



Friendship for Looked After Children

Survey Monkey Questionnaire Report

Background / Survey Aims

The Children's Society has been funded by Children in Need to investigate the opportunities young people in care have to make and maintain friendships with their peers. Through extensive consultations with supervising social workers, foster carers and young people in care across the country, barriers to friendship and innovative practice has been highlighted. In partnership with BAAF, The Children's Society conducted an online survey with all BAAF members from Local Authority and Independent Foster Care providers in the UK. The aim was to explore current practice around supporting young people to make friends and stay in touch with friends when they move placement. The survey also asked about current training offered to foster carers and potential gaps in the training currently provided.

Methodology

155 respondents took part in the survey. Not everyone completed the survey or commented in every section. Out of the 106 respondents eligible to complete the survey, 75% worked for a Local Authority and 25% for an Independent Foster Care Provider. The survey was open for just under 6 weeks from 19th January 2015 until the 26th February 2015.

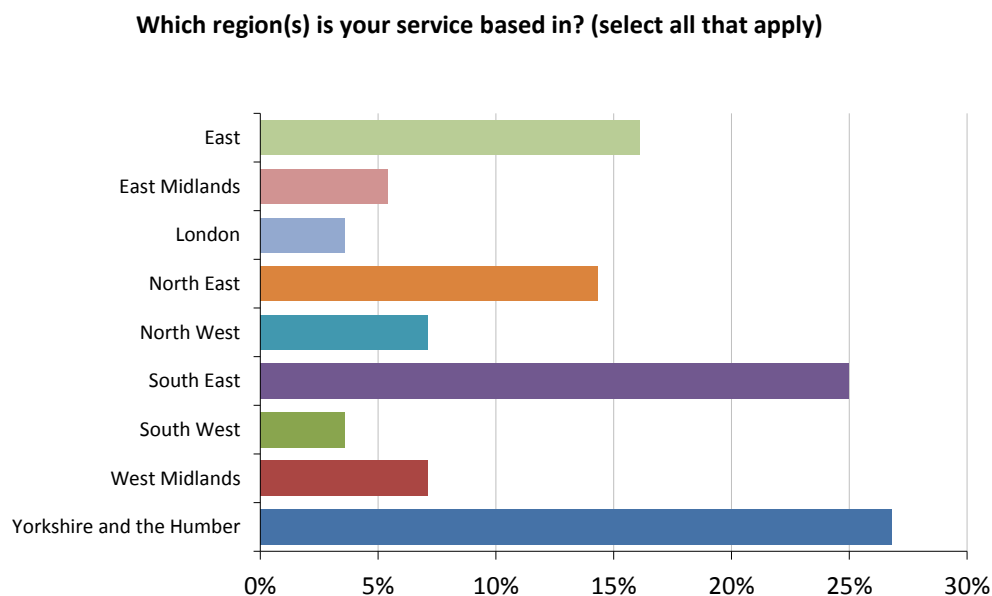
Demographics of the Respondents

Out of the respondents most were social workers supporting foster carers (36), and roughly similar numbers were social workers supporting looked after young people (24) Service Managers (23) and 'Other' (21). The list of 'Other'

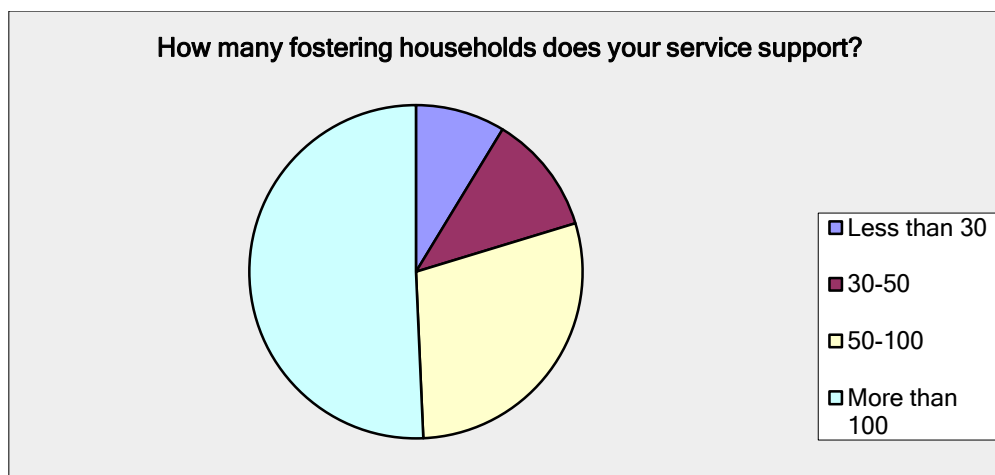
professionals includes nine Foster Carers, two education workers, a Practice Manager, Head of safeguarding, Reviewing Officers and Support Workers.

Out of 77 respondents the vast majority were from England with eight being from Scotland, five from Wales and one from Northern Ireland.

The following chart shows a breakdown of which regions within England the respondents were from. Most of the responses came from Yorkshire and the Humber and the South East but there was a widespread response from the different regions within England.



Half of the respondents work for a service that offers support to more than 100 fostering households and 30% to 50 – 100 households. Therefore the views given are informed in the context of working with a significant number of fostering households.



In addition to the number of fostering households supported, the majority of respondents, 51%, also have more than 100 children placed within their service.

How Services Support Friendships

When asked the question *'Do you believe that your service supports young people to maintain existing friendships and/or make new friendships?'* 51 out of the 69 respondents answered 'yes' and 18 'no'. It is hard to ascertain from this whether they are referring to the maintenance of existing friendships or the making of new friendships or indeed both. (In any future surveys it would be useful to make a distinction between these options).

In recent interviews conducted by The Children's Society it has been reported by Children's rights managers that young people are often helped to make new friends but are less likely to be supported to maintain contact with old friends.

37 respondents answered the question *'How does your service support young people to maintain existing friendships or make new friendships?'* This was an open ended question and the responses have been grouped into salient themes as shown in the table below. A significant number of respondents talked about 'encouraging' foster carers to ensure opportunities are there for young people in their care. Only one respondent mentioned that this is formally included in the foster carers' supervision. It is difficult to gauge how consistently across each organisation this encouragement is given. Eight

respondents gave reference to an activity or group run by the Local Authority or Foster Care provider specifically for young people who are looked after. One respondent gave a very detailed example that actually referred to keeping in touch with old friends:

‘Children are encouraged to keep in touch with friends from previous schools, pop in visits arranged whilst on route to family contact if they live far away. Carers buy card for friends birthday to send either locally or further afield’

Some respondents reported a specific aim to always place young people close to an existing school to maintain links. During interviews, two Local Authorities stated that they implement a policy of keeping young people in the same school wherever this is possible and safe, in order to minimise disruption and allow for continuity of friendships.

Four different respondents also mentioned that they have a budget available to support young people in seeing their friends that can be spent on activities or transport.

How does your service support young people to maintain existing friendships or make new friendships?

Encouraging Foster carers to ensure friendships opportunities are there, offering sleepovers, invites for tea, taking to clubs etc.	15
Activity or support groups for LAC offered by the LA	8
Discussed as part of LAC review function	3
Always aim to place young people near to existing school to maintain links	3
Extra funding is made available for Activities and transport	4
Support carers with decision making about delegated authority	2
Pop in visits to see friends whilst on contact visits to see family members	1
Friendship is discussed at every PEP meeting	1
Support Foster Carer with training on attachment	1
Support carers with decision making about delegated authority	2
Friendship is covered in Foster Carer Supervision meetings	1
Specific policy about sleepovers, skype, Facebook and emails	1
Work within schools to raise awareness of staff	1

Barriers to Supporting Friendships

Out of the 18 respondents who said that they did not feel that their service supports young people in maintaining or making friendships, 16 of them reported the barriers that they felt prevented this from happening. The

barriers have been themed and put into the table below. The most common barrier was that friendship is not seen as a priority by the Local Authority or Agency

“There is no drive to maintain friendships or facilitate new ones, it’s not high on the agenda of the agency”

“Not explicit enough emphasis placed on friendship within reviews, other planning forums or placement planning meetings”

“The duty fostering team do not seem to take this into consideration.”

It would appear that different competing demands and considerations of risk coupled with the young people themselves finding it difficult to maintain relationships means that friendships can be difficult to achieve or maintain. *You did not feel that your service supports young people in maintaining or making friendships. What barriers do you face in doing this?*

Not seen as a priority by LA or Agency	6
Children being placed out of County	4
Lack of permanent placements	2
Concern about the risks involved	1
Carers not equipped to deal with attachment disorders	1
Young people struggle to maintain relationships	1
Sometimes house rules put up barriers	1
Lack of connection between Social Work Team and Fostering Teams	1
Not listening to Foster Carers, only Social Workers	1
Competing demands placed on Foster Carers	1
Inflexibility to stay after school due to using taxi services	1

What more could be done?

When asked ‘*What more, if anything, could your service do to support looked after young people to maintain existing friendships and/or make new friendships?*’ 44 respondents offered a range of interesting ideas which are listed in the table below. The most repeated suggestion was the idea of supervision being used as a vehicle to encourage and support foster carers in this area. Five respondents wanted this to be an ‘expectation’ of carers and not just something they might want to consider. Including friendship in training was also a suggestion made by more than one respondent.

Through supervision/encouragement of carers	7
Make it an expectation of carers	5
Friendship could be considered at initial placement planning meeting	4
Include in carer training	4
Therapy/Support for children	3
Discussion in LAC reviews	3
Consult more with young people	2
More groups for young people who are isolated	2
Organise events that focus on friendship	1
Link up foster carers so they can arrange for young people to meet other LAC	1
Set up a system where older LAC can mentor younger LAC	1
Employ a dedicated worker to run groups	1
Place children locally where possible	1
Promotion of friendship as a matching consideration when placing children	1
Better use of delegated authority	1
Develop links with outside agencies to make activities more affordable	1
Having a larger resource of support workers to provide more intensive support to young people	1
Financial assistance where needed	1
Could set up a web-forum for young people to communicate with each other	1
Ask schools to have a buddy system befriending any incoming young people	1

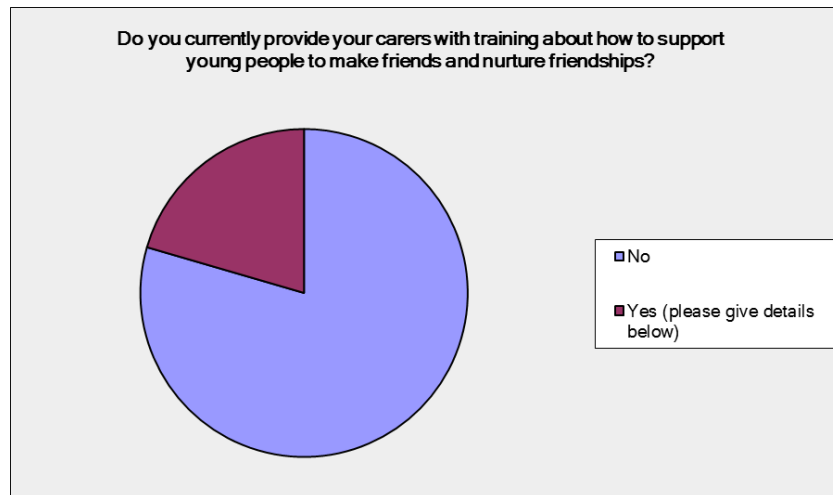
All of the ideas relate to putting friendship higher up on the agenda than it currently is, either by supporting foster carers, schools or the young people themselves. One answer gave a different insight into why it is important to support young people through the support offered to foster carers;

“Often carers say the child has never asked about friendships or they’re ‘not bothered’ about seeing them. Perhaps we need to get better at explaining to carers that may be their way of coping with loss and so we need to be more proactive in maintaining friendships.”

A number of respondents placed emphasis on the importance of considering friendship at the placement planning stage, one reason given for this was *“to ensure that carers are able to promote the friendships of all the children (in) their care”*.

Training on Supporting Friendships

The question ‘Do you currently provide your carers with training about how to support young people to make friends and nurture friendships?’ elicited a clear indication that **80% of respondents do not currently provide specific training about how to support children’s friendships**



Of the 9 respondents who indicated that they do provide carers with training reported that they provide training in: Social Pedagogy, Speakeasy, Attachment, Child Development and Safer Caring.

48 respondents gave feedback indicating their preferred categories of training/information. They were able to select more than one area and the results were as indicated below:

If you were to receive additional training or resources for your carers, to better support children’s friendships. Which of the following areas might you like to receive training or information on?	Response Percent
Friendship for young people with attachment difficulties	92%
Friendship for disabled young people	52%
Supporting carers to proactively help young people to maintain friendships	85%

Friendships and life story work	73%
Friendship support for care leavers	71%

Further comments suggested that friendship could become a course in its own right and that friendships during adolescence would be a useful area of focus as well as Social Pedagogy.

Friendship Prompts in Forms

When asked 'Do you currently include friendship prompts in your placement planning and monitoring forms?' there were 50 responses and the results were as follows:

Answer Options	Response Percent
Yes	30%
No	40%
No, but we are planning to in future	4%
Don't know	26%

Four respondents said they would be willing to share their placement planning forms to include in practice guidance. 13 said that they would be prepared to review their placement planning and monitoring forms to include specific references to friendship but the majority of respondents said that it wouldn't fall within their remit but they would be prepared to propose it to a relevant colleague.

Of the 42 respondents to the question asking whether or not they would be willing to try out additional foster carer training and/or resources as part of a pilot, 85% indicated that they would be prepared to do this. 7 people said that they couldn't make this decision but would refer it to a colleague and 3 indicated that cost or additional worker time could be a barrier to trying out new training.

Final Thoughts

The final question in the survey asked for any additional comments. Here are a few of the pertinent quotes;

"When a young person is placed into an agency foster placement they are no longer able to attend our activity programmes which mean they miss out on spending time with already established friendship groups."

"Sometimes the friendships themselves are the problem, particularly with young offenders."

"If we don't address friendship opportunities for looked after young people/children then we are adding to their social exclusion and failing in our duty as corporate parent."

"Most young people make the 'wrong sort of friends', this issue is often talked about at professional meetings but no solutions tend to be found".

"Thanks for helping us think about friendship, minor changes to our forms will be a good prompt to ensure friendship needs are addressed and ensure consistency throughout the service."