

A photograph of a man and a young boy outdoors. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark jacket over a red and blue checkered shirt. He is looking towards the boy. The boy, on the right, is wearing a blue quilted jacket and is looking up and to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background consists of green foliage and a wooden fence.

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Welcome

Foster Carers Toolkit

Supporting foster carers and promoting best practice

Background and context

The YoungMinds Welcome project recognises the importance of support for foster carers who look after refugee and asylum seeking children and young people. So one key part of this project was to organise and run two groups for these carers, where they would have an opportunity for learning and development, but also to meet each other and draw upon peer support.

The first group
ran for eight two-hour
sessions with local
authority foster carers in
the London borough of
Croydon.

The second group
involved Kent County
Council local authority
foster carers, and there
were eight two-hour
meetings held in Lenham,
near Maidstone.

The focus for both groups was shaped by participants, they placed a high value on the knowledge and experience they had gained from looking after this group of young people over a number of years, which they felt could be shared with other foster carers.

The learnings and experiences of these experienced carers have been collated to help support foster carers who want to care for refugee and asylum seeking young people.

Please note that these groups were formed as part of YoungMinds Welcome and were facilitated by members of the YoungMinds' team, but all views and suggestions in this document are the carers' own.

Why is this needed?

Foster carers who look after Refugee and Asylum Seeking young people are clearly prepared and trained like all other foster carers and should, like others, have access to on-going learning and development opportunities.

However, the foster carers who took part in this project believed that the particular context, and the particular needs of these children and young people mean that foster carers taking on this role require additional input from their service or agency:

- These children and young people are often placed in carers' homes with many unknowns. These include details about the young person's history and journey to the UK, their family circumstances and other relationships.
- Their age may be contested, and there may also be very little knowledge about their health, education or even employment background.

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- In addition, these young people come from a range of countries and backgrounds and their race, culture and heritage may be very different from the fostering households they join. This is often complicated by language differences which make communication more challenging.
- The young people's cultural practices, the part faith plays in shaping their identity and sense of self, and their world view – especially in relation to ideas about gender and relationships - may be very different, and even challenging for the households they join.
- The young people's experiences and journeys to the UK may have involved significant loss, abuse and trauma. This may have impacted their mental health and wellbeing, and many urgently need support with this.
- The need for stability and security can feel undermined by the Immigration and Home Office processes which carers must understand and try to support. These systems take time, and create an environment of uncertainty about the future; which can add to health and wellbeing challenges.
- The foster carers in Kent also believed that some young people arrive in the UK with expectations about the country and the systems, which are sometimes very far from the reality of what they find. They feel this can create the potential for misunderstandings and frustrations which are not always acknowledged.
- All of these factors are very likely to influence dynamics in carers' homes. Furthermore, living with young people who are experiencing serious mental health and wellbeing challenges can impact other members of the household, and the ability of these foster carers to practice self-care becomes very important.
- Finally, some carers held the view that in their own local communities there could be resentment and hostility towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers, which could result in additional pressures for everyone in their homes.

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What do these fostering households need?

Taking into account these particular contexts, and drawing on their own experiences, the Kent foster carer group felt that other carers wishing to take on this role should be prepared with the following input:

- **Information** about the legal system and the immigration processes that their young people would be going through. In addition to this information and the 'facts', clear guidelines about their own role should be provided – as many carers had been asked to give opinions about the young person's age etc which quickly escalated to contested situations.

Across both groups, all carers felt uncomfortable about being asked to give views on age and the 'truth' of stories about journeys they were presented with.

All felt that being asked to be part of the legal/Home Office process in this way undermined their role to provide care for their young person, and placed them in a difficult position. This strengthened their view that new carers need clarity, and should not be pressured to become involved in this decision-making.

- **Support** to understand the cultural practices and heritage of the young people they would be looking after. Most foster carers took responsibility for researching things like food and particular faiths. But they recognised that providing a home where a young person would feel comfortable, and where they could begin to feel they belong, involved more than knowing the basics related to national dishes or formal religions.

A session on the wider meanings of food, including social and emotional aspects felt important. And the need for discussion and exploration of how faith and culture shapes views of relations between the sexes, including intimacy, was extremely important.

Single female foster carers felt concerned about how their young people's beliefs about women's roles could at times lead to misunderstandings, and difficult situations in their homes. And carers felt that their young people lacked an older mentor, or respected person, from their own culture and background (and of the same gender) who they could more openly share their feelings with. This had been an easier task for some younger male foster carers, but they acknowledged that language and other differences meant that causing offence, or misunderstandings in very sensitive areas relating to personal life, could occur.

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As a result, the group strongly believed that agencies and services need to think about what would help their carers to support their young people in this complex area.

- **Access** to high quality, reliable interpreters, and information about how and when they could be used, was very important.

The foster carers recognised that their young people needed to trust and be open with people they had to rely on for communication. Using the same interpreter regularly, and building up relationships (with the young person and the carer) was seen as vital to be able to address the complex immigration and personal issues their young people faced.

Importantly, they felt strongly that any new carer in this role would need to be given good, clear information about the system for using interpreters, and how to access this service out-of-hours or in an emergency – which is often when it is required.

- **Understanding** mental health and wellbeing, and their role as foster carers in recognising concerns, and knowing how to get help was seen to be vital.

All foster carers were sensitive and aware of why their young people's histories, experiences and current situations made them vulnerable to mental health challenges. They felt they had gained most of their own knowledge through crises that had occurred in their homes, and carers new to this role could be better prepared by learning about depression, anxiety, trauma, self-harm and risks related to suicide.

They would also benefit from information about how to access services like CAMHS, as well as local support and what to do in an emergency.

However, both groups also asked for sessions which considered different aspects of family and household dynamics created by living with young people in these particular circumstances.

The first group looked at the impact of living with 'truths' and 'untruths' related to the stories their young people had needed to create when arriving in the UK. The second group focussed on how they could respond to the frustrations their young people felt when they had different expectations of what life in the UK would be like.



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In both situations a systemic family therapist led a group session which explored household dynamics, the carers' feelings and drew out strategies they might try.

Both groups found these sessions very helpful, and suggested that in addition to training and input on mental health, new foster carers would benefit from group sessions with a therapist to help them recognise and manage these particular on-going dynamics.

- **Raising Awareness** of the risks faced by this group of young people and their vulnerability to exploitation was an important area identified by the Kent group.

They believed that their own fostering had increased their understanding of how young people with concerns about family at home, and a strong desire for an income, could lead to situations where they could be drawn into criminal and other dangerous activities.

- **Support** to look after themselves and encourage the whole household to practice self-care was recognised by all carers.

Both groups had requested a session with a yoga teacher who introduced breathing and movement to help them manage their own emotions, and these sessions were highly valued in Croydon and Kent.

Carers felt that living with uncertainty, their young person's mental health challenges, and the particular dynamics created by this role meant that the stress felt by carers, and other members of the household, could be heightened.

Some of the carers were already involved in sport, walking, gardening or other activities which they felt helped them to maintain their own vitality and keep going. Those who were introduced to yoga for the first time found it particularly useful, and they felt that any preparation for new carers should help them think about their own approach to managing emotions experienced during this fostering role.

In addition, they agreed that running a regular carers group for practising yoga, or any other shared activity, could also be an important alternative or addition to more 'traditional' foster carer support groups.

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- **Opportunities** to learn from each other was valued highly by both groups of foster carers. The Kent group felt strongly that as experienced carers, they could play a key role in the learning and development of their peers.



They had developed strategies and had good, practical examples of how they managed some of the particular aspects of this fostering. For example, finding the 'balance' between wanting to protect their young people (in what they recognised as often hostile environments) and promoting their independence – knowing that many young people would only be in their care for a short period, before being out on their own. One carer took an approach which drew on 'coaching' he had done in other situations, which focused on teaching cooking, budgeting and other life skills.

Negotiating the local education system to find a suitable school which would value and support their young person was a particular skill developed by one or two of the carers in the group.

They were very positive about taking any opportunity to share their knowledge and skills with carers new to looking after this group of young people, or considering taking it on.

For some, becoming a kind of 'Ambassador' and helping to challenge what they saw as prejudice, and even hostility, towards refugee and asylum seeking children was something they really wanted to do.

More generally, the value of peer support should not be underestimated, and services and agencies could be more creative about the support groups they offer to carers in this role.

These could take the form of activity-based groups as described above, where carers who can feel 'talked out' could do things together. Or more structured groups that were introduced by YoungMinds Welcome where an outside organisation (YoungMinds in this case) provide a focus, but the topics covered are led by the group. The learning and development that this provided was valued highly by the foster carers who took part, and their feedback suggested this had a positive impact.

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