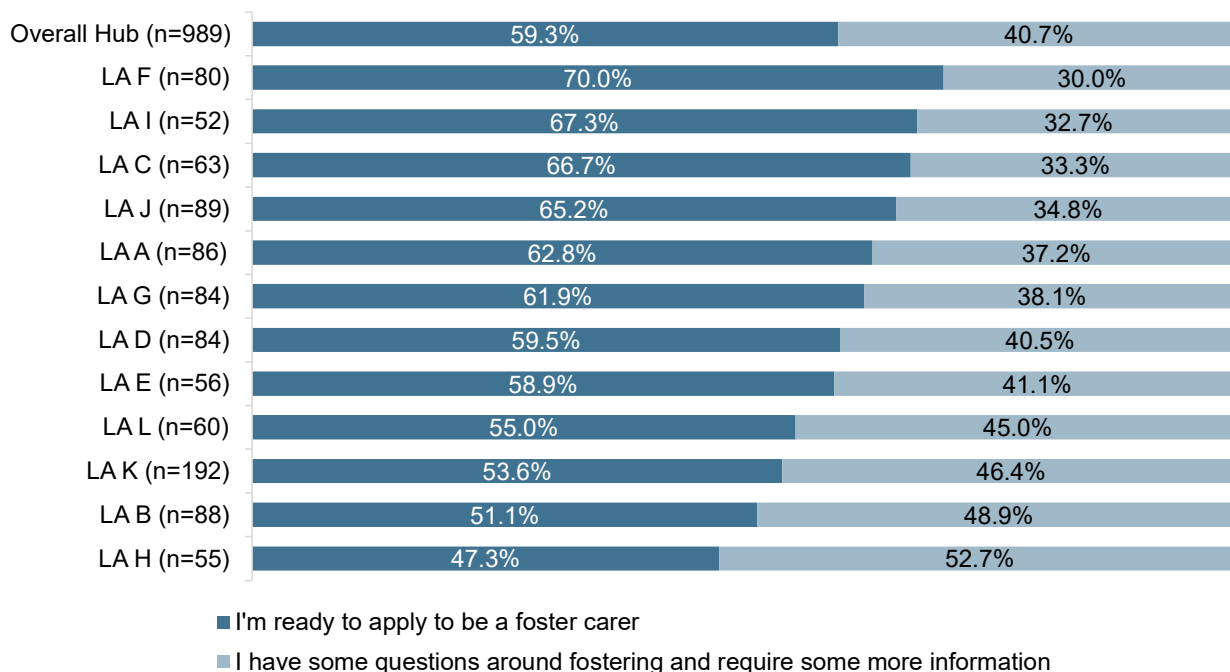
Some Hub and LA staff considered the number of approvals to be more important than the quality, as all LAs provide further training opportunities following Panel. This reflects a strategic focus on building capacity within the system.

Nevertheless, whilst the comms campaign sought to attract foster carer applications that demonstrated readiness and appropriateness, some Hub and LA staff felt it lacked sufficient targeting:

"Why have we not got posters up in police station staff rooms, fire brigade and our health centres- [these are] people about to retire or they want to and are thinking, can they afford to retire early? [...] People that we think would be good foster carers and who we would want to target. I don't get the sense that there's a great deal of creative thinking from the regional hub and it doesn't seem very targeted locally either." - LA staff (Strategic interview)

Figure 7 shows the proportion of enquiries from those ready to apply versus those seeking more information for each LA. At the point of enquiry to the Hub, 59.3% of enquiries were from people ready to apply to be a foster carer, whereas 40.7% were from those seeking more information. The ratio between those ready to apply and those requiring more information varied between LAs.

Figure 7: Readiness to apply at enquiry stage by Local Authority



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Application progress and approval rates

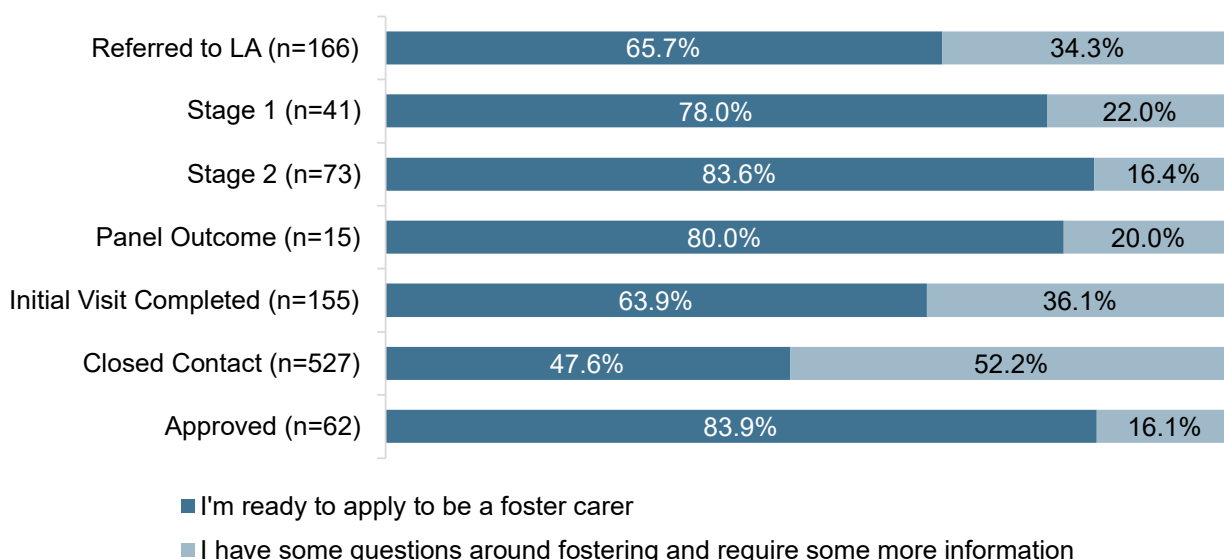
The quality of enquiries is particularly important as it contributes to successful progress towards assessments and approvals. The ToC outlines that the Hub should lead to an increase in conversion of prospective foster carers enquiries to assessments and approvals, whilst minimising drop out. Hub and LA staff interviewed also suggested that from their experience applicants that had been considering fostering for a longer time and were ready to apply tended to be more prepared for the application process and as a result progressed further through the process.

Figure 8 compares how far applicants progressed in the process based on their readiness to apply at enquiry stage. Stage 1 involves initial assessment and statutory checks, whilst Stage 2 comprises detailed assessment including home visits and comprehensive suitability assessment.

It reveals a strong relationship between readiness to apply when initially contacting the Hub and progression through the fostering approval process. Of those who ultimately

gained approval, 83.9% initially indicated they were 'ready to apply' at the point of enquiry, compared to only 16.1% for those who had required more information when contacting. This pattern holds consistently across most stages of the process. This finding suggests that 'ready to apply' candidates are further along the fostering journey and progress through the system more effectively than those still in the information-gathering phase.

Figure 8: Readiness to apply at enquiry stage by furthest status reached



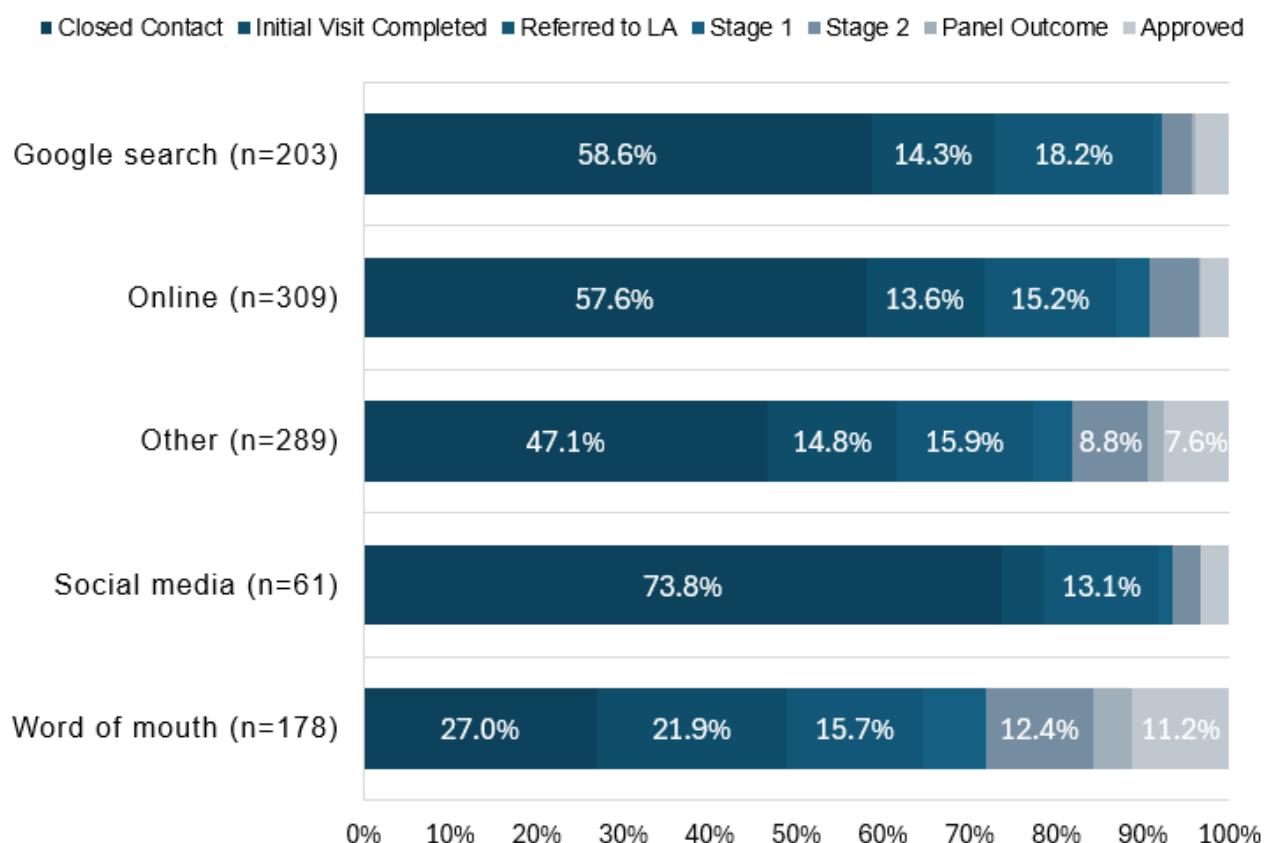
Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Figure 9 illustrates how enquirers heard about the Hub and their subsequent progression through the fostering process. The data reveals significant differences in progression rates depending on how prospective foster carers found out about the Hub. Those who heard about the Hub through word of mouth were least likely to result in closed contact with only 27% of these enquiries resulting in closed contact. This suggests those referred by personal connections tend to be better suited or more committed to fostering. In contrast, a great majority of enquiries, 73.8%, coming from prospective foster carers having heard about the Hub on social media lead to closed contact, indicating these enquiries may be of lower quality or appropriateness. Google search and online channels show similar patterns, with most enquiries (58.6% and 57.6% respectively) leading to closed contact.

Interviews with LA and Hub staff suggest that people who hear about the Hub through word of mouth are typically ready to apply and progress further in the application process compared to those who initially contact the Hub seeking general information about fostering. Hub and LA staff interviewed suggested that from their experience applicants that had been considering fostering for a longer time often had time to build long-term relationships with approved foster carers or had close proximity to foster carers (a friend

or family member who was a foster carer). As a result, they tended to be more informed and prepared for the application process, with more realistic expectations and an existing support network in place (and thus a reduced need for the buddy mentoring programme). This often results in further progress in the application process, with nearly all LA staff interviewed feeling that word of mouth led to stronger enquiries. The Hub intends to leverage the strength of 'word of mouth' in the fostering community moving forward, as discussed in section 4.5.

Figure 9: How enquirers found out about the Hub



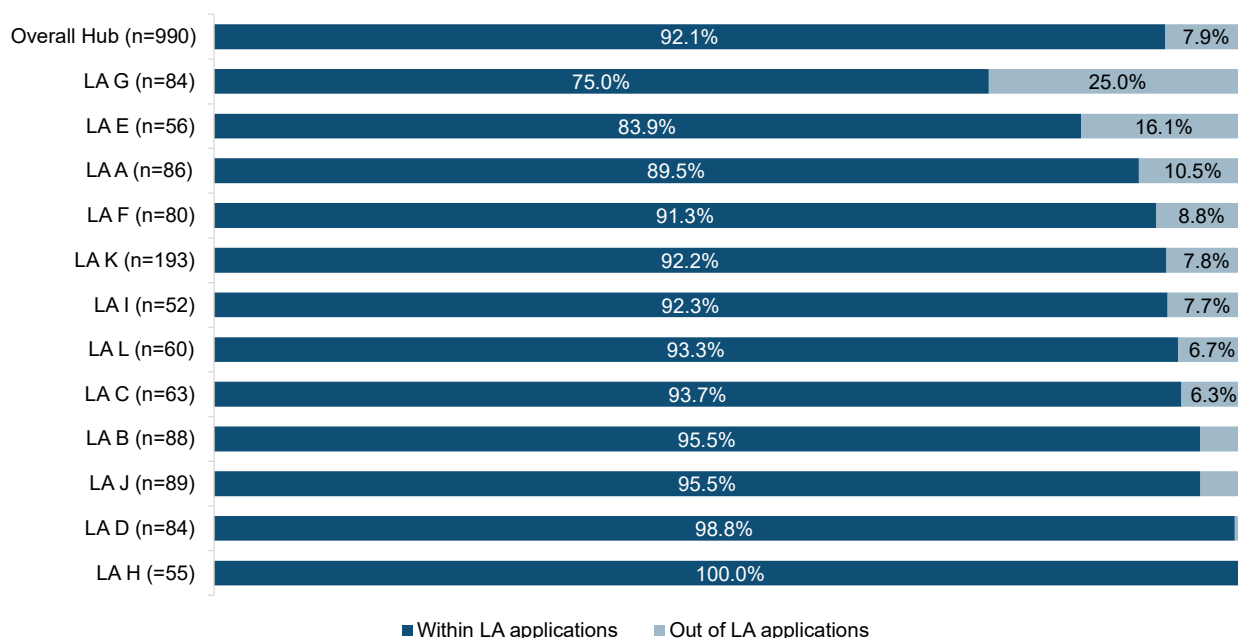
Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. Note: Numbers in parentheses represent the total sample size for each recruitment channel. Radio advert (n=6) has only responses recorded for the Closed Contact and Approved stages. Other = refers to activities such as OOH advertising, letters/flyers, information stands and includes Radio advert. Some of % labels for percentages below 7% have been omitted to improve readability.

Geographical patterns

Figure 10 shows where applicants live compared to where they are applying to foster. The data shows that, across the Hub, 92.1% of enquiries were from prospective foster carers applying within their own LA area, whilst only 7.9% were out-of-area applications. This strong preference for local applications suggests most prospective foster carers wish to serve their immediate communities.

The data reveals a strong tendency across all LAs for prospective foster carers to apply within their own LA, with out-of-area applications consistently representing a minority of cases throughout the region. Notably, LA G shows the highest proportion of out-of-area applications at 25%, compared to the rest of local authorities.

Figure 10: Proportion of out of LA applications



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. Some of % labels have been omitted to improve readability. We excluded 51 'out of area' enquiries because we lacked population data to calculate rates per 1,000 people.

6.3 Improved demographic variation in enquiries

This section examines the demographic diversity of enquirers who submitted Expression of Interest forms, analysing key characteristics that align with the ToC objective of broadening the foster carer population. It considers five crucial demographic dimensions: age profiles of applicants, ethnicity distribution, household composition, age groups of children applicants are interested in fostering, and the number of children households are willing to accommodate.

Age profile of enquirers submitting an EOI

Table 3 presents the age distribution of the primary enquirer. It shows a fairly even spread across middle-age brackets. The most common age range is 41-45 years (15.2%), closely followed by 51-55 years (15%). The data reveals that most foster carer enquirers (73.2%) are aged between 31 and 60, with significantly fewer enquirers under

30 or over 60. Interviewees indicated that parents with children having left home (i.e. 'empty nesters') are often more interested in fostering.

Table 3: Age group of the main enquirer

Age group	N	%
21 to 25	21	4.1%
26 to 30	28	5.5%
31 to 35	74	14.5%
36 to 40	75	14.6%
41 to 45	78	15.2%
46 to 50	72	14.1%
51 to 55	77	15.0%
56 to 60	48	9.4%
61 to 65	24	4.7%
Over 65	15	2.9%
Total	512	100.0%

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Ethnicity profile of enquirers

Table 4 shows the ethnic breakdown of fostering enquirers. The ethnicity data for main enquirers shows a predominant White demographic, accounting for 91.4% of all Hub enquirers. Minority ethnic groups collectively represent 8% of enquirers, with Asian or Asian British (4%) and Black or Black British (3.4%) forming the largest minority groups, while Mixed ethnicity enquirers account for just 0.6%. Moreover, all Hub, LA staff and Comms Leads interviewed reported that the ethnicity profile of enquirers remained consistent with pre-Hub trends, with no significant changes observed.

Table 4: Ethnicity of the main enquirer

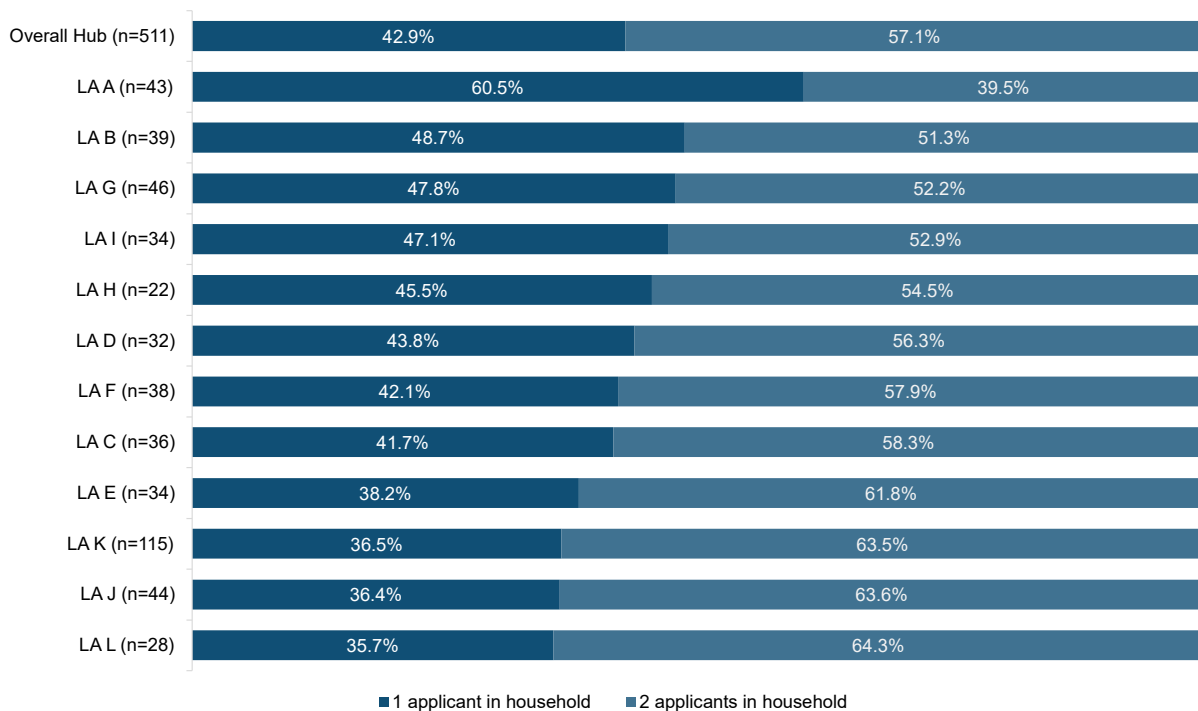
Ethnic Group	Hub Total	Hub %
White	460	91.4%
Mixed	3	0.6%
Black or Black British	17	3.4%
Asian or Asian British	20	4%
Other/Not Known	3	0.6%
Total responses	503	100%

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. The total corresponds to those respondents who provided an answer for this question (n=503)

Number of enquirers per household

Figure 11 compares the number of enquiries from single-enquirer households versus two enquirer households. The data shows that across the Hub, the majority of fostering enquiries (57.1%) come from households with two enquirers, whilst 42.9% come from single-enquirer households. This pattern is consistent across most Local Authorities, though with notable variation. Notably, almost 45% of enquirers did not disclose this information in their expressions of interest. LA staff interviewed noted that enquirers did not always feel comfortable disclosing much information about themselves at the enquiry stage. However, this could also be due to issues with the processes (e.g., the question not being asked or not being recorded appropriately).

Figure 11: Number of enquirers in a household by Local Authority



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Fostering preferences

Age interested in fostering

Table 5 shows the age ranges of children that prospective foster carers expressed interest in fostering. It is important to note that respondents could select multiple age ranges, reflecting their willingness to foster children of different ages.

The table displays both the total number and percentage of responses for each age range¹². The highest interest was for children aged 5-8 years (30.0%), followed by children aged 0-5 years (26.8%) and 8-12 years (26.1%). The lowest interest was for children over 12 years old (17.2%).

¹² There was a total of 1,084 responses across all age ranges. This figure exceeds the actual number of respondents because many individuals indicated interest in more than one age group. This multiple-selection approach gives us a more complete picture of foster carers' preferences and flexibility regarding the age of children they feel equipped to support.

Table 5: Age range interested in fostering

Enquirers	0-5 years old	5-8 years old	8-12 years old	Over 12 years old	Total number of responses
Total number of responses per age group	290	325	283	186	1,084
% per age group	26.8%	30.0%	26.1%	17.2%	100%

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Qualitative interviews with Hub and LA staff highlighted the perception that pre-existing trends in age-group preferences continued to persist, despite the Hub's attempts to broaden interest in fostering children with a diversity of demographics:

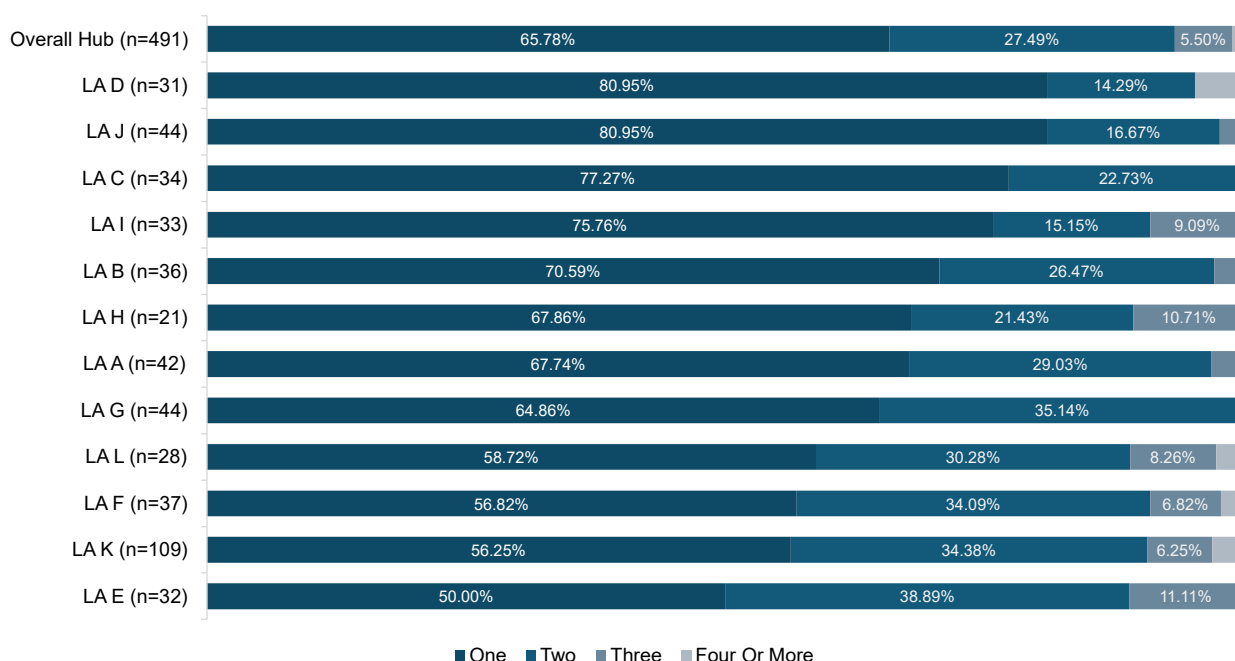
"I think most people, when they are applying to foster, want to foster at least young children, maybe up to the age of 8 years old. We still don't have enough people who will include teenagers or children with disabilities. [...] So, I'm not quite sure whether the talk has been effective in the way that we would like. But equally, I think that that's been happening for several years now." - Hub staff

Number of children that enquirers are interested in fostering

Figure 12 illustrates how many children enquirers are interested in fostering at a given time, broken down by LA.

The data reveals a clear pattern for the overall Hub, with nearly 2 out of 3 of enquirers expressing interest in fostering one child (65.78%), whilst just over a quarter indicate willingness to foster two children (27.49%). There is substantial variation across LAs, with preferences for fostering a single child ranging from 50% to approximately 81%. This geographical diversity likely reflects differences in local demographics, housing situations, and perhaps previous fostering experiences within each area. The data suggests targeted recruitment approaches may be beneficial to address these regional variations in fostering capacity.

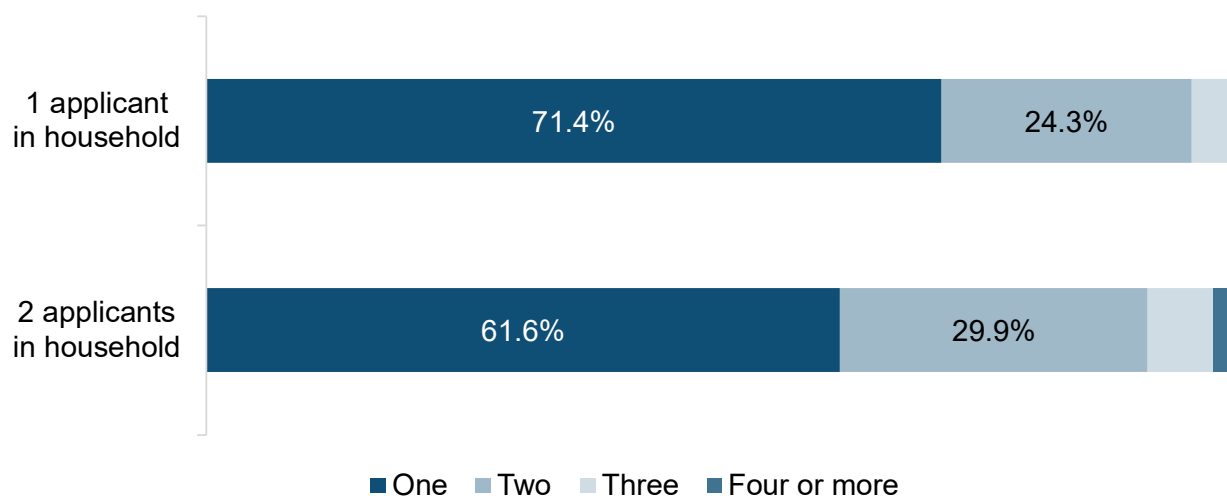
Figure 12: Number of children enquirers are interested in fostering by LA



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. The chart includes all data, though some percentages are not labelled to maintain visual clarity.

Figure 13 shows how many children single-enquirer and 2 enquirer households are interested in fostering. Households with 2 enquirers show more interest in fostering multiple children, while single-enquirer households are more likely to be interested in fostering one child.

Figure 13: Number of children interested in fostering by number of enquirers in the household

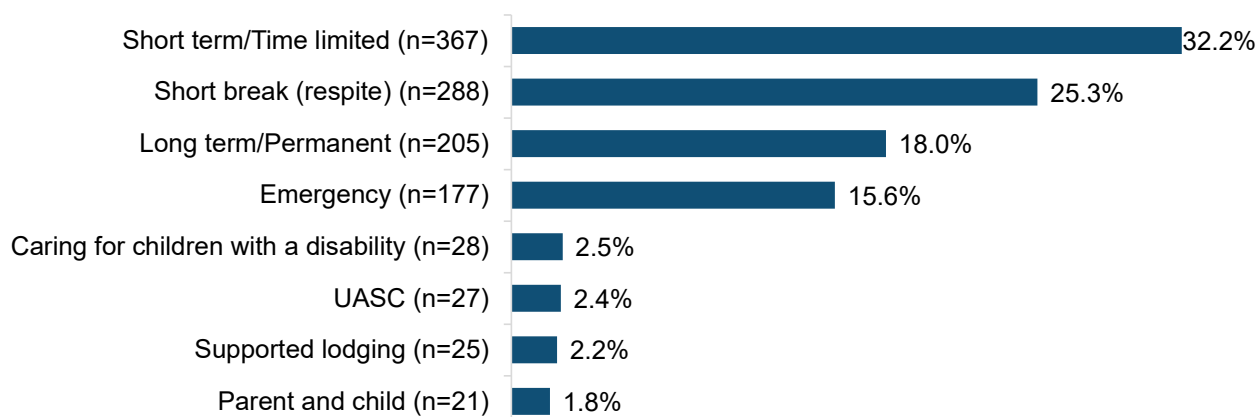


Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. The chart includes all data, though some percentages are not labelled to maintain visual clarity. The total number of valid answers for this variable is 491: 210 for 1 applicant and 281 for 2 applicants.

Fostering type

Figure 14 demonstrates enquirer interest across different fostering types, with multiple selections permitted. Short-term placements attracted most responses (367, 32.2%), followed by respite care (288, 25.3%). Specialist arrangements including disability care, UASC, and supported lodging each generated fewer than 30 responses each, indicating limited interest in these more complex placements.

Figure 14: Types of fostering interest among enquirers (multiple responses permitted)



Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024. Note: Enquirers could select multiple fostering types. Figures show total responses (n=1,138) rather than individual respondents.

6.4 Increasing LA capacity and increasing timeliness and frequency of support

Increased LA capacity

The majority of LA staff interviewed reported that the centralisation of enquiry management has reduced the workload of recruitment teams. As the Hub has become more established, the number of direct enquiries coming to the LA has been steadily decreasing according to interviewees. Having such experts who handle enquiries, initial screening, deliver Skills to Foster training, and also provide ad-hoc guidance meant that LA fostering teams had more capacity to focus on supporting enquirers that progressed through the application process. Most LA staff interviewed felt this was having an impact on their day-to-day role and provided more time to spend on progressing applications. This was particularly the case for staff working in smaller LAs, where capacity is particularly constrained.

“It’s [the Hub] taken a lot of pressure off cos we are only a small team compared to a lot of others in the area.” - LA staff

LA staff capacity has been particularly eased since the Hub’s screening procedures have been refined in Autumn 2024 (i.e. reducing the number of inappropriate enquiries being referred), and Hub staff acknowledged initial visits may facilitate this further:

“What we do in terms of those initial discussions, we, you know, if there was something really obvious or really significant like police history [...] we would have that initial conversation on the phone and it would be really sensitive, but it would prevent the Local Authority from having to do that. [...] So that's saving the Local Authority time. Now that initial visits are embedded, that again is saving the Local Authority some more time.” - Hub staff

The shift away from LA delivery of Skills to Foster training and the increased frequency of training (from every 3 to 4 months to three times a month) being delivered by Hub staff, was perceived by many as a considerable timesaver for LA staff. This immediate shift in responsibilities was evident to some interviewees:

“It cuts out a little bit of that work really for our workers to have to manage and deal with on a daily basis, and it allows them to then focus more on the assessment side of things. Getting the right people all the way through, rather than having issues to pick up at the beginning.” - LA Staff

Improved timeliness of support to enquirers

By providing dedicated resources for enquiry services, staff that participated in interviews perceived that prospective foster carers receive faster responses from the Hub than the previous service offered by LAs, improving their initial experience and keeping them engaged. Of those who commented on responsiveness during LA staff interviews, all observed that the Hub has either maintained or improved response times to enquiries. One LA staff interviewee noted that, thanks to the Hub, they are now able to respond to enquiries with the speed and efficiency typically associated with IFAs. This observation largely aligned with interviewed prospective foster carer experience of response times. LA staff acknowledged that these quicker response times had thus far improved the initial experience for prospective foster carers, helping to keep them engaged during the early stages of the application process.

Moreover, prospective foster carers generally appreciated the positive interactions with Hub staff and quick response times, with nearly all that were interviewed stating they received a response to their enquiry within 48 hours.

6.5 Improving the enquiry and application process for foster carers

As outlined in Section 5 interviewed foster carers generally found the Hub model to be of benefit, citing positive experiences with Hub staff and a sense of feeling well-supported throughout the initial enquiry process. They appreciated that there were dedicated staff for handling enquiries and felt that this led to quicker and more efficient responses. The post enquiry support, including Skills to Foster training and the buddy mentoring programme, were considered useful. The networking and informative aspects of Skills to

Foster training generally had a positive impact on journey experience, across the interviews. However, foster carer experiences indicate that the Hub's impact was confined to the initial stages of the foster carer application journey as LA support became increasingly more significant as assessment and Panel stages developed. Nevertheless, these early stages were deemed high-quality amongst most foster carers interviewed:

"I think the quickness in their response is definitely their number 1 benefit. Because if you are applying to be a foster carer, you don't want to wait 3 weeks to get a response." - Prospective foster carer

More detail on improvements on the enquiry and application process for foster carers can be found in Section 5.2

Interviews with fostering experts highlighted that the Hub, as a single point of contact, could improve communication and provide better support for foster carers navigating the approval process. Many emphasised the importance of the first contact, stressing that a knowledgeable and welcoming initial response is critical in ensuring prospective carers progress in their journey. The Hub has the potential to enhance this crucial first touchpoint:

"A dedicated front door is or should be beneficial. If designed properly, it should be more welcoming, more inclusive, more responsive, more expert and dedicated." - Fostering expert from national fostering organisation

However, concerns were raised about the Hub introducing an additional layer of complexity to an already intricate process. Some LA staff perceived that the Hub may increase the number of contacts a prospective foster carer interacts with which could potentially disrupt the relationship-based nature of the enquiry and application process. They feared that requiring applicants to repeat information to multiple contacts could lead to frustration and lower conversion rates. Some foster carers interviewed highlighted that the process was lengthy and demanded a lot of information about their personal history, but did not comment specifically on the repetitiveness of the process.

During early delivery the introduction of another layer in the recruitment process also prompted concerns amongst Hub and LA staff interviewed. Interviewees were concerned about potential miscommunication, ineffective handovers, and prospective foster carers slipping through the cracks, and one foster carer interviewed felt there was some disconnect between the Hub and their LA social worker. However, an improved case management system was introduced in September 2024 as a response to some inconsistencies (as discussed further in Section 5.1)

Another foster carer recalled initially thinking that adding another body to the process would increase complexity, but subsequently considered the Hub to be a good service. Most foster carers interviewed considered the transition of responsibility from the Hub to

their LA as smooth and timely, and indicated that the process did not impede their progress towards panel.

While the Hub offers opportunities to enhance consistency and first-contact experiences, interviewees saw its long-term success as depending on effective implementation - balancing the potential benefits outlined above with a streamlined and responsive recruitment process.

6.6 Monitoring, collection and sharing data at a regional level via the dashboard

The dashboard was intended to be used as an interactive platform for monitoring and analysing data related to fostering services. It was designed to provide LA fostering teams live access to monitoring data, which included updates on fostering applications and approvals, and visualisations such as maps to show the application source, the recruitment pathway and fostering data insights. Whilst an LA staff member shared in an interview that it was helpful to review the monthly dashboard snapshot (non-interactive) to better see how they were performing compared to other LAs, the majority of interviewed LA Data Leads and LA staff had minimal direct use of the dashboard. Usage of the dashboard was initially limited due to challenges with access and training, with more recent concerns relating to the utility of the dashboard due to the lack of historical data (prior to the Hub's launch) to identify any changes to conversion rates (as of December 2024).

Access

Initially, one of the key barriers to dashboard utilisation was limited access. Following the dashboard's launch, fostering team staff had access to the dashboard through at least one person in their team having a Power BI Pro licence. Ideally, every member of an LA's fostering team should have access to the dashboard directly. LA staff indicated that a corporate licence was not a solution as it would have needed to come as a government directive and was expensive (around £80k according to interviewees). Individual licences were therefore deemed more cost effective and easier to implement. Some Hub staff highlighted that a corporate licence should be viewed as an investment that will improve data collection and sharing in the long term. Following more recent fieldwork between October 2024 to January 2025, access to the dashboard had improved as a result of more individual licences being issued and increased engagement in training amongst LA staff, though its usefulness remains limited for LA staff.

Training

To support access, Power BI training was made available but not many LA staff were using it. Hub staff observed that the same people from the same LAs were accessing the training and the dashboards, suggesting that not all LA staff fully engaged.

Although the training has received positive feedback from those that attended, there have been very few requests for support or feedback on the dashboard contents, which again suggested low levels of engagement. Hub staff suggested that this low engagement was due to competing priorities and the urgency of other tasks, such as assessing children's social care needs, a lack of understanding of the training's relevance, or simply not having enough time to dedicate to it. It was suggested that a more hands-on approach to training, potentially through a regional Power BI user group, could help to improve engagement.

For LA fostering staff with access to the dashboard, the lack of formalised instruction and guidance prevented some of them from engaging with the dashboard and its potential to gain regional insight. Some LA data leads provided informal guidance (e.g. IT clinics, step-by-step videos) to fostering managers but fostering team staff are under time constraints and often struggled to access this support. As a result, some LA data leads noted that the dashboard was a missed opportunity because of the lack of understanding and formal training amongst some LA managers:

“I think there's definitely a training need on our end. And to be completely honest, a lot of people on our fostering side aren't very technical. So, you hand them a spreadsheet and they are scared of that. So, having a big dashboard sent over to them, it's a little bit daunting for them. And because us on the performance side [LA data team], we are still learning ourselves. We can't really give them the guidance that they need. [...] I don't think they are clicking into it, to get a drill down of the data.” - LA Staff

Data collection processes

Another barrier for dashboard usage was due to some duplication in the data collection process between the LA data leads sending updates monthly, and the Hub staff having direct dialogue with the LA fostering teams. The agreed process (i.e. for LA data leads to send updates monthly to the Hub) was challenging as the data in LA systems were not always updated due to case notes not always being up to date, IT issues and incorrect dates. In addition, issues arose from fostering systems not being set up optimally (e.g. wrong date fields used), and LA data leads not understanding fostering data nuances (e.g. types of enquiries, stages and/or updates of the application process). As a result, the monthly data received centrally was not consistently of high quality.

Meanwhile, the Hub staff needed direct updates from fostering services (e.g. withdrawals, discontinuations) to ensure they were updated before carrying out any 'check-in' calls. As a result, the Hub staff accessed a Teams channel with live spreadsheets that fostering services were supposed to update weekly in order to have more real-time data, compared to the official monthly data collection. Similarly to the monthly updates, completion of this 'live' data point was also inconsistent. As a result, 2 data collection streams continued to be in use as of December 2024; the first stream being the live spreadsheet in Teams channel and the second stream is the monthly fostering data shared between LA data leads and the Hub. The second stream informs the dashboard, albeit lacking the frequency required for LA staff.

LA staff interviewed highlighted the rapidly changing nature of service provision and children's circumstances. This is not captured by the current system due to a lack of live data. The weekly and monthly updates result in a lag, meaning the dashboard may not accurately reflect the situation of foster carers.

Utilisation

Whilst access to the dashboard has improved, its usefulness and utilisation remain limited for LA staff. The main concern raised by LA staff was the lack of quality and consistency of data available on the dashboard. For example, the dashboard does not collect speed of response to enquiries despite timeliness being an important objective for the Hub.

Moreover, LA staff that were interviewed highlighted frustration regarding the lack of historical information pre-dating the Hub on meaningful outcomes (e.g. number of foster carer approvals, historical data on approvals), making it difficult to track regional recruitment. Furthermore, the dashboard only tracks data stages from enquiry to approval, omitting data on service provision, placements, and children's outcomes. It is therefore not suitable to track service provision and children looked after's outcomes. Future expansion of the scope of the dashboard may address these limitations.

With more meaningful and live data, increased sharing and dissemination of the information internally within LA recruitment teams would generate more awareness of the pipeline of approvals amongst the commissioning and matching staff. In turn, there was strong demand for the dashboard to support LAs to assess the impact of the Hub to facilitate an evidence-based approach to foster carer recruitment:

"Ultimately I think if we get more focus on it [the dashboard] in our understanding of what the data is telling us and where the analysis is highlighting where we perhaps stop in ourselves being successful. If we shift some of that focus onto understanding the data and really focusing on it, I think you will begin to see more of a shift [in conversion rates]." - LA staff

Given the challenges and limitations with the dashboard to provide live data, it is unlikely that it will be feasible to currently use it to track (prospective) foster carers' journeys. In turn, future analysis of service provision and children looked after's outcomes via the dashboard may also lack feasibility in the dashboard's current format.

6.7 Increased collaboration across the region

The regional model was generally well accepted by interviewed LA staff and was largely perceived to have positively impacted the collaboration and knowledge sharing within the region. Staff across the LA teams recognised the common issue of foster carer recruitment and retention facing the sector and welcomed an initiative to help resolve this. This indicates that participation in the Hub was underpinned by a genuine shared vision for improving recruitment in the region.

"It's a really tough time. So, you know, we've all been in the same boat. [...] Our numbers of foster carers are just around an all-time low. And we are not recruiting, you know, to the same kind of speed, if you like, that we are losing carers." - LA staff

"Combined resources make the combined efforts bigger than individual efforts done singularly...there are lots of benefits when all LAs are struggling with the same issues to come together and try and have a united approach and way forwards." - LA staff

Perceived benefits of regionalisation

The majority of LA staff that were interviewed considered the regional Hub as a positive addition to the service, with some considering it to build on existing collaborative networks and structures (e.g. regionalised adoption service, regular regional manager meetings).

LA representatives shared that regionalisation provided an opportunity for relationship development, collaboration and knowledge/expertise sharing between LA staff. Each month the following workstreams meet with a representative from each LA present: project board members, data scientists and comms leads. These have provided opportunities for LAs to discuss challenges and share solutions. Increased points of communication have also resulted in more relationships being built between staff from different LAs. Staff are more comfortable sharing their own local knowledge and expertise, even if their LA has different needs to others.

The regional work has also increased transparency between some LA staff about the impact of the Hub on ways of working and approval processes. For example, one LA staff member highlighted that a prospective foster carer that was rejected by one LA would be identified if they applied to another. One LA staff interviewed explained that prior to

regionalisation, they would wait until Skills to Foster training was completed by prospective foster carers before progressing with other parts of the application process. Since joining the Hub, they have drawn insights from how other LAs operate and now run stages 1 and 2 of the assessment process concurrently. Stage 1 involves initial assessment and statutory checks, while Stage 2 comprises detailed assessment including home visits and comprehensive suitability assessment. This new approach has shortened their typical application timeline.

Previous experiences

In interviews with LA staff, Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) were frequently cited as an example of regional collaboration. Staff's experiences and perceptions varied. For some LA staff interviewed their previous experience of RAAs made them sceptical of the new Hub model. They perceived the implementation and initial delivery of the RAAs model negatively, especially regarding the collaboration between LAs. They nonetheless acknowledged that such changes to practice take time to embed efficiently.

For other LA staff, their previous experience and familiarity with RAAs served as a point of reassurance when changing to the new Hub model. Their existing understanding of regionalised initiatives and daily operations related to the RAAs gave them valuable insights into the logistical and resource requirements of effective regional working. Furthermore, these staff members viewed the regionalisation of adoption agencies as a positive development, notwithstanding the initial challenges. Furthermore, some LA staff highlighted that collaboration between LAs has been happening for years and staff were generally keen to work together.

“But overall, I think everybody was really keen to work together and I think we always have been. We've always had those regional managers meetings anyway to look at good practice, what's working well, what's not working so well, and support for each other. So, we've always worked collaboratively anyway [...] because they've always had those managers meetings for as long as I've been in fostering for about 11 years now.” - LA staff

Partial regionalisation

Both strategic and operational LA staff considered the Hub model to only partially regionalise the recruitment process. Some LA staff suggested that other aspects required regionalisation for the Hub to function as a solution. Examples provided by staff frequently referred to the disparities in fees and allowances, screening processes, and wider application stage provision across the different authorities. This partial approach to regionalisation meant some LA staff felt that the Hub model added an unnecessary layer to an already complex enquiry process. This was because the Hub initially lacked access to LA-specific information, and the transfer of data between the Hub and individual LAs

during the application stage remained an ongoing challenge. As a result, some staff proposed further regionalisation (e.g. greater Hub oversight during the application, assessment and panel stages, and harmonised fees) in order to streamline processes and to enhance the known benefits around collaboration and regional working. LA and Hub staff responses to the recent Hub pilot of initial visits has been mixed and has generated broader discussions around the implications on internal LA fostering staffing, as explored in Section 5.3.

IFA representatives interviewed felt that the Hub, in its current design and implementation, does not represent a fully regionalised approach and may have unintended consequences for the wider fostering market, including IFAs. They perceived that while resource-sharing and improved coordination among LAs have the potential to enhance efficiency, the exclusion of IFAs from participation in the Hub and the already saturated market posed concerns about its overall effectiveness. IFA stakeholders perceived that the Hub may unintentionally divert more perspective foster carers to IFAs through lack of use of targeted search optimisation and potential misidentification of Foster with North East as a new IFA, although as explored in Section 4.6 there was no consensus on whether this was observed in practice

Lack of Fee Harmonisation

Fees as a barrier for regional working

The lack of standardised foster carer fees across LAs is perceived by LA and Hub staff to be a significant ongoing structural barrier to regional collaboration. Children's services have long operated in a 'mixed economy' and with a range of providers involved in the delivery of services locally (Sellick, 2007). As a result, this has contributed to a competitive fostering landscape, driven by a scarcity of carers and the presence of IFAs. LA staff perceived the lack of regional fee harmonisation as a challenge for recruitment, regional working and sustainability, and some Hub staff view continued fee disparity amongst LAs as a potential design barrier for acceptance and buy-in amongst staff.

Fees as a barrier for enquirers

LA staff considered that prospective foster carers faced barriers to applying due to a confusing and inconsistent landscape of fees and payments at the initial enquiry stage. This lack of clarity stems from the varied and often incomparable fee structures, support, and training offers among different LAs. The complexity is further magnified by the link between a carer's training progression (particularly for supporting children with complex needs) and their future earning potential, a detail that is not always clearly communicated. This fragmented system required potential carers to navigate a confusing array of financial arrangements. Some LA staff also noted that during its initial rollout, the Hub's communications about these diverse LA provisions were also unclear, adding another layer of difficulty for those seeking information.

“I suppose we all need to be paying competitive rates because if you've got people, teachers, and other sort of professionals quite well paid, if you want them to rethink their employment, then you need to be able to offer a quite attractive package.” - LA staff

Interviews with fostering experts and IFA representatives highlighted that the Hub could help standardise terms and conditions across participating LAs. However, fee harmonisation was cited as a significant barrier to achieving this consistency. Fostering experts referenced Wales as an example of successful reform, where a harmonisation process created a more consistent system.

"[In Wales] we mapped everything that every Local Authority offered and we did a harmonisation piece of work... now the Hub can't deliver on consistency because they haven't got it, they are not all paying the same, they don't offer the same support, they don't offer anything of any consistency at the moment. So, other than the consistent phone call being answered, that's it, that's where it ends unfortunately." – Stakeholder from fostering charity

Mixed views around fee standardisation

Fee standardisation via the Hub was proposed as a potential solution by some Hub and LA staff, though opinions varied. Some LA representatives suggested implementing regional or national minimum/maximum caps on fees to reduce competition. They suggested this proposed 'cap' could contribute to a reduction in (though not eliminate) the competition and an increase in transparency between LAs. However, LAs that currently offer higher fees expressed concern that a maximum cap could undermine the Hub's competitive edge against IFAs. Consequently, some staff saw standardisation as a feasible solution that the Hub could oversee:

“Standardised fees for all authorities would help to eliminate competition and make it easier for children to access local homes.” - Hub staff

“In terms of being sustainable, I think the fees needs to be looked at. We are all offering very different amounts. Again, there's two strands to it. So, I think, I think there needs to be a consensus. [...] I think we are also silly if we don't recognise that of course finances play a part. We are asking someone to take care of a child, a young person. You know, they do cost and given the cost of living at the minute, it needs to be looked at [...] it definitely needs to be regionalised, a fixed amount.” - LA staff

However, some LA staff remained sceptical towards a standardised approach to fees:

“It is a competitive market and LAs are under tight budgets. Standardisation may hinder LA recruitment in comparison with the private IFA market... I would consider minimal allowances, but not standardised payments. Standardising fees may end up being a very costly and timely process.” - LA staff

8. Economic evaluation

A Value for Money (VfM) assessment examines the relationship between an intervention's social benefits and its costs. It determines whether public resources create and maximise public value whilst achieving policy objectives.

The first-year impact evaluation of the Hub found no statistically significant difference in foster household approvals between LAs part of the Foster with North East Hub, and comparable LAs not part of a Hub. This likely reflects the short timeframe for assessment, as interventions of this scale typically require longer to demonstrate measurable effects. The misalignment between the Hub's launch (September 2023) and Ofsted's reporting cycle (April-March) further complicated impact measurement.

As a result, the economic evaluation takes a break-even approach. We estimate the impact the Hub would have needed to achieve on approved foster households to break even on first-year costs.

This early Value for Money assessment provides a formative analysis of the Hub's first year up to August 2024, establishing a baseline understanding of cost structures and potential returns rather than making judgments about long-term programme effectiveness.

The following sections detail our cost and benefit estimates, including a sensitivity analysis of key assumptions.

Estimated cost of the Hub

The cost assessment includes costs associated with the investment in the Hub, including initial capital expenditure, operating expenses, maintenance costs, and any other relevant expenses.

The costs included in Table 6 estimate the spending up to August 2024 which includes some of the set-up costs as well as the ongoing operating costs. Staffing costs accounted for 58% of total spending. Based on assumptions from the Hub business case, management costs are estimated based on a 10% increase in non-management staffing.

Table 6: Costs of Foster with the North East Hub (September 2023 to August 2024)

Spend Categories	Cost (£)	% of total cost
Total Staffing	£896,546	58%
Content development	£132,528	9%
Case management implementation	£114,415	7%
Management oversight	£127,551	8%
Campaign costs	£100,000	6%
Training & support activities	£76,417	5%
Office site costs	£29,019	2%
Production costs	£36,475	2%
Hub events (launch; focus groups)	£18,185	<1%
ICT equipment and support	£8,647	<1%
Office equipment	£6,255	<1%
Total cost	£1,546,039	100%

Benefits of increasing the number of approved foster care households

The benefits of the Hub are estimated based on the cost savings of LA foster care compared to IFA foster care and residential care. A key objective of the Hub is to increase the number of approved LA foster carers, which, in turn, will reduce the use of more expensive provisions in the form of IFAs and residential care, thus generating cost savings.

We use publicly available unit costs to estimate the cost per child of care in different settings. Section 2.3 sets out how the most appropriate unit costs were chosen and the limitations associated with using unit costs.

Table 7 shows the costs used in the estimates. We assume cautiously that 90% of new LA foster households replace costs from IFA foster households and 10% replace costs from residential care. However, we do not necessarily assume that newly recruited households provide placements for children that would otherwise have been in IFA or residential care, it may be that newly created placements free up existing experienced LA carers to provide diversion or step down.

Table 7: Annual per-child unit costs for North East Local Authorities (Cost Benefit Analysis)

Local Authority	LA Foster care	IFA Foster care	Residential care
Darlington	£32,586.44	£44,067.80	£349,816.88
Durham	£28,130.18	£38,041.43	£336,169.56
Gateshead	£26,459.08	£35,781.54	£334,219.94
Hartlepool	£33,421.99	£45,197.74	£350,373.91
Middlesbrough	£30,915.34	£41,807.91	£379,896.67
Newcastle upon Tyne	£34,536.06	£46,704.33	£299,683.88
North Tyneside	£28,687.21	£38,794.73	£286,593.60
Northumberland	£28,408.70	£38,418.08	£236,460.61
Redcar and Cleveland	£28,408.70	£38,418.08	£448,411.76
South Tyneside	£37,321.23	£50,470.81	£359,564.96
Stockton-on-Tees	£20,888.75	£28,248.59	£331,434.78
Sunderland	£30,915.34	£41,807.91	£351,766.49

Important assumptions

In addition to the cost estimates, we must make some additional assumptions to model the cost savings from increasing foster household approvals. Within the findings, sensitivity analyses show how the results would deviate if the assumptions were changed. The key assumptions are:

- **Foster carer length of service:** Estimates in national statistics show that foster carers, on average, provide 8 years of care. We assume foster households recruited via the Hub will provide a length of care in line with this.
- **Children per active foster household:** The number of children in foster care and the number of foster households in England suggest around 1.44 children per active foster household. We assume that households recruited through the Hub will care for an equivalent number of children on average.
- **The ratio of counterfactual accommodation between IFAs and residential care:** we cautiously assume that for every ten new foster households carers, the

counterfactual would be that nine placements would have been in IFAs, and one would have been in residential care.

- **Correction factor of 20%:** Given that the unit costs are averages, they may not represent the trust cost savings from the Hub. For example, residential care placements will include children with complex needs who would not be appropriately cared for in a foster care setting. To account for this and other limitations from the unit costs, we reduce all cost savings by 20% to provide a more conservative estimate.

Non-monetised benefits

The assessment includes only the fiscal benefits from the Hub to ensure a robust, evidence-based analysis. However, the Hub may also enable children to access more appropriate care settings for their specific needs. This improved matching could significantly benefit children's well-being, health outcomes and educational attainment.

Evidence suggests that capacity constraints in foster care often force children into residential settings despite foster placements better meeting their needs. These constraints impose social costs beyond fiscal considerations. While the Green Book provides methods for monetising such social benefits, we cannot reasonably apply these approaches here. This limitation stems from insufficient data on the number of children unable to access optimal care arrangements and the magnitude of resulting social costs. Readers should note that these unquantified benefits would likely increase the overall social value beyond our conservative estimates.

Findings

The estimates suggest that each additional foster household generates an average savings of £465,354 (£58,169 annually). After applying the Treasury-mandated 3.5% discount rate and a 20% correction factor to account for uncertainty, the net savings amount to £341,287 per household.

Comparing the year 1 cost of £1,548,039 with the unit costs saved per foster care household, the cost of the Hub in year 1 was equivalent to the cost savings from five recruited households. Based on the difference between the treated and non-treated areas in 2023/24 and the cost of the Hub in year 1, it is estimated that 88 households would need to have been recruited by the Hub between September 2023 and August 2024 to break even¹³.

¹³ This estimate is based on the following calculation: the QED identified the average number of approved households in treated and non-treated areas, and the ratio between these. The monitoring data shows that for the period Sept 2023 – Dec 2024 that there were 62 approved households in treated areas. We therefore take 62 approved households and apply the ratio, which equals 83 households. Adding the 5

Sensitivity analysis tests how changes to key assumptions affect these findings. Table 8 shows that the break-even point is particularly sensitive to the assumed distribution of alternative placements between independent fostering agencies and residential care. If more children would otherwise require residential care rather than IFA placements, fewer approved foster households would be needed to recover the programme's costs.

Table 8: Results from breakeven scenario sensitivity analysis

Assumption	Sensitivity	Recruited foster care households for breakeven
a) Ratio of counterfactual accommodation between IFAs and residential care	60% IFA and 40% Residential care	2 households
b) Ratio of counterfactual accommodation between IFAs and residential care	100% residential care	1 household
c) Retention of foster carers	Foster carers recruited through the Hub provide 9 years of service	4 households
d) Children per foster household	One child per foster household	7 households
e) Out of area care	A 15% saving (wellbeing and developmental benefits not included) is applied to 40% of placements due to reducing out of area accommodation	5 households

additional approved households needed to cover costs of the hub equates to 88 approved households needed to break-even. It should be noted that the costs used for the purposes of the break-even analysis cover the period September 2023 to August 2024 while the ratio between the treated and untreated areas is based on Ofsted data from the period April 2023 to March 2024, and the approved households recruited by the Hub in year 1 are based on monitoring data from September 2023 – December 2024. This finding should be treated with caution given the different reporting periods used. In addition, the difference between the treated and non-treated areas in the QED was not statistically significant, urging further caution.

Therefore, this analysis suggests that the Hub can achieve value for money with a modest impact on foster care recruitment rates relative to the programme ambitions. While first-year impact data showed no measurable difference in approvals, the sensitivity analysis reveals the programme has significant potential for cost-effectiveness, particularly if it reduces reliance on expensive residential placements. The substantial difference between placement costs makes even small shifts in care settings financially significant.

9. Sustainability

In October 2024, we interviewed a representative from 11 of the 12 LAs to discuss the future of the Hub beyond March 2025, when DfE funding ceases. This section outlines some of the future plans and considerations shared by LA staff. These plans have not yet been implemented or evaluated but will be considered in future evaluation activities.

From April 2025 onwards, the Hub will be fully self-funded and will continue to use the population funding model. The population funding model is funding provision based on the percentage of adult population in each LA. Interviews with Hub staff highlighted that the future vision for the Hub involves a more integrated approach, similar to that of the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs), with an emphasis on enhanced collaboration between the Hub and individual LAs. This longer-term strategy potentially includes the Hub taking on the responsibility of conducting assessments and ensuring seamless continuity from enquiry to assessment, with oversight and approval by the LAs.

9.1 Considerations for Sustainability

Emphasis on impact and evidence-based approaches

Most LA staff prioritised the need for the Hub to demonstrate its effectiveness and sustainability through evidence-based approaches when making funding decisions. They suggested an improved dashboard system where detailed data, including the context behind the numbers, was readily available to inform decision-making would be beneficial. For example, some LA staff wanted to understand why enquiries did not convert to applications, where enquirers lived and which LA received the enquiry. LA staff felt that this information would have enabled them to tailor recruitment strategies, address gaps in service provision, and build confidence in the Hub's long-term effectiveness. LA staff also suggested a move away from what they perceived to be surface-level metrics, such as how quickly the Hub responds to enquiries, towards data reflecting actual approvals and the reasons behind placement choices. By focusing on data transparency and tangible outcomes, LA staff aimed to build confidence in the Hub's long-term viability within their foster teams.

Increased scope of Hub services

The shift to self-funding will result in LAs paying a higher amount than the amount they previously paid whilst the Hub was being partially funded by DfE. As a result, the Hub considered ways to increase its scope (such as conducting initial visits), in order to build a more robust business case and LA buy-in. However, this increase in the Hub's scope was not received well by all LAs. Some LAs felt they would have to double fund recruitment and early application activities as they would be paying staff within their fostering teams to continue with recruitment/events, marketing and carry out initial visits, when the Hub would also be carrying out these same activities.

In addition to this there have been concerns raised in relation to whether the Hub has enough staff to carry out initial visits and the impact the Hub carrying out these initial visits would have on early relationships with prospective foster carers. Early findings from the pilot LAs indicate that Hub staff have been able to manage initial visits, but concerns remain about the Hub's ability to conduct visits in all 12 LAs. The future scope of the Hub had not yet been clearly defined at the time data was collected in October 2024 and LA staff found it challenging to justify funding decisions without clarity on future scoping into year 3 and year 4. Some LA staff believe that fostering teams should consider the necessity to restructure their team in response to the Hub handling a larger portion of recruitment tasks and the associated increased costs.

Harmonising fees and offers

Most Hub and LA staff thought standardised fees and allowances across all 12 LAs was crucial for the Hub's continued success. While standardising fees were viewed as beneficial for creating a unified business case and facilitating the Hub's expansion, each LA faces unique budget pressures, demographic needs, and intricate factors such as council tax exemptions, mileage payments, and access to local benefits. Additionally, foster carer skills and qualifications add further complexity to harmonisation efforts. All Hub staff and some LA staff still thought fees should be harmonised in the future.

Hub staff also believed that harmonising various regional offers such as specialist schemes and training is crucial for ensuring effective support and would benefit service provision across all LAs. Achieving harmonisation necessitates in-depth discussions and negotiations, considering the distinct circumstances and challenges of each LA.

“I think it's just there are so many specific intricacies for each LA, for example differences in: council tax exemptions, mileage payments, holiday pay, benefit access to local areas such as leisure centres, cinemas and the National Trust, alongside variations depending on foster carer skills and qualifications. This will not be easy to harmonise. I could imagine across a wide range of Local Authorities who have varying levels of need and demographics within each of those region areas, agreeing on an offer is going to be challenging.” - LA Staff

10. Conclusion and recommendations

This report has provided an overview of the first 16 months of the Foster with North East Hub; a pathfinder initiative aimed at improving foster carer recruitment and support in the North East region. The evaluation, spanning from September 2023 to January 2025, brings to light key findings:

- The early implementation of the Hub was largely successful and involved a collaborative approach between the Hub and LAs. However, challenges such as limited funding, fixed-term contracts, and operational inconsistencies were encountered. The shift to regionalised working was generally well-received by staff, despite ongoing concerns regarding fee standardisation and inter-LA competition.
- The communications campaign, launched in October 2023, was perceived by LA and Hub staff to have successfully increased awareness of fostering and the Hub but faced challenges in balancing enquiry quantity and quality. The Hub has continued to develop the comms campaign, including a stronger focus on diversity. It has taken steps to increase the range of promotional activities led by the Hub alongside the communications campaign, particularly those that encourage enquiries through word of mouth, such as 'refer a friend scheme'.
- There were no statistically significant effects on outcomes measured via the early impact evaluation: number of applications received, new fostering households approved, and new individual foster carers approved. These outcomes show a slight, non-statistically significant decrease. It is important to note that this was an early assessment of outcomes using data which only captured the first 6 months of the Hub's operation. The complex nature of foster carer recruitment processes requires more time to show measurable changes and 6 months represents an insufficient timeframe for meaningful impact, particularly whilst the Hub was resolving early operational challenges. In addition, our counterfactual analysis of these outcomes faces timing limitations, as Ofsted's annual April-March data cycle does not align with the Hub's September 2023 launch. This misalignment means our 'post-intervention' data contains several pre-intervention months, potentially masking true effects. Our feasibility testing of the method indicates that key assumptions are met for future analysis of the impact of the Hub on applications, however further refinements to the approach are required for robust future assessment of the impact of the Hub on approvals outcomes, particularly approved carers
- Core Hub services, including enquiry processing, Skills to Foster training, and a buddy mentoring program, were delivered largely as planned, with some variations in level of awareness of these services among prospective foster carers. The Hub refined its service delivery across time, particularly for the 'Staying in touch'

programme that was not delivered consistently in the early stages but became better embedded in the Hub's second year. The Hub also started conducting screening and initial visits to create further efficiencies. Overall, the services provided by the Hub are perceived to reduce burden and workload on LA staff. Foster carers interviewed have also found the enquiry process to be informative and appreciated the Hub staff's quick response times.

- Based on the difference between treated and non-treated areas and the year 1 cost of the Hub, it is estimated that 88 households would need to have been recruited by the Hub between September 2023 and August 2024 to break-even.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Allow sufficient time for the regionalised approach to embed and show its full effect by continuing to evaluate the Hub. The Hub implemented several changes to its services following internal reviews and preliminary evaluation findings. This indicates that its Theory of Change is still being refined and represents methodological challenges for an impact evaluation. As some activities become better embedded whilst others emerge, it is likely that the Hub model will change. Whilst this is not an issue for outcome measures (e.g., number of foster carers approved), it may be difficult to provide a blue print for other Hubs as the model continues to develop. It is important to recognise that approvals may slow down initially as the system adapts to the new model. The absence of immediate observable outcomes in data, does not preclude their eventual detection. It will likely take several years to be able to measure the full effect of the Hub.
2. Maintain a diverse range of promotional activities with a focus on word of mouth and child centred marketing. LA staff, Hub staff and foster carers interviewed perceived positive child centred messaging to be more engaging than messaging that focuses on foster carers. Hub staff, LA staff and foster carers interviewed also highlighted that whilst increasing the breadth of enquiries, it was important not to compromise on the quality of enquires whilst doing so. It is important that LAs maintain their own activities alongside the communications campaign, particularly those that encourage enquiries through word of mouth, as Hub and LA staff consider these to more often lead to higher quality applications. Furthermore, foster carers believe that marketing campaigns would be more effective if they focused on the positive aspects of fostering as it may resonate with people's motivations to foster. They suggested continuing to use real-life examples and success stories. Additionally, highlighting positive statistics about fostering could be impactful.
3. Progress towards harmonising LA fees and offers. The lack of harmonised fees across LAs poses a significant obstacle to regional collaboration in fostering recruitment. Hub and LA staff believe that the full regionalisation of fostering recruitment cannot be achieved without fees and offers being more aligned.

Standardising fees were viewed as beneficial for creating a unified business case and facilitating the Hub's expansion and further reducing competition between LAs.

4. Enhance the usability and benefits of the dashboard for LAs. Currently, the dashboard functions as a one-way monitoring system and adds administrative burden to fostering teams. Barriers such as different IT systems, ways of working, licences, and heavy workload hinder the timely updating of data. To improve the engagement and effectiveness of the interactive dashboard for fostering teams, the following steps could be considered. These suggestions have been both suggested by LA staff and developed by evaluators:
 - Purpose of the dashboard: Clarify the purpose of the dashboard before making changes to its structure or content. If the dashboard is to be used for monitoring, incorporating key indicators such as speed of response would enhance utility. If the goal is to provide insights on service provision across the region to inform better decision making, it will be essential to deliver live data. This functionality would demand a substantial investment due to the often incompatible nature of existing systems.
 - Integration and data flow: Work towards better integration of data systems to minimise duplication and streamline data entry processes. This could involve collaboration with IT departments to explore technical solutions for system compatibility.
 - Training and support: In addition to the training programme, provide support tailored to the needs of fostering teams to enhance their skills in using Power BI and navigating the dashboard. This could include one-on-one coaching sessions or a BI working group.
 - Feedback mechanism: Once more familiar, fostering teams start using the dashboard to implement a structured feedback mechanism to gather insights from users on their experience with the dashboard. This will help in understanding their needs and making necessary adjustments to the dashboard and keep it updated based on user feedback.
 - Communication Strategy: Create a communication plan that highlights the benefits of the dashboard, success stories, and best practices. This can motivate teams to engage more with the tool.

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Annex

Annex 1: Methodology

Theory of Change data collection

ToC workshop

Prior to the evaluation, DfE had created a ToC in relation to the national picture. For this evaluation, the evaluation team re-examined the model in light of progress and context in the North East. First, we began by understanding the context of the original ToC and its development by DfE. Next, we used existing documentation and conversation with DfE to undertake a 'backwards' revision to the ToC, initially focusing on the agreed outcomes and the regional model in the North East. Then, we held a theory of change workshop to revisit the ToC, with staff from Foster with North East and Local Authorities again using the 'backwards' ToC approach, and focusing on ultimate outcomes, outputs, mechanisms of change, assumptions underlying these mechanisms and new activities that had been put in place to achieve outcomes. Core operational leadership members of the Hub attended the workshop as well as those from other Local Authorities to gain consensus and identify different assumptions.

ToC interviews

Individual interviews were conducted for those unable to attend the workshop. These insights were then used to validate outputs and content from the workshop. We conducted individual interviews with a sample of 3 LA representatives and core hub staff (in both leadership and frontline roles), and the insights were combined with the Hub and LA staff interviews, which also explored some key themes of the ToC (aims, outcomes, and implementation, for example).

The interviews covered the following areas:

- Exploration of participant's perspective of the current five ToC components (rationale, inputs, outputs, short-term outcomes, long-term outcomes).
- Identify potential causal links and mechanisms of change and examine the assumptions that underpin these.
- Uncover contextual/external and internal moderating factors. These are things that can impact (inhibit or support) the mechanisms of change and ToC's functionality.

Analysis

Qualitative data collected for both the process and impact evaluation were analysed thematically. Most of this research produced narrative data, which informed our decision to analyse this data using the 'framework' approach. This involved identification of emerging themes through familiarisation with the data. We then created an analytical framework to map emerging themes with sub-themes, within transcripts for each participant. Group analysis sessions were carried out to agree on overarching themes. Relevant visual data (e.g. communication materials) and observational data was analysed based on what is observable for researchers and how participants described it. Overall, our analysis process has been conducted in a manner that aims to be comprehensive and grounded in the data, alongside giving each participant's views and experiences appropriate weight.

Moreover, available monitoring results have undergone descriptive statistical analysis.

Short-term outcomes

Table A 1: Description and notes on short-term outcomes

Field Name	Description	Notes
Hub_ID	Unique ID for each enquiry	Each enquiry receives a unique identifier. Individual applicants cannot be tracked across multiple enquiries due to data protection constraints
Local Authority Applying to	The Local Authority which the enquirer has indicated they wish to apply to	The Local Authority where the enquirer wishes to apply for foster care approval. This defaults to their home authority based on postcode but can be changed if they prefer a different authority's fostering service.
Initial Contact Type	Selection of 1 of 2 options: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm ready to apply to be a foster carer• I have some questions around fostering and	Enquirers select between two options indicating their readiness level: immediate application or seeking further information about fostering.

Field Name	Description	Notes
	require some more information	
Initial Contact Source	<p>Selection of 1 of 6 options at present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google search • Word of mouth • Online • Social media • Radio advert • Other 	How enquirers first heard about the fostering service, selected from six predefined categories including Google search, word of mouth, and social media.
Referral accepted to Buddy Scheme (Y/N)?	Whether the enquirer has accepted the offer of a "buddy"	Records whether enquirers accepted buddy support from an experienced foster carer who provides guidance through the application process.
Current Status	<p>One of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closed Contact – NFA enquiry • Closure in Progress – Enquiry did not progress to an LA referral and has been flagged for closure but not yet closed • Initial Contact – New enquiry to be responded to • Ongoing Contact – Contact has been made but follow up is needed, or the applicant has not yet completed an EOI • Referred to LA – A completed EOI has been forwarded to the relevant Local Authority team, with no updates received as yet • Initial Visit Completed - The LA has completed an 	The enquirer's position in the fostering recruitment process, from initial contact through to final approval or closure.

Field Name	Description	Notes
	<p>Initial Visit to the prospective household</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage 1 – An application has been accepted by the LA • Stage 2 – The application has reached Stage 2 • Panel Booked – The LA has indicated a Panel Date which is in the future • Panel Outcome – Panel has taken place, and an outcome has been advised (Approved, Rejected or Deferred) • Approved – The date of the ADM approval following approval at Panel • Closed LA Referral – The LA has indicated that the enquiry has been closed, at any stage 	
Initial Contact outcome	Indicates the outcome reached within the Hub, to either closure or referral to LA.	Whether the enquiry progressed to Local Authority referral or was closed at Hub level.
Furthest Status Reached	These stages reflect those in Current Status, with the same conditions, but indicate at what stage the enquirer had reached at point of closure rather than status at report date	The highest stage achieved by enquirers whose applications were subsequently closed.
Age range interested in fostering	<p>Options are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0 - 5 years • 5 - 8 years • 8 - 12 years • Over 12 years 	Age groups of children enquirers are interested in fostering, with multiple selections permitted.
Placement type	<p>Options are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term / time limited 	Types of fostering arrangements enquirers are interested in, such as

Field Name	Description	Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency • Short break (respite) • Long term / permanent • Supported lodging • Caring for children with a disability • UASC (unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) • Parent and child 	short-term, emergency, or respite care. Multiple selections allowed.
Number of children interested in fostering	Options are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 	How many children enquirers are willing to foster simultaneously.
Number of Applicants in household	How many adults are included in the application/enquiry	Whether the application involves one or two adults.
Ethnicity Applicant 1	Matches DfE groupings used in social care and education statutory returns	Ethnic background using standard government categories for social care reporting.
Ethnicity Applicant 2	Matches DfE groupings used in social care and education statutory returns	Ethnic background using standard government categories for social care reporting.
Age Applicant 1	Age band	Age ranges of applicants, grouped to maintain anonymity.
Age Applicant 2	Age band	Age ranges of applicants, grouped to maintain anonymity.
Home address LA	Local Authority of Residence	The Local Authority area where enquirers live, based on their postcode.

Annex 2: Comms campaign

Table A 2: Campaign channels

PPC (Pay Per Click)	Specific activity
Paid Search	Google Ads Search geo targeted to the North East region
Paid Search	Google Ads Performance Max geo targeted to the North East region
Paid Search	Bings Ads geo targeted to the North East region
Paid Social	Facebook geo targeted to the North East region - Feeds
Paid Social	Facebook geo targeted to the North East region - Leads
Paid Social	Instagram geo targeted to the North East region - Feeds
PPC Digital Campaign	Set up, management and reporting
OOH (Out of Home)	Specific activity
Bus Rears	45 x Bus Rears covering the North East region (includes production based on 1 design) for 4 weeks
Digital 6 Sheets	10 x Digital 6 Sheets (Supermarkets) covering 10 areas for 2 weeks
Adshels	26 x Adshels (Bus Shelters) covering the North East region (includes production based on 1 design) for 2 weeks
Audio - Digital Radio	Specific activity
DAX (Global)	1,153,846 audio impressions and geo targeted to the North East region
DAX (Global)	Clickable MPU (Mid Page Unit – a type of clickable advert online)
Digital Audio (Bauer)	1,250,000 audio impressions and geo targeted to the North East region
Digital Audio (Bauer)	200,000 digital impressions, MPU served across all their brands' websites and geo targeted to the North East region

Annex 3: Detailed QED methodology

Overview of the quasi-experimental design

This counterfactual impact evaluation compares fostering outcomes between 12 Local Authorities participating in the Hub and 134 Local Authorities elsewhere in England that are not part of the Hub. By analysing data from both Hub and non-Hub areas over time, we aim to estimate the causal effect of the Hub after 6 months of implementation (September 2023 - March 2024), whilst acknowledging this timeframe may be too brief to detect statistically significant effects.

To understand whether the Hub is making a difference, we need to measure what would have happened in participating areas if the Hub had not existed (the 'counterfactual'). The most rigorous approach would be through a randomised controlled trial (RCT), but randomly assigning local authorities was not feasible due to practical and ethical considerations.

Instead, we employed a quasi-experimental design (QED), specifically a Difference-in-Differences approach. This method attempts to create valid comparison conditions by matching Hub areas with similar non-Hub areas. The Difference-in-Differences technique compares outcomes before and after implementation across both groups, helping us distinguish the Hub's effects from other external factors affecting all areas during the same period.

Dataset and outcomes

Our analysis used Ofsted data covering all mainstream fostering at Local Authority level from April 2019 to March 2024. The dataset compares 12 local authorities in the North East region (the treatment group) with 134 local authorities from the rest of England (the control group).

The North East authorities were the only ones participating in a regional fostering Hub during our analysis period, as other regional Hubs were not launched until April 2024. This timing strengthens our evaluation by ensuring all comparison authorities were genuinely untreated during the study period.

While England has 152 upper-tier Local Authorities in total (12 in the North East plus 140 elsewhere), our final analysis used 134 control authorities because some report their data jointly:

- London Tri-borough (Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster)
- London Bi-borough (Kingston upon Thames, Richmond upon Thames)

- Cornwall (includes Isle of Scilly data)
- Northamptonshire Children's Trust (North and West Northamptonshire)

We also excluded City of London due to lack of available data.

The table below shows key differences between the treatment and control groups. While gender proportions and average age are similar, the North East has smaller populations, fewer approved households, higher deprivation levels (IMD score), and substantially lower ethnic diversity (7.1% Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic population versus 21.9%). Our methodology accounts for these differences by controlling for these characteristics and comparing trends rather than absolute levels.

Table A 3: Descriptive statistics average across years (2019-2024)

Variables	North East Region (Treated LAs)	Rest of England (comparison group of LAs)
Total population	220,584	401,750
IMD Average score	29.0	22.53
% of women	51%	51%
% of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	7%	22%
Average age	48.58	47.0

Data source: Ofsted annual data (2019-2024). Sample: 12 treated Local Authorities in the North East Region, 134 control Local Authorities in the rest of England.

Outcomes Measured

We focused on three key fostering outcomes at Local Authority level:

- Applications received: Total number of applications from prospective fostering households between 1 April and 31 March each year.
- Households approved: Number of households newly approved and still active on 31 March.
- Foster carers approved: Number of individual foster carers newly approved and still active on 31 March.

Finally, a significant limitation of the Ofsted dataset is the lack of precise timing information for individual data points. The data is collected annually from April to March, but records do not include quarterly, monthly, weekly, or daily timestamps. This creates

challenges for impact evaluation when interventions begin mid-cycle, as occurred with the Hub's September launch. Without granular timing data, we were unable to cleanly separate pre-intervention from post-intervention records within the same annual collection period. Some records classified as 'post-intervention' may actually reflect activity that occurred before the Hub began operating, potentially contaminating the analysis. This timing imprecision is an inherent feature of administrative data systems designed for annual reporting rather than evaluation purposes. More granular data collection would not have been feasible within existing administrative frameworks.

However, this limitation primarily affects the first year of analysis. As the Hub operates for longer periods, subsequent annual data cycles will provide cleaner pre- and post-intervention comparisons. First-year findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind, whilst recognising that longer-term analysis will offer more robust evidence of intervention effects.

Methodology

We used an advanced version of the Difference-in-Differences method (DiD) to assess the impact of the Foster with North East Hub. This approach, developed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021), compares changes in fostering outcomes between Hub areas and non-Hub areas over time.

Our approach offers three key advantages over traditional methods:

- It accounts for area-specific factors (like population size and demographics) that could influence fostering outcomes regardless of the Hub's presence.
- It allows for varying effects across different local authorities, acknowledging that the Hub's impact might differ based on local conditions.
- It provides robust statistical tests to verify whether Hub and non-Hub areas were following similar patterns before the intervention—a crucial requirement for this type of analysis.

We implemented this approach using statistical software, controlling for several local authority characteristics including population size, deprivation levels (IMD score), demographic composition, and geographic region.

While we considered other evaluation methods, data constraints influenced our choice. Alternative methods such as synthetic control (Abadie et al., 2011) or interrupted time series (Bernal et al., 2017) require longer pre-intervention data (8-12 time points) than our available dataset (4 years from 2019/20 to 2022/23).

As noted in recent methodological literature (Goodman-Bacon, 2021; Roth et al., 2023), traditional DiD approaches can produce biased estimates when treatment effects vary

across units or over time. Our chosen method addresses these concerns through a more flexible approach that doesn't require all treated areas to experience identical effects from the intervention.

The method calculates the average treatment effect by comparing actual outcomes in Hub areas with estimated outcomes had the Hub not existed. This comparison helps isolate the true impact of the Hub from other external factors affecting all areas during the same period.

Results

Table A.4 presents the Average Treatment Effect on the Treated (ATT) for each outcome measure, showing the estimated impact of the Hub. The ATT represents the difference between what actually happened in Hub areas and what would have happened without the Hub intervention.

While most outcomes show negative coefficients (suggesting decreases), none of the effects are statistically significant at conventional levels (all p-values > 0.05). This suggests that after 6 months of implementation, we cannot detect any significant changes in fostering outcomes that can be attributed to the Hub.

Table A 4: Average treatment effects on the treated (ATT) for all outcomes

Outcome	ATT	SE	z	P value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Interpretation
Applications received	-2.51039	9.120795	-0.28	0.783	-20.3868	15.36604	No significant effect
Households Approved	-1.93522	2.637332	-0.73	0.463	-7.1043	3.233858	No significant effect
Foster Carers Approved	-3.22087	4.321774	-0.75	0.456	-11.6914	5.249647	No significant effect

Test of assumptions

One of the key tests for the validity of DiD is the parallel trend assumption, which means that in the absence of the intervention both groups would have followed a similar trend.

Table A.5 presents the results of parallel trends tests. These tests examine whether Hub and non-Hub areas followed similar patterns before the intervention, which if positive, gives reassurance on the credibility of the parallel trend assumptions. The statistical test is testing the hypothesis that the pre-treatment effects are all equal to 0.¹⁴

The results show evidence that support the assumption of parallel trends for applications received but some evidence of pre-existing differences for households approved ($p=0.0466$) and stronger evidence of differing pre-trends for foster carers approved ($p=0.0102$). These findings suggest we should be particularly cautious in interpreting results for the approvals outcomes.

Table A 5: Pre-intervention t-test (parallel test)

Outcome	chi2(3)	p-value	Interpretation
Applications Received	2.5535	0.4657	Supports the credibility of parallel trends assumption
Households Approved	7.9696	0.0466	Does not support the credibility of parallel trends assumption
Foster Carers Approved	11.2989	0.0102	Does not support the credibility of parallel trends assumption

Event study analysis

Table A.6 displays the event study analysis, which examines how effects evolved both before (Pre_avg) and after (Post_avg) the Hub's implementation. The table also shows specific time-period effects, from three periods before treatment (Tm3) to the treatment period itself (Tp0). This analysis helps us understand the dynamic effects of the Hub and verify the timing of any impacts. The results generally show fluctuating patterns before and after implementation, with no clear consistent direction of effect across outcomes, supporting the overall finding of no significant impact in the first year.

¹⁴ The statistical test examines whether pre-treatment effects differ from 0. A p-value above 0.05 means we fail to reject the null hypothesis of parallel trends. This does not prove the assumption holds, but rather that we lack evidence to conclude it is violated.

Table A 6: Event study analysis

Outcome	Pre_avg	Post_avg	Tm3	Tm2	Tm1	Tp0
Applications received	1.728329	-2.1595	5.322398	-2.19449	2.057079	-2.1595
Households Approved	3.232145	-3.22087	9.311305	-3.8541	4.239234	-3.22087
Foster Carers Approved	0.254585	0.482151	-5.44113	9.908774	-3.70389	0.482151

Dynamic treatment effect analysis

Table A.7 presents the detailed coefficients from the main Callaway and Sant'Anna Difference-in-Differences analysis for each time period comparison (t_1_2 through t_4_5) across all outcomes. Each coefficient represents the estimated effect for a specific time period relative to the previous period, with associated standard errors and confidence intervals. While some individual period comparisons show statistically significant effects (e.g. foster carers approved t_1_2, $p=0.026$), the overall pattern suggests mostly temporary fluctuations rather than sustained impacts of the Hub intervention.

Table A 7: Time-varying treatment effects by outcome and period

Outcome	Parameter	Coefficient	Std. err.	z	P> z	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Applications received	t_1_2	-5.27241	5.700487	-0.92	0.355	-16.4452	5.900344
Applications received	t_2_3	15.94781	12.7165	1.25	0.21	-8.97608	40.87169
Applications received	t_3_4	4.628588	4.713494	0.98	0.326	-4.60969	13.86687
Applications received	t_4_5	-2.51039	9.120795	-0.28	0.783	-20.3868	15.36604
Households Approved	t_1_2	4.969226	2.568354	1.93	0.053	-0.06466	10.00311
Households Approved	t_2_3	-2.15263	3.860028	-0.56	0.577	-9.71815	5.412882
Households Approved	t_3_4	2.778727	2.213959	1.26	0.209	-1.56055	7.118008
Households Approved	t_4_5	-1.93522	2.637332	-0.73	0.463	-7.1043	3.233858
Foster Carers Approved	t_1_2	9.311305	4.189991	2.22	0.026	1.099074	17.52354
Foster Carers Approved	t_2_3	-3.8541	6.320464	-0.61	0.542	-16.242	8.533778
Foster Carers Approved	t_3_4	4.239234	3.949895	1.07	0.283	-3.50242	11.98089
Foster Carers Approved	t_4_5	-3.22087	4.321774	-0.75	0.456	-11.6914	5.249647

Robustness check

Use of different matching strategies

The same DR-DiD estimations have been tested using other estimators for the matching approach, and results do not differ compared to the results shown above based on the default inverse probability weighting.

Annex 4: Enquiries, Applications and Approvals by Local Authority (September 2023 - December 2024)

Table A 8: Number of enquiries by Local Authority

Local Authority	Number of enquiries - Sept 23 - Dec 24
LA I	52
LA H	55
LA E	56
LA L	60
LA C	63
LA F	80
LA D	84
LA G	84
LA A	86
LA B	88
LA J	89
LA K	193
Out of area	51
Overall Hub	1,041

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Table A 9: Number of applications received by Local Authority

Local Authority	Number of applications received - Sept 23 - Dec 24
LA E	9
LA K	23
LA F	10
LA L	8
LA G	5
LA A	16
LA H	5
LA B	11
LA I	13
LA C	8

Local Authority	Number of applications received - Sept 23 - Dec 24
LA J	11
LA D	10
Overall Hub	129

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.

Table A 10: Number of approved applications by Local Authority

Local Authority	Number of approved applications - Sept 23 - Dec 24
LA E	8
LA K	10
LA F	2
LA L	2
LA G	9
LA A	3
LA H	3
LA B	6
LA I	5
LA C	5
LA J	5
LA D	4
Overall Hub	62

Data source: Hub monitoring data up to December 2024.



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