



**SHSCT – The voices of foster carers and their families matter 2023**

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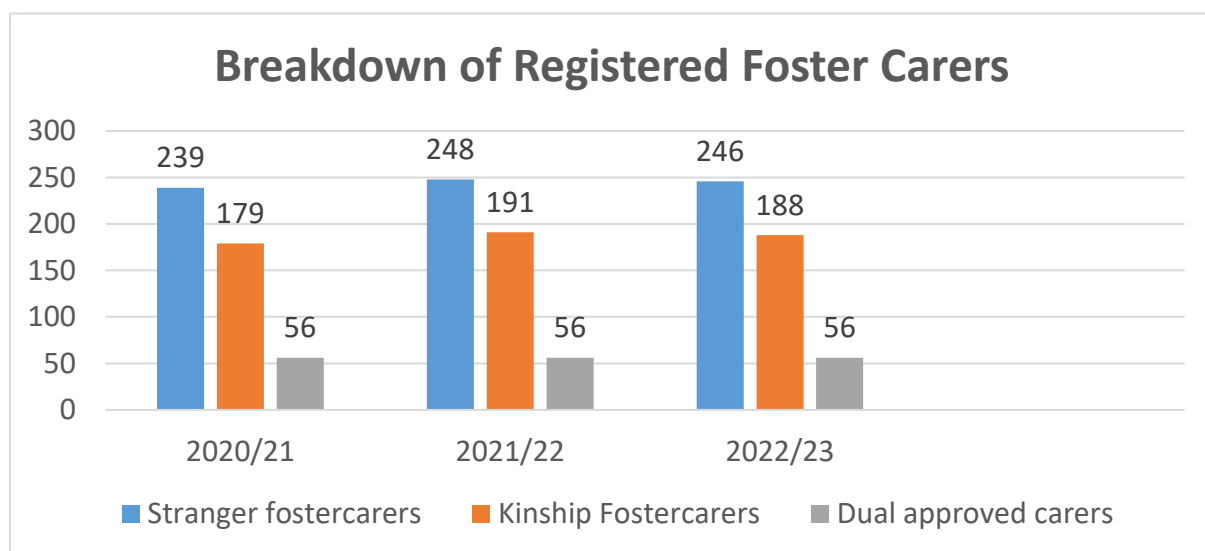
\* **Cover** photo features one of our support social workers from fostering services in SHSCT – Amber Murray

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## Current landscape of fostering in SHSCT and regional context

- As on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were 631 children in care in Southern Trust
- 80-84% of these children are in Foster care
- DSF Figures 2023 indicate there are 489 foster carers in total in SHSCT
- Stranger Foster carers represent 246 of these - 50% of total foster care population
- Kinship Foster carers represent 188 of these -39% of total foster care population
- Dual approved carers represent 55 of these -11% of total foster care population
- Children Placed with Private Agency Carers total 5



**A Life Deserved**<sup>1</sup> - Department of Health and Education NI 2021- the NI strategy for Looked After Children, recognises the increasing numbers of Looked After Children in N. Ireland. This strategy also highlights the progressively complex needs of children needing to be Looked After and the ongoing pressure on Trusts to respond effectively to meet the increasing need for placements.

The strategy aims *“to ensure a permanent, stable home for Looked After Children, as quickly as possible and in a way which best matches their individual needs and is in their best interests”*. (5:39)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/life-deserved-strategy-looked-after-children>

It continues... “ *In addition to adequate numbers of the right people, with the right skills to engage in the care of children ....we also need to properly support care givers...to enable them to keep children and young people safe and offer them stability*”. (5:45)

A subsequent **review of fee paid fostering in Northern Ireland 2023 completed by Liz Stevenson<sup>2</sup>** identifies over the last 5 years, alongside the average de-registrations of foster carers, only the Belfast and Southern Trusts make a net gain of +9 and +14 respectively. The SEHSCT net gain was zero and the Northern and Western Trusts had a -5 and -12 net loss respectively. The regional five-year average approval minus the average de-registrations amounted to +5 net gain. However, the figures for the last year 2021 to 2022 are more positive with a net gain of +52. This clearly evidences a need not only to focus on the recruitment of new foster carers but also a required focus on the retention of already approved foster carers and the acquired skills, knowledge and experience they have developed.

Retention strategies and a positive experience of approved foster carers has a knock on effect for recruitment and it also has always been recognised that ‘word of mouth’ is one of the most powerful recruitment tools that exist. SHSCT have involved foster carers in recruitment, development groups, advertising and have launched a new word of mouth or “Friends of Foster Care” reward scheme.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Services in N. Ireland commenced in 2022 by Professor Ray Jones across all five HSCT Trusts and will review Children's Services with a focus on quality, equity, resilience and sustainability. The review will publish its findings and recommendations later this year 2023 and will have relevance for fostering services and this current piece of work.

## **SHSCT – averages over the last five years**

- The care population in the Southern Trust has risen by 42 children - 8% over the last five years.
- Admissions to care averaged 179 per year, with the lowest admission number of 151 in 2022. The discharges from care averaged 156.
- There were an additional 47 children in foster care over this five-year period – an increase of 11%.
- 80-84% of all Looked After children in SHSCT are in foster care i.e. 476 children

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<sup>2</sup> [Liz Stevenson 2023 Review of fee paid fostering report]

- Placements of children within their own kin averaged 195 per year, ranging from 178 to 209, with 209 placed at 31.3.22—representing 45% of all placements in fostering.
- Placements with non-kin average at 247 per year, and range from 231 to 266- with 263 being the total for the 2021/2022 period – and this accounts for 55% of all Looked After children in foster care.
- Over the last five years SHSCT have recruited an average of 46 new non kin foster carers per year. An average of 32 non kin carers have been deregistered per year leaving them with a net average of +14 new carers per annum
- Placements with Independent Sector Providers average 8 per year, with a range of 3 to 14 – as at 31.3.22 there were four - a decrease of 10 placements over the five years- accounting for 1.5% of all placements with non-kin carers. Therefore foster care need is mostly met within own Trust resourcing and not resourced from independent, private agencies at significant cost.
- The SHSCT made the highest net gain in their recruitment of non kin carers i.e.+14 new non kin carers over the five year period. It is their use of Independent Sector Provider placements, however, that is the most noticeable difference, accounting for less than 2% of all their placements with non-kin carers. This requires significant investment in both the recruitment and retention of Trust foster carers for the system to continue to meet the levels of need and demand.

## Why foster carers care 2013

To explore the psychology behind foster carers' motivation, The Fostering Network partnered with consultancy iMPOWER, to use the psychographic categorisation tool, Values Modes™, in a survey of foster carers to identify any trends in foster carers' intrinsic personalities.

'Why Foster Carers Care'<sup>3</sup> reports the outcome of the research, funded by the Department for Education, including unprecedented findings in the history of the Values Modes™ theory and its application in helping fostering services recruit and retain foster carers.

Findings showed the significant majority of existing foster carers share Pioneer values characterised by an increased concern about the environment, society, world poverty, and so on, Always looking for new questions and answers, strong internal sense of what is right and what is wrong, strong desire for fairness, justice and equality, self-assured and sense of self-agency and positive about change whilst cautiously optimistic about the future. This provides powerful insight and implications for the recruitment and retention of foster carers. **A desire**

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<sup>3</sup> Impower, DOE, Fostering Network 2013, "Why foster carers care – how understanding values can transform relationships and improve services"

**to be consulted, contribute to the wider development of the fostering service, and the additional insight presented above will also empower fostering services to better retain and develop their existing foster carer workforce through post-approval supervision and support.** Ultimately, this finding provides a new lens through which fostering services can better understand foster carers and their feedback, and a framework to help act on this improved understanding.

This survey offers opportunity for values-based targeting in foster care recruitment as well as service development strategies which could inform the retention of foster carers already within the service. Understanding values should influence fostering services' relationships with foster carers. The whole service offer can be better tailored to foster carer need.

Within "Why Foster carers care part two" 2015<sup>4</sup>, support has also been highlighted as a key motivator when considering which agency to foster with. This will clearly have an impact on an individual's willingness to advocate on a fostering service's behalf. Improving communication during the assessment process, ensuring sufficient staffing and **consistently valuing foster carers**, are all basic principles within the support mix, to which foster carers with Pioneer values will respond. Given the SHSCT reliance on both non kin foster carers and on resources developed within Trust and not independent agencies, it is increasingly important that the learning from this is implemented within SHSCT.

## **SHSCT Research questionnaires**

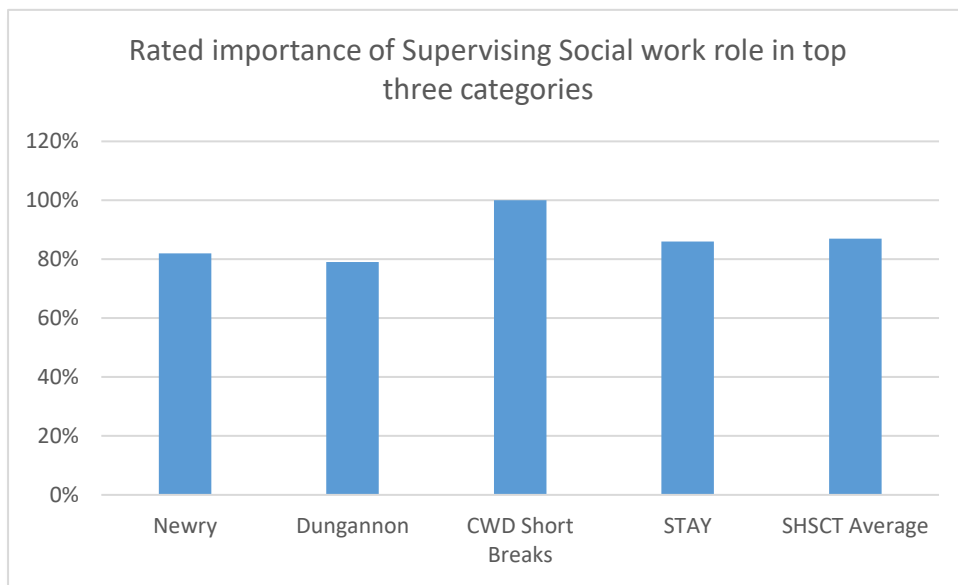
Against the above backdrop and with a desire to engage in co-production and consult with fostering families in the design of post approval, support packages, questionnaires including a blend of quantitative and qualitative questions, which all followed a structured format, were distributed to all foster carers in the SHSCT.

There were 115 households who returned the questionnaire, although there are some still being returned. Any further questionnaires will be considered but are not included in the body of this report. The breakdown of returns is 43 households from general fostering in Newry and Mourne locality area posted a return, 59 households from general fostering in Armagh and Dungannon locality posted a return, 6 households from SHSCT who offer Short breaks to children with a disability and 7 households classed as Stay Hosts. (For information general fostering includes a mix of stranger fostering, kinship care and concurrent care across a range of different types of fostering from short breaks (non disability) respite to long term placements). Although the returns from CWD and STAY are small, this is reflective of a much smaller population and allow us some opportunity to have an inclusion of the views in this area of service development.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/why-foster-carers-care-2015.pdf>

**Question one** asked foster carers to consider and rate the importance they assigned to the relationship with their supervising social worker. This gave the option of five responses ranging from not important to helpful only at times and at the positive end of the scale the foster carer identifying they would struggle without their social worker. Results showed the majority of fostering households (87%) ranked the relationship with their supervising social worker as in the top three bandings – worded as central to their role, very important to me and my family or the foster carers would struggle to foster without them. Within these bandings the results were as follows:



**Newry – 82%, Dungannon 79%, CWD Short Breaks 100%, STAY 86%**

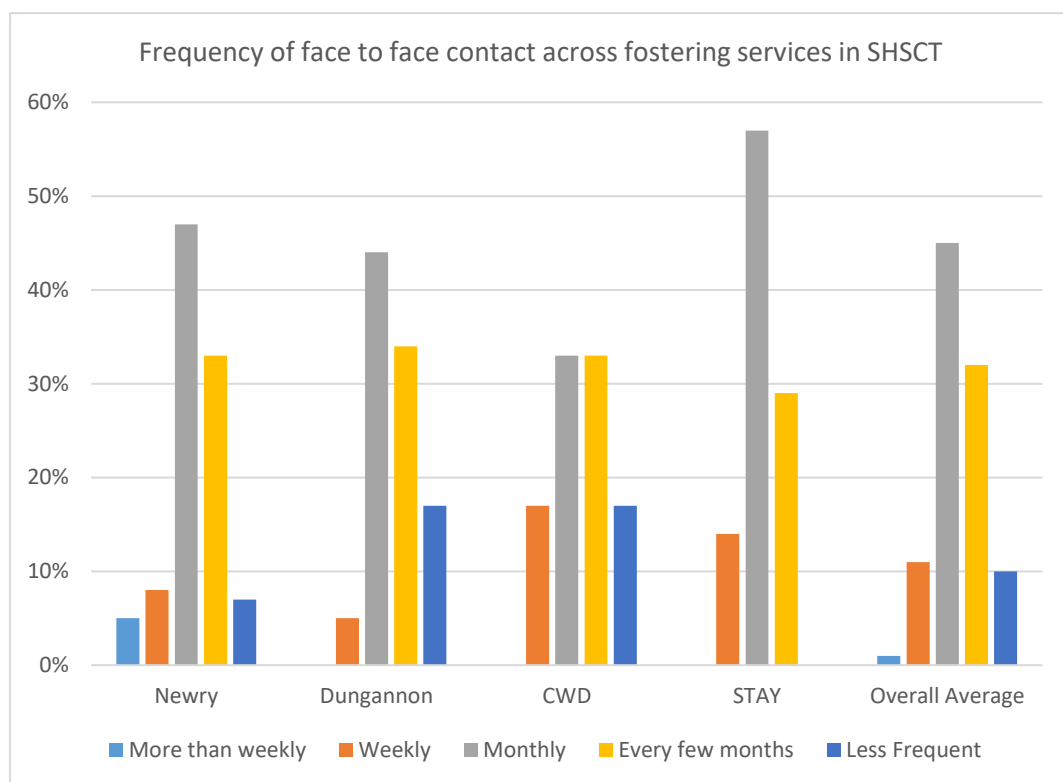
**Overall SHSCT mean average 87%**

Some of the qualitative comments in this area were as follows:

- With regards to social workers *“I find them very knowledgeable and helpful”*
- *“Our social worker \_\_\_ is lovely”*
- *“We have no suggestions for improvements to any part of the service – we are very happy with everything at present”*
- *“In my view, family placement provide the best service within their resources available to them. It is an essential service for foster carers, assisting them in providing safe, secure bases for foster children”.*
- *“The foster carer’s role is extremely difficult and the pressures on social workers are huge at the minute. We have an excellent link worker who I know is at the end of the phone/email when I need support I also know that she has and will advocate for my family and I at professional meetings etc”*
- *“I am extremely grateful for my social worker \_\_\_. I would love for her to be reminded what a fab social worker she is”.*

- *“We have recently had a new link worker assigned and we really notice and appreciate the regular support and feeling like someone “has our back” as carers it can be very lonely and scary”.*
- *“We have an amazing social worker \_\_\_ and are so thankful for her support, being available and knowing she cares and will always be willing to help. We have contact when needed and this works well for all”*

**Question two** asked about the frequency of face-to-face contact with supervising social workers. The results of this were across five domains as listed below:



More than weekly – **Newry 5%, Dungannon 0%, CWD Short Breaks 0%, STAY 0%, Overall average– 1%**

Weekly – **Newry 8%, Dungannon 5%, CWD Short Breaks 17%, STAY 14%, Overall average 11%**

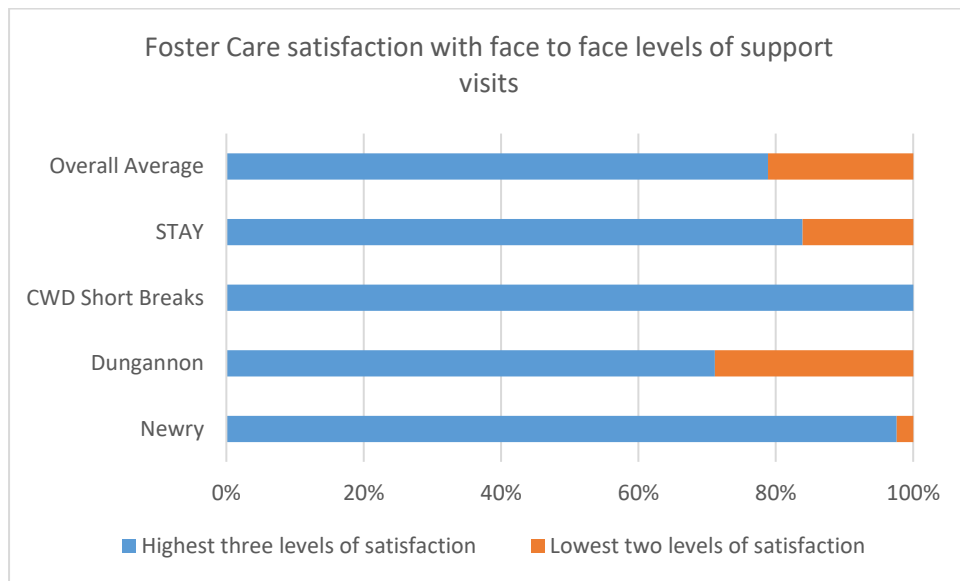
Monthly – **Newry 47%, Dungannon 44%, CWD Short Breaks 33%, STAY 57%, Overall average 45%**

Every few months – **Newry 33%, Dungannon 34%, CWD Short Breaks 33%, STAY 29%, Overall average 32%**

Less frequent – **Newry 7%, Dungannon 17%, CWD Short Breaks 17%, STAY 0%, Overall average 10%**

The figures indicate the most common frequency of contact to be monthly across all services with 17% of families being visited less frequently than every few months in both Dungannon general fostering and CWD Short Breaks. For Dungannon, the outcomes of this are largely influenced by staffing vacancies at present which have required cases without a social worker to be managed by indirect support from duty social work system.

**Question three** asked about satisfaction with these levels of direct contact and the results were as follows:



**Highest three levels of satisfaction** - Newry 81%, Dungannon 69%, CWD Short Breaks 100%, STAY 73%, **Overall average 56%**

**Lowest two levels of satisfaction** - Newry 2%, Dungannon 28%, CWD Short Breaks 0%, STAY 14%, **Overall average 15%**

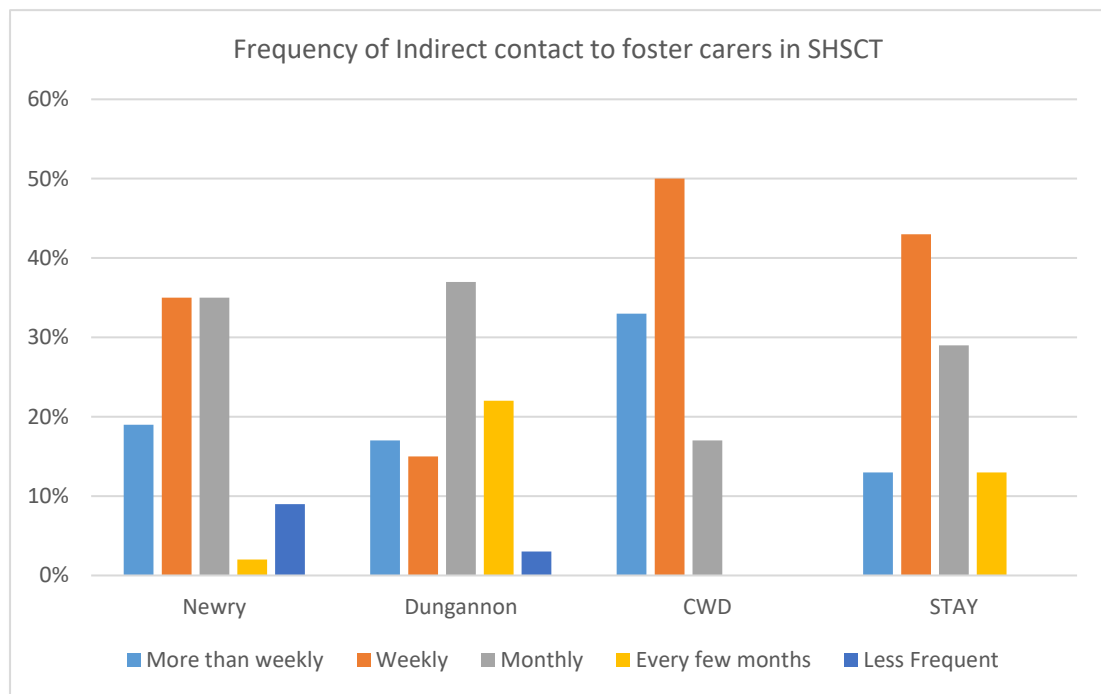
It was difficult to identify trends and extrapolate from these percentages for a number of reasons. On analysing the data from the questionnaires there did not appear to be a pattern between the frequency of face to face contact and the level of satisfaction. Some respondents identified lower levels of contact and were most satisfied whilst others had high frequency contact and were least satisfied. It is reasonable to assume satisfaction levels were influenced by factors other than frequency i.e. type and duration of placement. Settled, long term or kinship placements may not wish for high visiting levels or significant intrusion into family life. However, short-term, emergency care with high turnover or placements experiencing crisis may wish for higher levels of support. This would indicate that levels of social work support need to be agreed on an individual basis, pertinent to the specific type of placement provision, presenting issues at that time and expectations of the foster carers. Contact level agreements

which are reviewed at annual review or commencement of any new placement may be helpful in this regard.

Some respondents took time within their responses to independently highlight the staff absence rates that were currently in the Dungannon team through sick leave and maternity leave had impacted their responses but if their social worker was present they would have scored more favourably.

Furthermore, small sample sizes in both STAY and CWD populations can skew the figures.

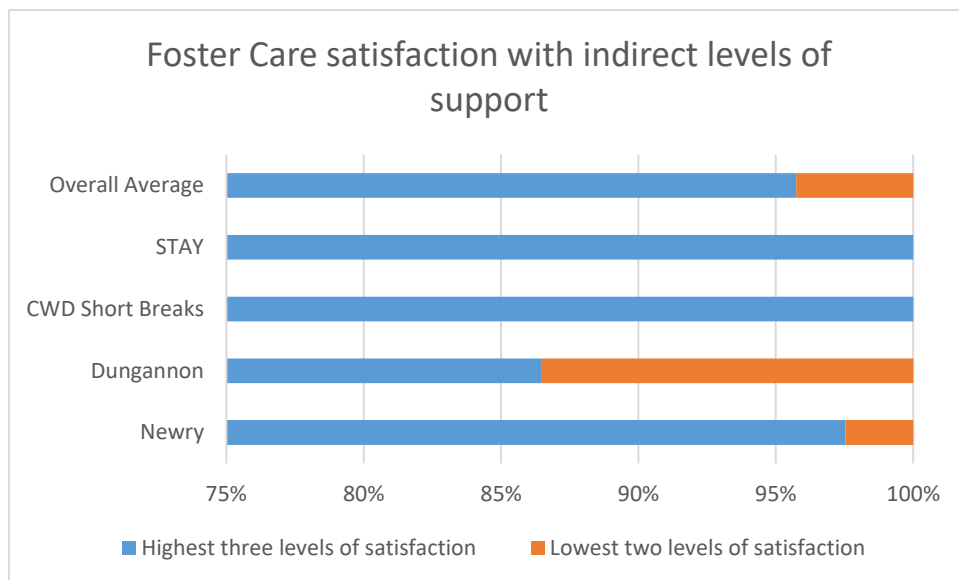
**Question four** asked about levels of indirect contact between supervising social workers and foster carers:



In Newry locality area 70% of respondents indicated they had weekly or monthly indirect contact with their supervising social worker with only 9% indicating it was at a lower level of less than every few months and 19% saying it was more than weekly. In Dungannon 52% of respondents indicated they had weekly or monthly indirect contact with only 3% indicating it was lower level of less than every few months and 17% saying it was more than weekly. Of CWD Short Breaks 67% indicated they had weekly or monthly indirect contact and 33% indicated it was more than weekly, in STAY service 72% of Hosts had indirect contact weekly or monthly with 13% stating it would be more frequent than weekly **Overall average of 65% had indirect contact with their supervising social worker weekly or monthly and 21% on average stating it was more than weekly.** These figures are impacted by high levels of indirect contact within CWD Short Breaks with a frequency of more than weekly. This is likely to be

reflective of the high turnover rates and nature of short breaks in addition to the additional support needs of the children placed.

**Question five** asked about satisfaction levels with these rates of indirect contact and the results were as follows:



**Highest three levels of satisfaction** - Newry 79%, Dungannon 83%, CWD Short Breaks 100%, STAY 100%, **Overall average 90%**

**Lowest two levels of satisfaction** - Newry 2%, Dungannon 13%, CWD Short Breaks 0%, STAY 0%, **Overall average 4%**

It can be clearly noted that respondents were significantly more satisfied with the levels of indirect contact in comparison to direct contact. This may well be reflective of the increasing pressures on our social work systems and the reasonable conclusion that it is less labour and time intensive to telephone and connect with foster carers online and maintain higher frequencies of contact. However, will require us not to lose sight of the importance of face-to-face contact and ensure this is not replaced.

It is important not to overlook the role of the child’s social worker in the working relationship with foster carers so **question six** addressed this specific area. In Newry 79% identified the child’s social work role as important, central or strongly influencing how they subsequently perform their fostering role, this was 78% in Dungannon, 100% in CWD Short breaks and 86% in Stay hosts – a **mean average of 86%**. **Only one respondent out of 115 foster care households felt this role was not important.** Whilst the responses indicate a clear value placed on this role, the research did not identify satisfaction levels within this specific area of practice and it may be an area for further exploration. However, it does present a clear

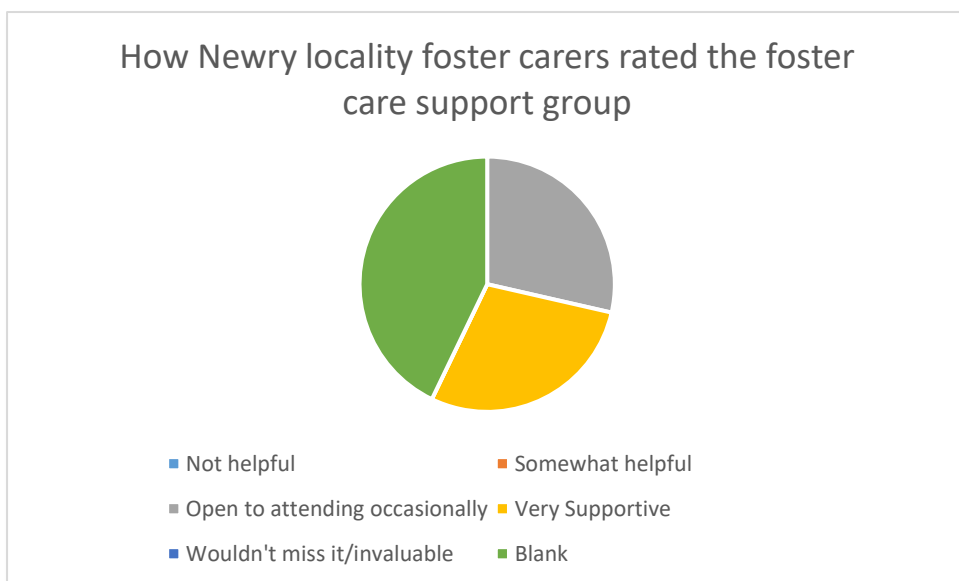
validation of this particular role and it is reasonable to assume from a foster carer's perspective, it makes a significant contribution to the success or otherwise of a foster placement. This will be considered further in recommendations arising from the research.

**Questions 7 – 11** focused on the area of **Foster Care Support groups** as peer opportunities for foster carers to connect with each other in their roles. This had a disappointingly low return in terms of responses and many applicants left the question blank. On reflection one question may have been better phrased but even allowing for this anomaly there were a series of questions which were left blank.

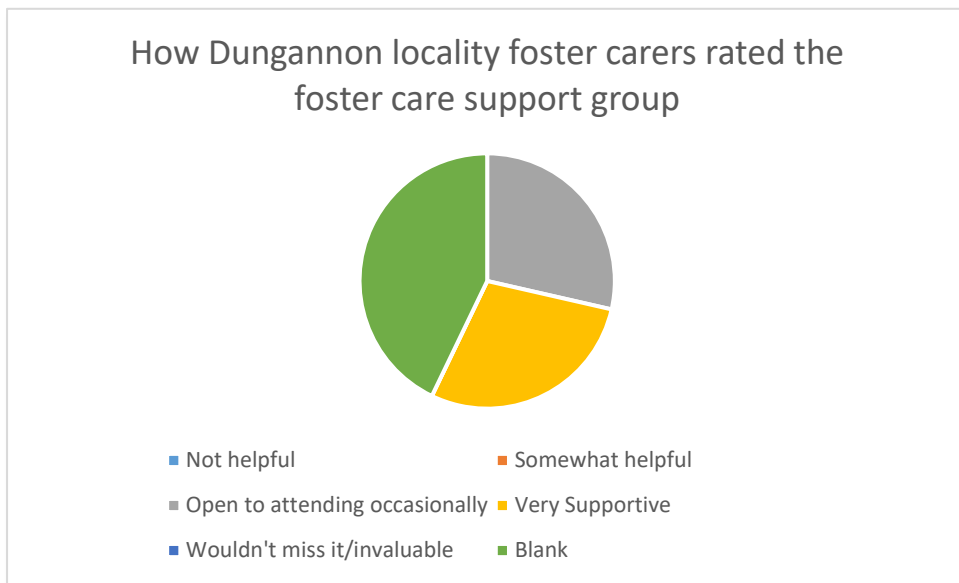
In the absence of any information, one is left to draw conclusions that respondents feel a level of apathy in this area or due to not having attended before they did not feel the area of support groups is relevant to them or something they feel equipped to comment on.

**Interestingly, some people have responded to indicate they did not know of the existence of the Foster Care Support Group so there does need to be more collaborative between group co-ordinators and Trust staff.**

In Newry locality, 46% did not offer any response in terms of the helpfulness of a support group but 30% did indicate they would be open to attending occasionally. Almost 40% of respondents in the Newry area indicated they would want the meetings to take place in the morning and a similar percentage in mornings/during school – offering an almost 50/50 split. It is interesting to note that previously the support group was moved from an evening slot to mornings during school to facilitate attendance and there was no significant change in uptake. 49% felt that meetings should be face to face whereas a further 30% felt a blended approach of online and face to face would be helpful. 33% felt that social work support at meetings would be helpful occasionally whereas 23% would want to see more regular social work attendance.

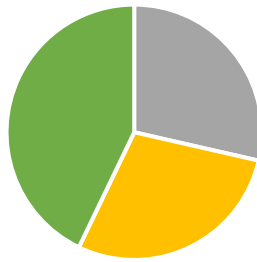


In Dungannon locality, similarly 52% of respondents left blank the rating of the foster care group experience and 27% advised they would be open to occasional attendance. 38% thought evening attendance was more convenient and 41% indicated mornings during school time would be best suited again suggesting an almost even split. 51% felt meetings should remain face to face whereas 29% felt they should be blended. 20% felt social work attendance would be helpful occasionally whereas 33% felt this should be more regular. There was virtually little difference between responses for Newry and Dungannon Foster Care Support Groups despite different personnel and approaches.



Within CWD Short Breaks responses, 50% identified that they experienced the group to be supportive and make time to attend, one respondent felt they wouldn't miss it, one left it blank and one would be open to attending occasionally. Similar comments were added in terms of competing caring responsibilities and 'finding time'.

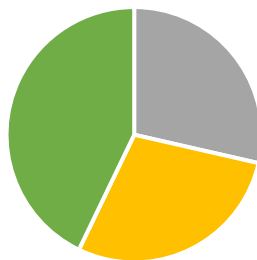
### How CWD short breaks rated the foster care support group



- Not helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Open to attending occasionally
- Very Supportive
- Wouldn't miss it/invaluable
- Blank

For STAY providers we are drawing figures down from small numbers but 43% of hosts wouldn't miss a support group, 57% felt it should take a blended approach and 43% felt occasional social work support would be helpful.

### How STAY hosts rated the foster care support group



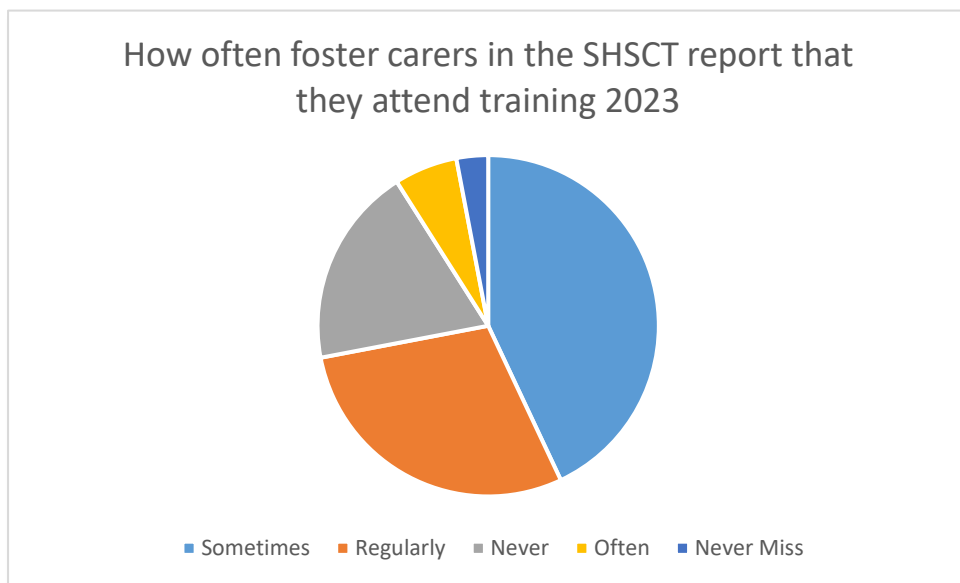
- Not helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Open to attending occasionally
- Very Supportive
- Wouldn't miss it/invaluable
- Blank

Interestingly, it was helpful to consider these figures separately within different areas of practice, as later feedback generated from the questionnaires indicates that foster carers may find small support hubs and informal coffee and chat opportunities more useful. There is a significant difference in the application of this question as the cohort of attendees to Short Breaks and STAY support groups would inevitably be small and offer an entirely different

experience. This may be more akin to small coffee gatherings or small hubs whereas the larger support groups may be more formal. It may also be for staff/support co-ordinators to consider if the use of language e.g. “support group” conveys different messages to people and lead to assumptions from the group titles.

- One respondent did comment ***“Support groups could be improved by altering the venue and having topic nights – going on holiday with a LAC child, transitioning to long term care, preparing for emergency care, managing Christmas holidays”***

**Questions 15-18** asked respondents about their experience of training as part of a wider support package. Of the 115 responses received back (7 from STAY providers, 43 from Newry Family Placement Team aligned foster carers and 58 from Dungannon Family Placement aligned foster carers) and indicated how frequently they attend courses offered within the Trust’s ongoing Learning and Development Programme (currently publicised to all carers twice per year).



43% of respondents indicated that they attend training *SOMETIMES*

29% of respondents indicated that they attend training *REGULARLY*

19% of respondents indicated that they attend training *NEVER*

6% of respondents indicated that they attend training *OFTEN* and finally

3% of respondents indicated that they *NEVER MISS* training.

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferences in respect of method or format of training delivery, acknowledging how the Trust had, since the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020, increasingly used *online or remote* methods of training (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams). With the easing of pandemic restrictions the Trust had then reverted to using a combination of both online/remote training methods in addition to *face to face* training within real venues.

47% of respondents indicated a preference that the Trust continue to provide opportunities to participate in training delivered across a combination of formats (i.e. comprising *both online/remote alongside face-to-face venue based training*).

42% of respondents indicated that they preferred *face-to-face* training only.

11% of respondents indicated that they preferred *online/remote* training only.

Carers were also given the opportunity to provide general feedback or to reference individual courses provided within their Learning and Development Programme which they considered to have been particularly useful and beneficial to their role. It was very positive to note that several respondents wished to provide very general comment, indicating that they considered the entire training programme to be varied, relevant and worthwhile – indicating high levels of satisfaction with all of the courses they had completed. Several carers also commented in a very positive manner in respect of the initial or mandatory type training courses they had encountered at the outset of their fostering careers (these being either Core Issues in General Fostering or Kinship Core Issues, depending on registration status). Positive reference was also made to the Recognising Men’s Role in Fostering Course.

Respondents cited 130 instances of a variety of courses being particularly useful.

Significantly, 33% of these were in respect of courses where content suggested an exploration of theoretical subject matter centred on *attachment, loss, trauma and therapeutic approaches to parenting*. These courses included: Trauma Informed Care (formerly referred to as the Scaffold Sessions), Adverse Childhood Experiences, The ARC Model of Care, The 4 Rs, Building Attachment through Play, Nurturing Attachments, Building Resilience in Children and Young People, Brain Development.

9.2% were in respect of Basic First Aid.

6.1% were in respect of Self Care or Mindfulness Programmes.

4% were in respect of Parenting Teens/Adolescent Development/Walking on Eggshells

3.8% were in respect of Safeguarding Workshop (Children and Vulnerable Adults)

3% were in respect of the FASD Awareness Workshop

3% were in respect of Internet / Digital Safety (Including the Fostering in a Digital World App)

3% were in respect of Special Educational Needs Workshop and other Education related workshops.

3% were in respect of Child Safety Within The Home

2.3% were in respect of ADHD Awareness Workshops

2.3% were in respect of Autism Awareness Workshops

2.3% were in respect of Child Sexual Exploitation Awareness / Child Protection Awareness Workshops

2.3% were in respect of Self Harm Awareness/Adolescent Mental Health Workshops

1.5% were in respect of The Fostering Network Workshops on Tax, Insurance and HMRC matters for Foster Carers

1% were in respect of Substance Misuse Workshops.

Within CWD Short Breaks the specific type of training required is notably different and so these results are recorded separately and entirely appropriately given their own space. There were six returns within this service area and the results are as follows:

60% respondents indicated they attend training provision regularly – 15% indicate they attend training sometimes and 15% indicated they would never miss. Again the request for training formats indicated a 50/50 split between blended and online approaches, demonstrating a move away from traditional delivery towards a more flexible approach.

Much of the training identified as helpful was understandably relating to specific conditions and the type of care provided – epilepsy management, first aid, manual handling, specific feeding, autism etc but also Short Breaks carers found it helpful to be included in training on trauma informed care and specifically the 4 R's. This was identified as helpful by a high proportion of general foster carers.

Areas identified for further training were further first aid, Makaton, play therapy, sleep training and also a suggestion for the provision of links to resources and platforms for independent learning.

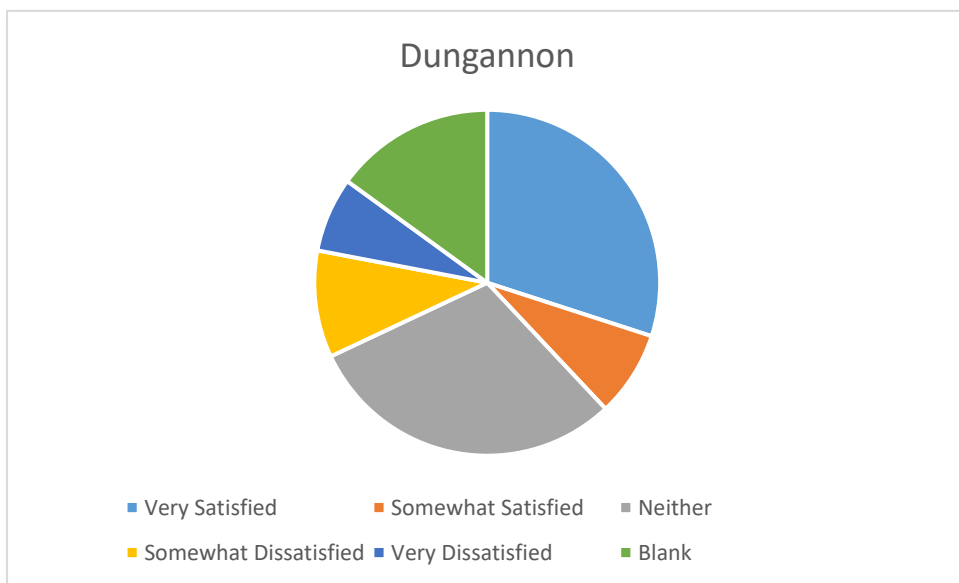
Finally, one respondent did make the comment *“if unable to attend a session it might be beneficial to have a recording of the session or a webinar”*

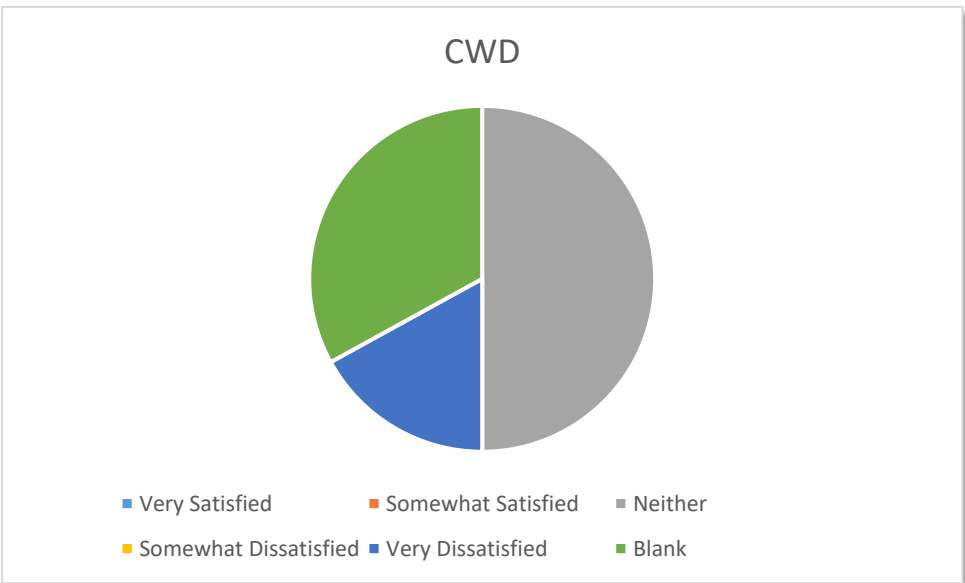
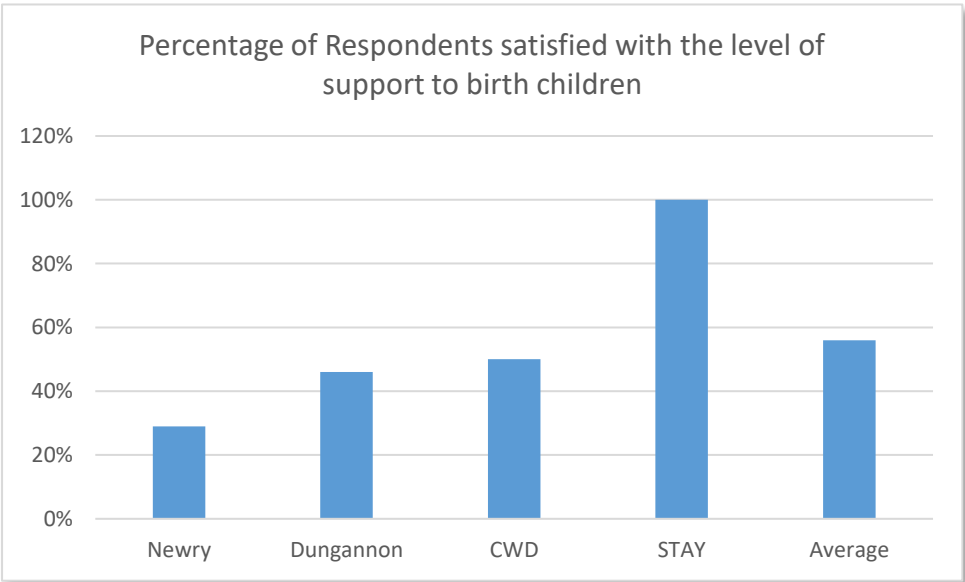
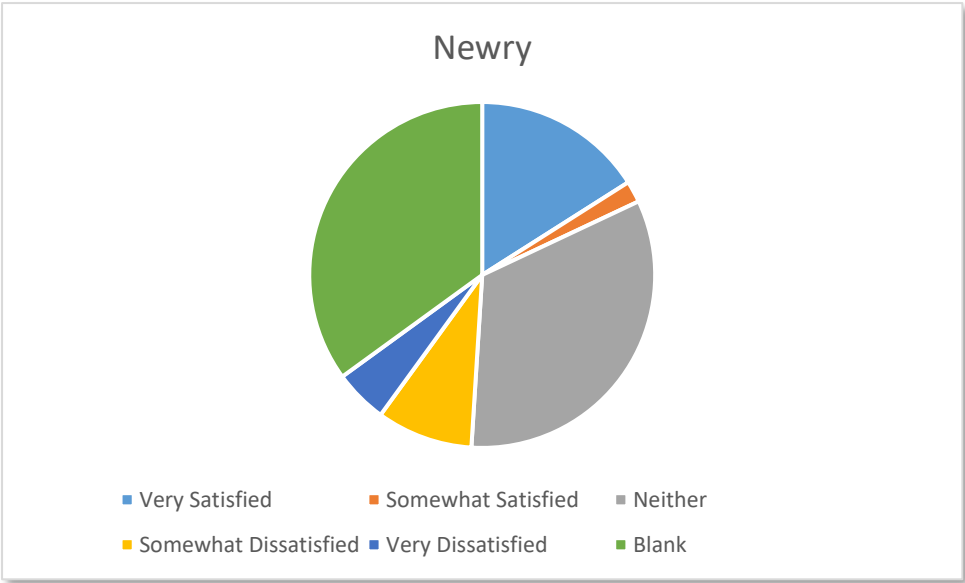
Whilst another stated *“no nothing needed as we have always been well looked after by the Trust”*.

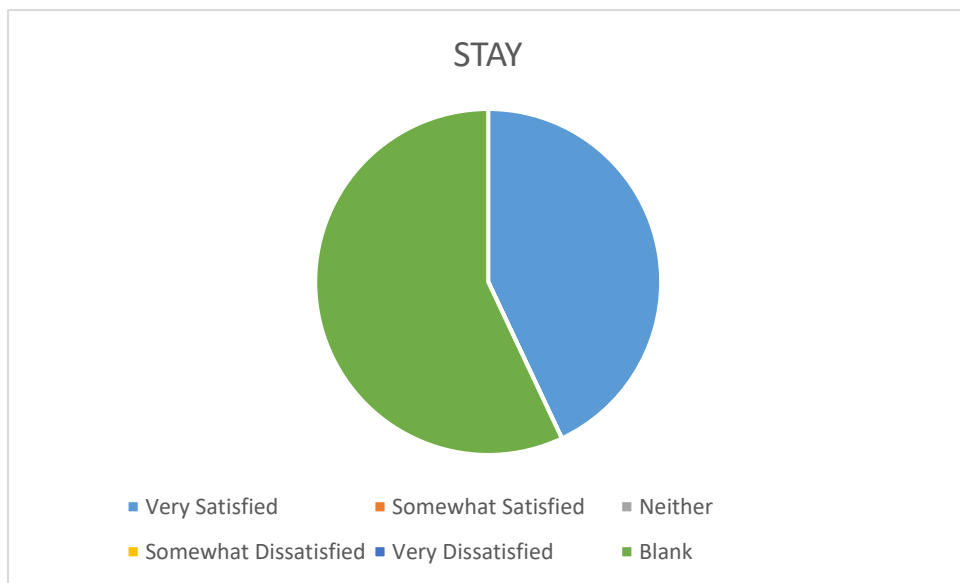
**Question 12** explored the level of satisfaction with **support provided to birth children** within foster families. Of 43 households in Newry team 15 did not offer a view as they did not have birth children or they were not living at home. Of the 28 responding only 8 identified they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the support their children received (**29%**).

An improved picture presented within the Dungannon team, with 9 of 59 responding households not feeling this question was applicable to their circumstances but still only 23 out of 50 households either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their support their children received – representing less than **50%**.

Within **STAY** provision this figure was **100%** satisfaction of the applicants who completed this section but within **Short Breaks CWD service** the figures dropped to 50% having no feeling either way and **17%** being very dissatisfied. Apart from the small numbers included within consultation with STAY hosts, this area shows need for improved engagement and performance.







Some of the qualitative comments in this area were as follows:

- *“Recognition of the contribution and role of birth children in supporting children in placement. Awards are given to fostered children for their achievements. Perhaps something similar could be devised for birth children who can feel side-lined when foster child requires intensive support and attention”*
- *“Allow birth children more opportunity to voice their opinions as dealing with a variety of issues that can arise”*
- *“Listen to voices of the children who foster more. Take their feelings and emotions on board”*
- *“Concerns raised before about how foster child treats birth child and it was dismissed – support of any kind should be offered as birth children are often forgot about”*
- *“While the social worker meets with the foster carer, I think five minutes with each birth child at each visit would be beneficial to find out how they are coping and if any supports are needed for them”*
- *“We foster long term. At the beginning the annual ‘treat outing’, Christmas gift and chat with our social worker was important. Now they would appreciate support as our foster son’s behaviour is very challenging”*
- *“Concerns raised before about how foster child treats birth child and it was dismissed – support of any kind should be offered as birth children forgot about”*
- *“The same resources should be available to birth children as there is to foster children”*
- *“sometimes overlooked foster children get a lot of outside attention but birth children can feel overlooked and ignored. Also no consideration for birth children when asked to do certain things for foster children”*
- *“The reality of fostering is that your birth children tend to bear the brunt of negative behaviour. Support at the minute tends to be around managing the placement rather than for the benefit of the children. I’m not complaining, managing the placement is*

*an essential part of the link workers role but it would be nice if the children in the home could be acknowledged for the role and sacrifices they make”*

- *One suggestion was for “Training style days where they have activities that encourage/support them in their role with other birth children. ..fun days with other birth children so they feel more connected and maybe build up friendships and support”.*
- *“Supervising social worker always asks about them which is great. Little else is done to recognise the vital role they play”*
- *“We don’t feel any need for improvement. Our social worker was amazing support to our daughter when they were struggling with the placement and continues to engage and listen to them. She is outstanding in her role”*

### **Supports Foster carers would like prioritised**

Final, remaining questions offered foster carers the opportunity to record their preferences with regards to a range of supports which were possible. From the returns originating from Newry support team, there was a total of 136 preferences recorded. From these, 21 households registered they would like to have family days and 20 households indicated they would like to mark festive events. 14 respondents also indicated a desire to partake in activity based days. One proposal would be that if a Fostering Retention Planner included all of these proposals by having family, activity based days at key, festive times of the year a very high proportion of the fostering population would have their requests met.

18 respondents advised they would experience self-care days as helpful in supporting them and their families in their fostering role, with the same number advising that local discounts in their area would be a helpful support. Finally, the other areas of development which generated a level of interest were small support hubs and coffee mornings with a total of 24 votes. This is currently modelled by Home for Good for faith based carers but may need to be extended to more general fostering connections. Finally, identity promotion for foster carers was an identified area of importance. Although identity promotion could be ambiguous, some of the qualitative comments offered through the questionnaires indicated this involved both public promotion of the role foster carers offer but also great importance was placed on the inclusion and role recognition of foster carers amongst the network for the child/children and how they were viewed/respected by Trust professionals.

One respondent commented *“Foster carers need to be respected and treated as part of the team supporting the child. So often meetings take place and decisions are made and the foster carer’s views are not considered”*.

A similar landscape presented from Dungannon area when results were analysed from a total of 157 responses. 26 respondents identified that family fun days would be a helpful support, 19 respondents felt activity based days would be welcomed and 13 respondents would enjoy the marking of festive events. Together, this totalled 58 respondents if an organised event could cover all three of these bases. In Dungannon locality, coffee and chat opportunities were ranked highly with 19 votes registered for this option and small hubs having a further

14 votes. Again with these options combined that would offer opportunity to meet the support needs of 33 households. Self-care days registered 19 votes and discounted local services 16 votes and again identity promotion was something that featured in the registering of preferences but was more explicitly referenced in the comments.

For CWD Short Breaks service, preferences for family fun days, informal coffee and chat, self-care days, activity based days and local discounts all similarly featured in the identified supports that foster carers wished to experience although walking groups were more of a significant feature.

Self-care was explained by one foster carer respondent as *“I think it would be useful as the role is very stressful. It’s not about spa days and holidays, it’s about the small things that keep you well like a cup of tea in peace, a walk, cuddling your kids. The principles are easy to apply and in a group setting it’s really powerful to hear different perspectives, experiences and ideas”*.

339 preferences were recorded across the services for supports foster carers would find most helpful for families who foster. This information is valuable and will be used to form a Retention planner for the year which will address the expressed wishes and aims to listen to the **voices of foster carers**, taking a service wide approach but also acknowledging slight differences.

SHSCT have taken account of ‘Why foster carers care 2013’<sup>5</sup> in exploring the motivating drivers of those families considering fostering and in trying to encourage others to take families/enquirers to take the first step. However, there is a considered commitment to invest the same level of efforts into retention strategies and the acknowledgement of the valuable work our foster carers do. The research from 2013 indicates that individual, personality characteristics of foster carers influences their position and predispose them to have different motivations for considering foster care. Some of these factors are also worth consideration with regards to ongoing retention and can in some ways be reflected in the responses from the retention questionnaire. Individuals who are identified as ‘Pioneer – inner directed’ have a strong desire for fairness, justice and equality and may be influenced by individual stories/child specific appeals or calls to action – reflecting aims of the service thereby being a valued part of a team who are addressing inequality in the lives of children/families. However individuals who are identified as ‘Driving prospector – outer directed’ are indicated as taking great pleasure in recognition and reward therefore may enjoy inclusion in events, award ceremonies, discount services, press articles or involvement in organisation based structures – feeling part of a wider family.

Some comments in these areas taken from the returned questionnaires are shared below:

- *“Training for some social workers that foster carers play a vital role in well-being of looked after children. Too often carers are being treated as unimportant and irrelevant”*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/files/content/why-foster-carers-care-2015.pdf>

- *“Appreciated the gift card and letter of thanks sent out at Christmas to foster carers. Can we make a suggestion of something that a Trust in England do that is budget friendly – award certificate to foster carers recognising the number of years they have contributed (could even quantify the number of children fostered)”*
- *“I suppose when the courts are involved a lot of things happen. I feel there should be an element of discussion around this to allow understanding. I appreciate confidentiality but there should be room for engagement”*
- *“I feel strongly that when children are showing significant signs of continued distress before, during and after contact there should be a platform to discuss the long term implications of this. I feel very strongly about this”*
- *“Promote fostering by having car stickers and Christmas decorations available to buy (similar to the yellow face Christmas decorations issued a while ago)”*
- *“I feel as if I need more background information on the child I’m caring for. It was very much highlighted during 4 R’s sessions”*

### **Recommendations for actions following questionnaire analysis and actions to implement an effective Retention Strategy**

- Service wide Retention Group to meet on a regular basis with representation from foster carers and other significant support services i.e. Fostering Network, Kinship Care etc
- Development of an Annual Retention Planner with key events, areas of focus and opportunities for engagement
- Development of a policy around inclusion of foster carers at Trust meetings and decision making forums
- Roll out of information sessions on role of foster carers and outcomes of questionnaire analysis across Family Placement, 14+, Lac and Safeguarding with possible supporting guide
- Further development of kinship care service and associated supports. Some further exploration of the unique specificity of this type of care and support service
- Implementation of ‘Friends of Foster Care’ word of mouth scheme
- Continued engagement with Southern Area Foster Care groups
- Development of support to birth children of foster families and development of guidance to social work teams
- Roll out of FITC training model to all
- Written feedback to foster carers on the questionnaire outcomes and developing strategy
- Information provided consistently on Blue Light card and development of further local discount schemes

- Public promotion and press articles in relation to valuable role of foster carers to the community

Finally, I believe the words provided by a foster carer when she/he returned their questionnaire epitomise what the heart of what foster care is about – relationships. People at all parts of the service wish to feel valued and they are contributing to positive change. There is no more eloquent way to express this than the words displayed below:

- *“As a foster carer I wanted to make a difference in a child’s life and I still do. When things get difficult for me that’s what I try to come back to. But I am only human, there are times when I feel completely overwhelmed and unseen, unheard and not understood. Money is very tight in the Trust at the minute and although it is nice to have events, I don’t believe it is necessary. For me it’s that support – “I hear you, I see you. We’re all part of this child’s team to give him/her the best start in life”. (Foster Carer in SHSCT 2023).*
- Finally, the photograph of the notice board below taken from Dromalane House, Newry is an illustration of a co-production piece of work this year between our young people on the Intensive Support Scheme and the outreach workers. It is a powerful piece of work in terms of the children identifying what they feel is important in foster care. One simply wrote **“I like my foster carer because she is loving and cares a lot”** whilst another wrote **“My foster carer is loving and kind and spends time with me”**. Foster care matters, foster care makes a difference, foster care changes lives and for those reasons we will always strive to improve and do better!

