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September 2010

Evaluation of Fosternets in three English Local Authorities
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Executive Summary

Background to the evaluation of Fosternets

Young people in care are one of the most vulnerable, and often disadvantaged, groups in society, and local authorities are committed to improving their lives, and life chances. At a time when the general population is becoming technologically proficient, and as technology becomes increasingly connected to everyday life, contemporary and future foster carers and professionals will need to utilise technologies and increasingly become a technologically familiar and competent audience. Local authorities have an obligation to ensure that their foster carers are appropriately skilled, kept up to date in their fostering role, and provided with the technology to assist them in this.

In March 2009 the Digital Inclusion Team (DIT), a delivery body funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government to implement the ‘Inclusion Through Innovation Report’ (Social Exclusion Unit 2005), commissioned The Centre for Research on the Child and Family in the School of Social Work & Psychology at the University of East Anglia (UEA) to undertake an independent evaluation of the implementation of Fosternets in the fostering team within the Children’s Services Department of a shire county in England. Subsequently the evaluation was extended to a further two local authorities, a London Borough and a city unitary authority, both of whom were further on in their implementation of Fosternets. This provided the research team with additional data and the ability to make comparisons between the manner in which Fosternets had been introduced and maintained within different local authority settings.

Fosternets is an online service run by Redhood IT Services that enables local authorities to use social networking technology with the aim of improving the way they communicate and exchange information with, train and support foster carers. Fosternets also aims to facilitate the development of a community of foster carers – and a wider learning community linking carers and social workers.

The aims of the evaluation

The study was commissioned to evaluate whether the implementation of the Fosternets web based service to foster carers improves services and communication to and between foster carers, and increases their capacity to improve the outcomes for the young people they foster. In particular the evaluation considered how far Fosternets impacted on the way:

- Social workers and foster carers communicated with each other;
- Foster carers booked training courses;
- Files could be transferred securely between foster carers and social workers;
- Foster carers used the site as a social networking facility to communicate with each other, to share ideas and provide mutual support;
- Foster carers could access online knowledge bases around fostering topics;
- Foster carers understood, and used, new computer technologies.
Study design
The research team at UEA comprised academics and researchers from both social work and psychology backgrounds. The study employed a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods:

- Questionnaires to foster carers in the three authorities;
- Questionnaires to social workers and their managers;
- Interviews with key personnel responsible for implementing Fosternets;
- Focus groups discussions with carers and social workers;
- Analysis of data on the usage of the Fosternets sites in the three authorities.

Key findings

- How Fosternets was implemented in the three local authorities
  There were distinct differences in the strategies for implementing Fosternets in the three authorities; for example regarding the provision of computers to the foster carer and/or to the foster child, the staff member responsible for the introduction of Fosternets, the training provided to enable both social workers and foster carers to use the site and the level of back-up administrative support for the initiative. A minority of foster carers did not own a computer and/or could not receive Broadband in their locality.
  The variations between local authorities in the proportion of foster carers accessing and benefitting from Fosternets indicated that the implementation differences may have an impact on how the service is perceived and used. The questionnaire results showed that more people who saw themselves as less confident at using computer technology had never used Fosternets or struggled more when using the service. Both foster carers and social workers tended to appreciate training where provided. Many users did refer to difficulties or irritations they had with the service’s operation. Clearly support needs to be provided to enable all to access the computer technology available to support their role as foster carers if they wish to do so.

- How the Fosternet sites were being used by foster carers
  From their questionnaire responses, foster carers indicated that they were very variable in their use of Fosternets, but 60% of foster carers who had used it were accessing it at least once a week, and just over two thirds (67%) found it useful in some way, especially for accessing up to date training information, news, messages and events. However there were many foster carers who were not accessing the service, were accessing it rarely or said they were gaining little from it, either due to personal preference or other factors.

- Communication between foster carers and social workers
  Communication between foster carers and social workers was not, at this stage, taking place very often via Fosternets – only 6% had used the service in this way, and only
infrequently. Email, text or telephone were considered better forms of communication in part due to the nature and urgency of some conversations about foster children which need to take place. There will always be a need for a range of communication methods. What will be important for the future is ensuring that technology supports flexible, efficient and creative use of computer based methods as part of a range of communication and information accessing methods available to carers and social workers.

- **Booking training courses via Fosternets**
  The ability for foster carers to book training courses via Fosternets had been a key selling point of the service, and the aim was for most or all training courses to be booked in this way. This function of Fosternets was widely used in all three authorities, as evidenced by the analysis of the sites’ usage, and frequency of log-ins to specific pages. However to be effective, information must be consistently updated, suggesting the need for dedicated administrative time and the oversight of a lead officer to ensure this takes place. In addition there is a need for a backup system for people who cannot access Broadband or Fosternets to avoid isolation and alienation of these particular foster carers.

- **Secure file transfer between foster carers and social workers**
  This aspect of Fosternets appears to have the potential to improve levels of communication, time saving and awareness of day to day issues between foster carers and social workers. Currently this facility has been underused, either through lack of awareness or concerns about confidentiality. The use of, for example, electronic signatures could facilitate the exchange of daily records of the child and supervision notes, between foster carers and social workers. If file transfer of this kind using Fosternets were the aim, it would need to be actively promoted, and become an agreed method of communication, with issues of confidentiality, both real and perceived, overcome and both fostering and Looked after Children (LAC) social workers trained and expected to use the site.

- **Fosternets as a social networking provision for foster carers**
  Foster carers suggested that for direct communication with other carers the mobile phone was most commonly used and provided immediate personal contact. They also liked to meet and have face to face contact with each other. It would seem that the creation of an online community of carers is at an embryonic stage. This use of the Fosternets site could be improved by the creation of foster carer champions to encourage contribution from others and the creation of more space on the site for more routine child care issues and smaller and more frequent information updates.

- **A portal for accessing an on-line knowledge base and support materials**
  In their questionnaire responses foster carers indicated that around 40% of them either sometimes, or regularly, searched the internet for topics related to fostering. There is a potential for Fosternets to include, or to link to, an extensive online knowledge base of support materials and local resources of interest to carers. For this to be of benefit, the Fosternets sites require regular updating with information that foster carers find helpful. This should increase their motivation to access the site.

- **Foster carers’ understanding of and use of computer technology**
  It appears that at this early stage Fosternets has not yet led to a significant improvement in foster carers’ understanding or use of computer technology, with only 14% of questionnaire respondents indicating that their computer usage had increased since accessing Fosternets. However, many foster carers and social workers already embraced
computer technology and used it for communication and obtaining information. So for many, the provision of an adapted specialised and accessible resource made good use of the skills, habits and interests already present. For Fosternets to be of benefit, that enthusiasm needs to be harnessed and skills improved by the provision of sufficient training and additional support in using computer technology for a wide range of professional tasks.

- **Factors which facilitated or impeded the implementation of Fosternets**
  Despite their geographical and organisational differences, there were some marked similarities in the factors which impeded or facilitated implementation and ongoing usage of Fosternets in the three authorities.

**Facilitating factors included:**
- Providing computers
- Initial instruction on Fosternets, and Redhood availability subsequently for advice
- Agency support and promotion, including administrative support
- Peer support by and for foster carers
- Carers who are already computer literate
- Increasing general population use of technology, social networking sites etc.

**Impeding factors included:**
- Poor broadband access (or no access in a few instances)
- Insufficient training and ongoing support
- Not a priority for the agency or the social workers, and a perceived lack of social work time
- Lack of clarity about whether LAC social workers should be included
- Resistance by some social workers
- Resistance by some foster carers
- Some aspects of the website layout.
Conclusion

For local authorities deciding whether to continue with Fosternets and develop its potential or to introduce Fosternets, it is necessary to consider:

- What Fosternets can deliver to meet their particular needs most effectively e.g. information and booking training and/or more wide ranging functions;
- Which professionals (foster carers, fostering social workers, Looked After Children (LAC) social workers) would be expected to use the site;
- How training and ongoing support would be delivered;
- Which tasks using Fosternets would be required or optional;
- How Fosternets could be integrated into the daily exchange of information;
- Which member of staff would take responsibility for the site;
- How foster carers could become champions/supporters of other carers;
- How the site could be improved and then kept up to date;
- How those carers who do not have reliable Broadband can have alternative sources of communication.

One key question will be whether a system that is warmly welcomed by some (foster carers and social workers) can be developed in relation to certain tasks (e.g. secure file transfer) for those who wish to use it that way, when not all may be willing or able to take this up.

Although specific costings were not included in the evaluation, the local authority would need to consider not only the cost of the site, but also the cost of providing adequate ongoing administrative support e.g. to update the website, to answer queries, to provide a link to the provider, Redhood. These costs would need to be compared with other strategies, for example, for publicising and booking training or sharing information about Council or Government initiatives or promoting foster carers’ use of technology.

The decision about the value of Fosternets relative to the cost (including the cost of training and administrative support) will depend on which activities and functions are aimed for or achievable. An expectation that the site will be used for informal communications and training information/booking only will be more modest in impact than a site used to share supervision notes or the daily log for the child, but also more modest in cost, since less training/support etc. would be needed.

Although some of the aims of the implementation of Fosternets (particularly the use for communication between foster carers and social workers) were not achieved in the time period of this evaluation, there was considerable interest among some social workers and foster carers in the potential of the system. The awareness of the potential for Fosternets to provide a useful resource to add to and improve services and communication to and between foster carers was evident from many of the comments made. There was also a general recognition that although technology cannot replace personal contact, the fostering service should where possible make use of opportunities to use technology to be more efficient and to improve the service provided to children.
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