Recruitment and retention of foster carers

This learning activity supports:

- Topic 10: Multidisciplinary working
- Topic 14: Placement stability and permanence

This exercise has been adapted from the Fostering Now Fostering Service Development Exercises[i].

Introduction

It is important to consider why more people are not attracted to fostering. Carers themselves put forward the following reasons: a lack of awareness of the need for fostering; a fear of not measuring up to agency expectations; a lack of confidence in their ability to parent someone else's child; the poor image of foster children; distrust of social workers and of their ability to tell the truth about fostering or deliver promised services. These findings…may also have implications for the way the message is conveyed – for example through the use of experienced carers who may be trusted or foster children who can help dispel stereotypes. There is evidence that support for foster carers is most effective if it is tailored to their particular family situation; combines regular social work visits with relevant training, contact with other carers in training or groups, and adequate remuneration; pays attention to the particular issues raised by carers such as the need for a good after hours service; is responsive to 'events'; and makes carers feel they are part of a team.

Fostering Now: Messages from Research(Sinclair, I,2005)   pp102-103, p114

Methods

Suitable for a group review and planning session with service managers, social workers and foster carers and where possible elected members (as policy makers).

Learning Outcome

- To identify the strengths of the local service.
- To identify the areas for development.
- To plan how to achieve improvement.

Time Required

90 minutes including:
- 15 minutes brainstorm of drivers and barriers,
- 30 minutes group activity to review current recruitment and retention activities,

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- 15 minutes group feedback,
- 30 minutes group action planning.

Process

Part 1: preparing the context (15 minutes)

Ask the group to 'brain storm' the external and internal drivers and barriers for the fostering service in their organisation and record the ideas on a flip chart.

Part 2: implications for recruitment and retention (30 minutes)

Divide participants into smaller mixed groups of 4-6 people. Give one group (or two groups, depending on the overall numbers taking part) a list of the questions relating to recruitment (handout 1); and give the other group (or groups) a list of the questions relating to retention (handout 2).

Ask each group to discuss the questions and answer them with 'yes', 'no', 'not sure' or a 'comment'. Nominate a chair for each group and a scribe to record the group's answers and to feed back their ideas to the whole group (Part 3).

Part 3: feedback (15 minutes)

Ask the scribes from the smaller groups to feed back their answers to the recruitment and retention questions and to highlight any specific issues they identified. During feedback, draw up a list on separate flipchart sheets of:

- the identified strengths,
- the identified challenges.

Part 4: action planning (30 minutes)

Still working with the whole group, lead a discussion to:

- focus on each identified strength (from Part 3) and identify how participants will continue to develop these areas;
- focus on each identified challenge (from Part 3) and identify the solutions and targets that are required to achieve good outcomes for children;
- prioritise targets – immediate, medium term and long term – with a named person to take responsibility in each area, a timescale for action, and a review date (use template provided if helpful)

Exercise

Handout 1: recruitment

Question	Yes	No	Comment
Is recruitment a matter of 'ad hoc' campaigns or is there an overall policy?			
Does the recruitment policy take account of the different kinds of foster care on offer and the different motives of those who might wish to undertake it (e.g. the differences between those who want to foster adolescents or young children)?			
In light of the above, is the recruitment policy targeted? Or does it promote an 'undifferentiated' picture of foster care?			
Does it use local or research knowledge of likely sources of recruitment (e.g. the friends or relatives of carers and places of worship)?			
Does it use the local media – for example, by seeking to promote 'good news' stories about fostering?			
Are experienced foster carers and foster children involved in recruitment campaigns?			
Is there joint action by neighbouring authorities (when this is appropriate)?			

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Question	Yes	No	Comment
Is recruitment policy informed by the experience of projects that have successfully recruited minority ethnic carers?			
Does it ensure that the possibility of relative carers is always considered?			
Is it backed by an efficient response to enquiries that is available all year round?			
Is there any monitoring of the number of enquiries, the proportion of them that become applications or the proportion of these that become registrations? Is this information valuable? Could it be?			
Is there additional good practice that could be routinely introduced at this point?			
Can it honestly deal with issues of finance, further training and career progression without putting off potential carers?			

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Handout 2: retention

Question	Yes	No	Comment
Is support tailored to the carer's view of their family situation (e.g. whether they wish to work)?			
Is the age profile of carers in the authority known? Over a year, what is the balance between recruiting 'active' carers and losing them?			
Are there mechanisms for supporting the children of carers?			
Does the timing of training sessions take account of the realities of carers' lives (e.g. the difficulties in attending for individuals who work, are lone carers, or have young children)?			
How do local authority remuneration rates compare with those nationally recommended, and those of neighbouring authorities and the independent sector?			
Can carers expect regular visits and/or telephone calls from supervising social workers? If so, how regularly?			
How are difficulties between carers and the child's social worker picked up and handled? How satisfactory is this process?			

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Question	Yes	No	Comment
Are carers able to attend carer groups on a regular basis if they wish? Are there other mechanisms for enabling carers to keep in touch if it is difficult for them to attend groups (e.g. because they live far away)?			
What are carers' experiences of using the out-of-hours service? If there are problems, could changes be made (e.g. a dedicated service, use of other foster carers, residential care, supervising social workers on call)?			
Are carers able to use relief breaks? Is this routinely discussed or is it only offered grudgingly in an emergency?			
What are the arrangements for expenses? Do they result in rapid processing (e.g. through direct contact between carers and those responsible for payment)?			
What support is offered to carers over allegations? Do they experience this as satisfactory?			
What support is offered to carers over breakdowns? Are the arrangements designed to deal with hurt feelings on both sides? Will the arrangements minimise the loss of good carers but also help to weed out the small number of less than good ones?			
To what extent do carers genuinely feel that they are valued partners in a shared enterprise? What are the practices that have come to symbolise this for them?			
Do carers feel that they are given all the information they need when a child comes to live with them? How can this be ensured?			
Do carers feel that their interest in the children is acknowledged and valued after the children leave?			

Exercise

Recruitment and retention action plan

Tasks	Targets	Named Person responsible	Target Date	Review

i Research in Practice (2005) Fostering Now: Fostering Service Development Exercises

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