# Applying behavioural insights to help support foster carers

17.04.2019

THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM

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# Executive summary (1)

Fostering services in Bristol and elsewhere do their best to support foster carers in their challenging roles, but providing help at the right time and making foster carers feel supported can be difficult. BIT received funding from Bristol City Council to identify ways to support foster carers more effectively through the application of behavioural science. Based on qualitative research and a scan of the relevant academic literature we identified a range of potential applications (see our Solutions report).

Given the service's priorities, we developed a social support intervention, where new foster carers were asked to nominate a family member or friend as a supporter. Both parties received regular text messages with the goal of encouraging and normalising regular check-ins with the aim of making foster carers feel more supported. This complex intervention required us to find a way of sending foster carers messages that corresponded to the stages in their fostering journey (such as being in assessment, waiting for a placement, or having a placement) without being too resource-intensive. We conducted a feasibility study to answer two questions:

1. Do foster carers and supporters find the programme helpful?
2. Can the programme be practically implemented in a fostering service?

Out of forty eligible foster carers, nine signed up to participate. We ran the pilot for about three months from early November 2019 until late January 2020. During this period foster carers received between five and nine different messages (depending on the phase they were in).

# Executive summary (2)

Our main findings are:

**Impact:** Foster carers did not find the message helpful as they already had strong relationships with their supporter and found them lacking in specificity. Some also reported messages not being timed correctly. Supporters, however, said that messages helped normalise conversations and helped them ask different questions.

**Feasibility:** Staff felt the intervention did not require too much work, but we did experience some challenges in terms of updating the phases correctly.

We recommend:

**1. Making messages more specific:** We included some links to external content in our messages, but there is scope to provide more specific content about how to be an effective foster carer (incl. reminders of what was taught in trainings).

**2. Expanding the programme to all foster carers:** We ran this pilot with new and aspiring foster carers. We think that while more experienced carers may not need ongoing messages, they could benefit from quick check-ins when placements start and end.

**3. Clarifying who to nominate as a supporter** to ensure they get the most out of the programme.

**4**. **Ensuring that the purpose of the programme is clearly explained to foster carers** so they can get the most out of it and know what types of conversations with their supporter are most useful.

# Project overview

# Background

Being a foster carer can be a rewarding yet demanding role. Carers often face a range of physical and mental health risks, and dealing with these challenges can be especially hard when they do not receive the right levels of support.

The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) was commissioned by Bristol City Council in 2018 to identify and test ways to make service delivery more effective through the application of behavioural insights. One of the areas we agreed to focus on was children's social care with a particular focus on fostering. We initially completed a short piece of research on how to improve the recruitment process between September and December 2018. Our suggestions aligned well with thinking among service management and led to a simplification of the recruitment process, for example by removing the requirement for applicants to attend an information evening before undergoing a home visit.

We began this longer piece of work aimed at finding innovative ways to support Bristol's existing foster carers in February 2019. In September 2019 we submitted a Solutions report setting out detailed findings from our exploratory research, which identified areas to apply behavioural insights as well as a range of potential new approaches. This final report describes in greater detail the solution we eventually developed and the findings from our feasibility study. The methodological approach we took is set out on the following slides, followed by our findings.

# Project at a glance

| Phase | Objective | Key activities |
|---|---|---|
| **Target**<br>Jan-Feb ‘19 | Confirm the problem statement | We worked with Bristol City Council (BCC) to define the areas of focus for the project: the training offer, informal as well as formal support for foster carers, and communication between the service and carers. We delivered:<br>● Light-touch exploratory review of the foster care related policy literature<br>● A kick-off workshop and rounds of meetings with key BCC stakeholders to identify priority areas and key challenges |
| **Explore**<br>Mar-July ‘19 | Understand relevant behaviours and the wider context | We conducted exploratory research to understand existing processes, the experience of service users, and any opportunities to improve outcomes in our areas of focus.<br>● We interviewed eight foster carers, four team leads and four social workers, as well as one social worker and one practice lead from the Through Care team.<br>● We attended one CLA review meeting, one supervision meeting and one session of the Skills to Foster training.<br>● We also conducted a review of the relevant academic, behavioural, and policy literature on supporting foster carers |
| **Solution**<br>Jul-Oct ‘19 | Consider and design the intervention | We developed a long list of ideas to exploit the opportunities we identified, based on the insights gained during our Explore phase. Following conversations with the service we developed the preferred solution - a text messaging support intervention for foster carers and nominated supporters - in greater detail. |
| **Trial**<br>Nov ‘19 - Feb ‘20 | Assess impact and feasibility of intervention | We tested our intervention in a three month long pilot and conducted a qualitative process evaluation to understand if:<br>● The programme could be implemented without causing too much work for the service<br>● Foster carers and their supporters found the programme helpful |

# Research overview

The first part of this project involved a range of exploratory research activities in order to better understand the key challenges for the service as well as associated target behaviours that we could encourage or discourage. Through this analysis we wanted to identify potential behavioural solutions.

**Fieldwork**

Fieldwork visits to interview foster carers and social workers

Observations of CLA review meeting and supervision meeting

**Literature review**

Rapid review of the relevant academic, behavioural, and policy literature on supporting foster carers

**Data analysis**

Light-touch exploratory review of administrative data to identify trends

**Stakeholder engagement**

Continued discussion with key staff from Bristol County Council to test potential intervention ideas

# Exploratory research findings

# Insights from literature review

At the start of the project we conducted a brief review of the evidence on how to improve placement stability and foster carer retention. We highlight the main findings here. Research suggests that the following factors impact retention:

**Level of formal and informal support:** Evidence has specifically pointed to the provision of support (through formal services as well as informal networks) being a factor that improves retention (Thomson et al 2016). To be effective, support can be both actual and perceived. Perceived support refers to the expectation that support will be provided rather than referring to specific instances in which one has received support. Perceptions of availability of social support have been linked to better outcomes during times of stress (Wethington and Kessler 1986).

**Commitment and motivation:** Foster carers can be committed to care for a specific child, so once a placement ends that can form a natural decision point to leave fostering rather than 'starting over' with a new child (Thomson et al 2016).

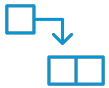
Placement stability, which is beneficial for the child, is improved by the following factors:

**Parenting style and child relationship:** Unsurprisingly, parenting style is important, such as being effective at setting boundaries, being tolerant, emotionally involved, child-centred, and providing support in academic and life skill development (Konijn et al 2019). Fostering a good relationship with the child is also important, with good communication and commitment being beneficial to this, while being unprepared for children's specific difficulties could result in carers experiencing stress, which may hinder that relationship (Konijn et al 2019).

**Carer motivation to foster:** Evidence suggests that having child-centered motivations for fostering is essential for foster placements, and that other motivations, such as providing company for a carer's other children, may lead to less positive outcomes (Rock et al 2015). This builds on more general evidence that links higher intrinsic motivation (that is, motivation to undertake a task for its own sake and value) to increased engagement and performance on tasks (Ryan and Deci 2000).

# Explore: Overview

Based on our literature review and our qualitative fieldwork we identified four areas where behaviourally-informed interventions could make a positive impact on placement stability and foster carer retention. In this final project report we only give a brief description - for more detailed research findings and a full list of our suggested interventions please see our Solutions report.



1. **Placement preparation:** The information provided to foster carers (and young people) as part of the placement process could be changed to facilitate matching as well as early attachment.

2. **Access to support:** The service has done great work to facilitate peer support. There are opportunities to increase the support provided by family and friends, facilitate regular contact with social workers and empower foster carers to access other services.

3. **Skills and motivation:** There is a lot of helpful skills-focused training, but there are opportunities to improve foster carer resilience through dedicated training and simple writing exercises.

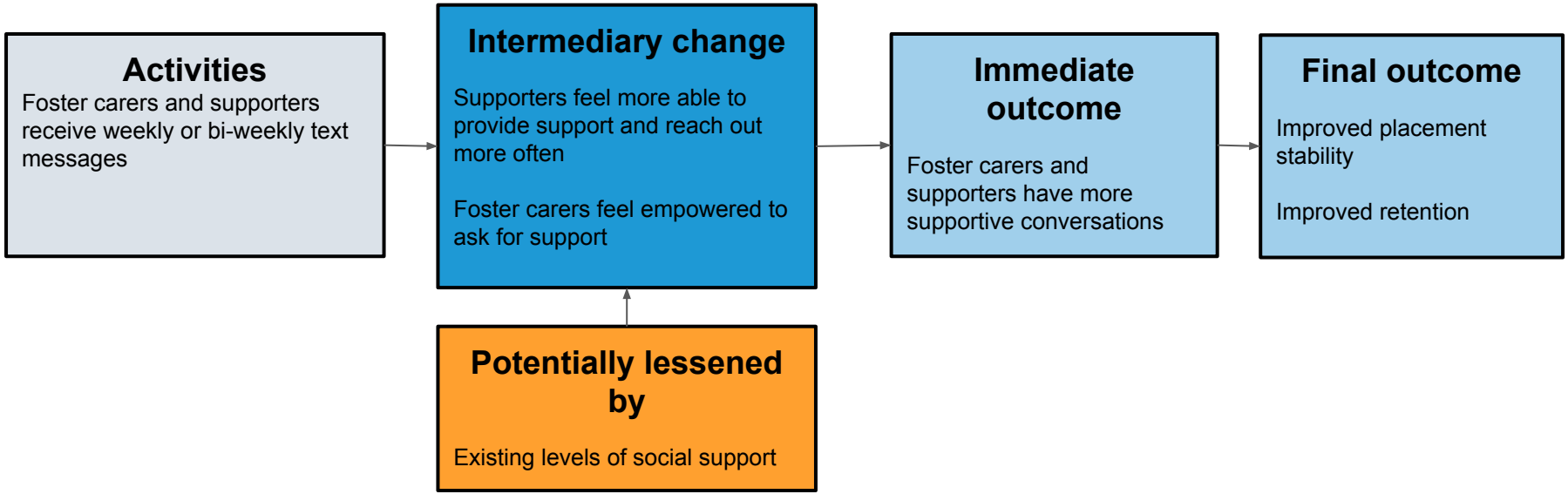
4. **Communication:** Simple changes to feedback processes and communications could ensure that foster carers feel like they can raise concerns and feel more informed about service changes.

From our long list of intervention ideas, we agreed with BCC to pilot a programme to provide selected friends/family of foster carers with tips to support them, and encouraging them to reach out. This was because there was already work being done by the service to make changes to the placement process and develop a new training programme.

# Intervention overview

# Intervention theory of change

The programme encouraged foster carers to nominate somebody from their social network as a supporter. Both parties received regular text messages with the aim of updating the supporter on upcoming changes in the foster carer's journey, and of encouraging both parties to reach out to seek/provide support through regular check-ins. To some extent, we also sought to inform the supporter about typical challenges experienced by foster carers to make it easier to have helpful conversations. Below we provide a simplified theory of change for our programme:



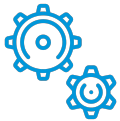
# Pilot aims and research questions

Given that this was the most complex intervention on our long list of solutions to develop, we decided to assess the **feasibility** of such a support programme in a **pilot study**. Our pilot sought to answer to questions:

1. Do foster carers and supporters find the programme helpful?
2. Can the programme be practically implemented in a fostering service (without causing too much work)?

We developed the programme using the following principles:

**1. Target cohort:** We tested the programme with people who are just **undergoing assessment** and people who **have been approved fairly recently**. Our assumption was that these aspiring and new foster carers will not yet have established habits in terms of the support they access and are therefore more likely to be open to this intervention.



**2. Delivery mechanism:** During this pilot BIT handled the sending of text messages through BIT's own platform Promptable. Our aim was to develop a mechanism that can be implemented by the service without BIT's help in the future. In order for this intervention to be scalable we needed to achieve a high degree of automation for sending out the text messages (rather than messages being sent out manually).

# Phases during the early fostering journey

The early stages of the fostering journey can be broken down into the three phases set out below. During the pilot we recruited people across all three stages of this process (i.e .we did not just start with people in assessment and then waited for them to progress through the stages). We did this because we otherwise would have had a very small sample or would have needed to run the pilot for a very long time.

## 1. Assessment

**Typical length:** 4-6 months

Typical challenges experienced:

- Feeling nervous about one's life being examined as part of assessment.
- Feeling anxious about going to panel and what will happen on the day.

## 2. Waiting for placement

**Typical length:** unable to get data

Typical challenges experienced:

- Feeling nervous and impatient.
- Feeling unsure about how to best prepare the home for first placement.
- Feeling unsure about how to best welcome the child and establish rapport.

## 3. First placement

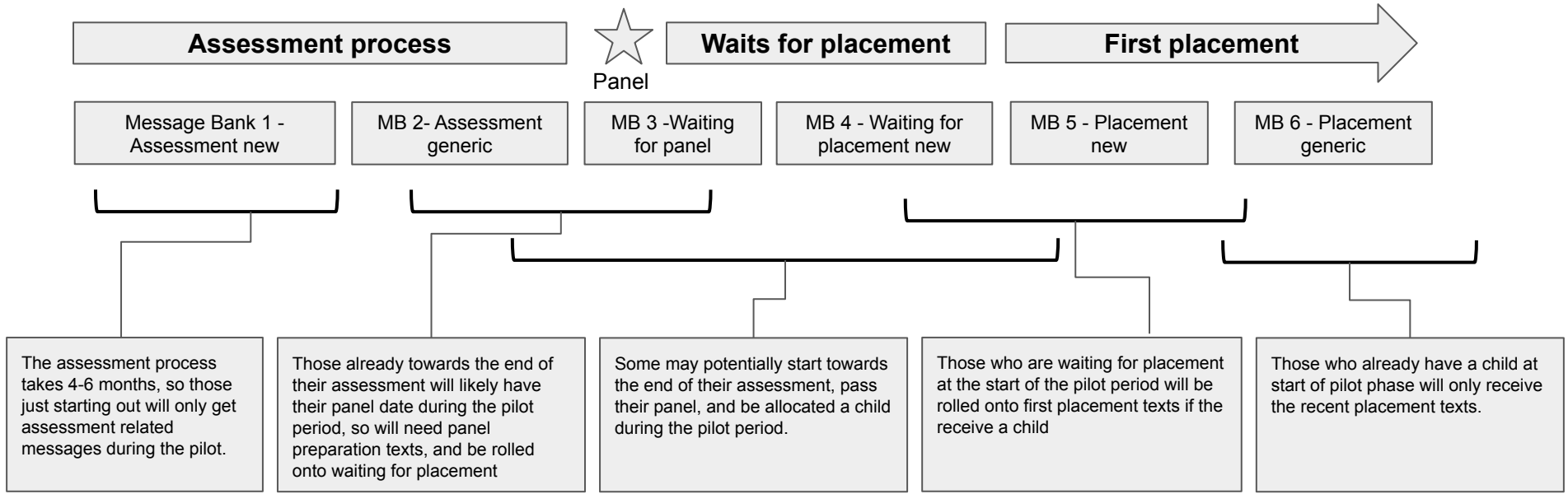
**Typical length:** unable to get data

Typical challenges experienced:

- Difficulties empathising with the child
- Difficulties setting boundaries
- Feeling overwhelmed and doubting one's abilities.
- Struggling to find time to look after one's own wellbeing.

# Message pathways during the pilot

Because the journey from assessment to first placement (and beyond) can vary in length and last months, we designed 6 different message banks, rather than simply one for each phase, to better capture the different priorities and concerns of foster carers and ensure the messages were more relatable. Moreover, people may move through these at different paces (e.g., go straight from panel to placement), so this made it easier to move foster carers to the most appropriate messages.



# Sample

Forty foster carers were eligible for participation by virtue of being in assessment or having been approved in 2019:

| | |
|---|---|
| | **15** in assessment |
| | **25** with a placement or waiting for one |
| They were registered as: | |
| | **32** were mainstream carers |
| | **8** were respite carers |

Out of this group of forty eligible foster carers nine people signed up to participate:

| | |
|---|---|
| | **4** in assessment |
| | **5** with a placement or waiting for one |
| They were registered as: | |
| | **7** were mainstream carers |
| | **2** were respite carers |

# Delivery mechanism

We developed a mechanism for ensuring that participants would be rolled on the right course of messages in a timely fashion without causing too much work for social workers. Messages were sent out once a week in bulk.

### 1. Social workers update team manager

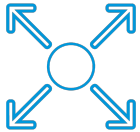
Every Monday morning social workers provided a quick update on their relevant cases to team manager.

### 2. Manager updates BIT

The team manager notified BIT of the following events:

- Withdrawal from assessment process
- Date of panel
- Decision of Agency Decision Maker
- Notification of (first) placement
- Withdrawal from being a foster carer

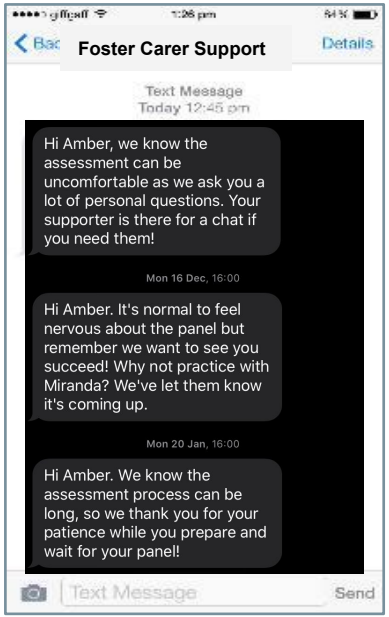
### 3. BIT sends messages



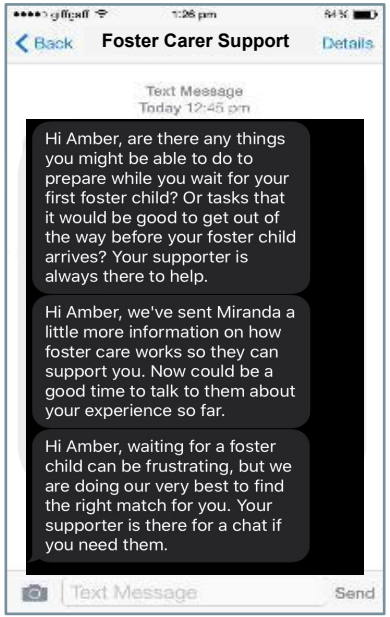
BIT moved participants to new message banks where necessary and scheduled messages to be sent out in the late afternoon.

# Example messages for foster carer

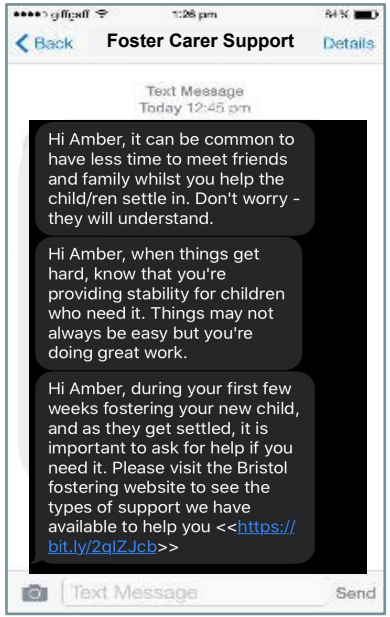
## 1. Assessment




## 2. Waiting for placement

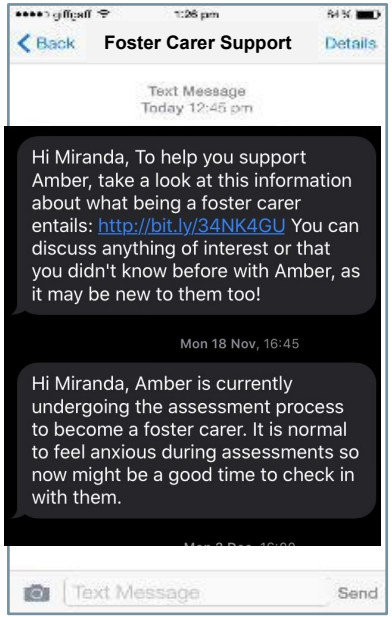



## 3. First placement

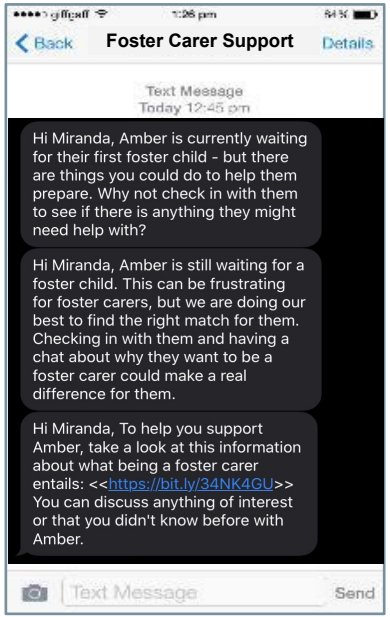


# Example messages for supporter

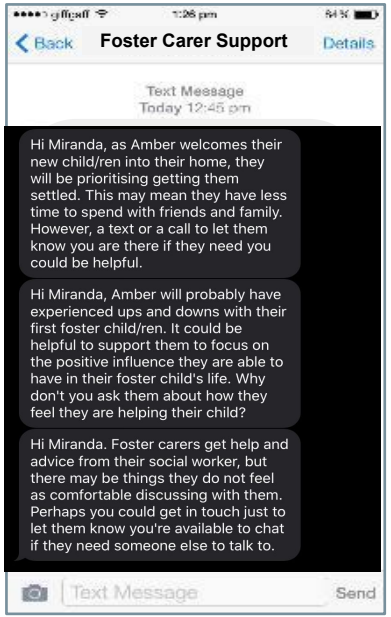
## 1. Assessment




## 2. Waiting for placement

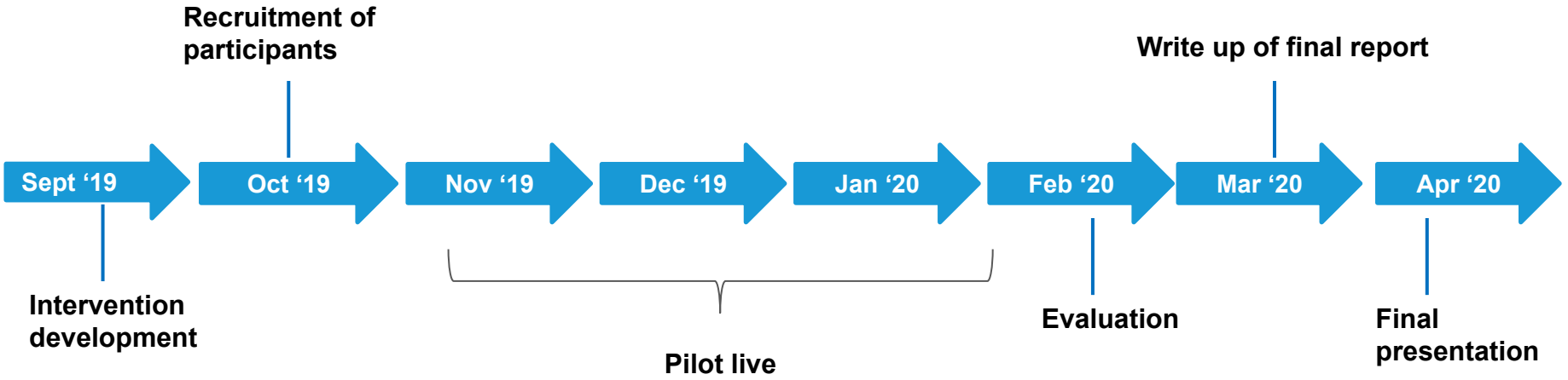



## 3. First placement



# Implementation timelines

We worked closely with team managers, one social worker and two foster carer to develop the exact content of the message in September 2019 and began recruiting participants in October. Eligible individuals received an email with a link to a GDPR compliant sign up form as well as follow up calls from their social worker. The pilot itself ran from early November until end of January.



# Pilot findings

# Qualitative design

## Research questions

**Implementation:**

- How feasible was implementing the intervention within Bristol Foster Caring Service?
  - Explore ease of setting up the SMS system
  - Explore staff views on workload
- How did foster carers and supporters experience the intervention?
  - What were their views on message content and timing?

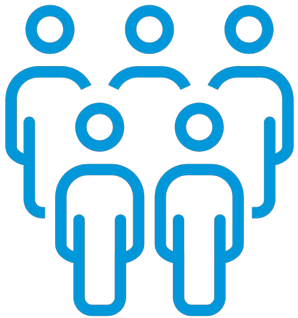
**Impact:**

- How was the intervention received by supporters and foster carers?
- What were the facilitators and barriers to engaging with the intervention?

## Data collection and analysis

- Semi- structured 30 minute telephone interviews in February/March 2020
- 5 interviews with foster carers
- 3 interviews with supporters
- Of which, 3 were matched pairs of foster carer and their support.
- We had originally planned to interview all matched supporters but were unable to contact two supporters.
- 1 interview with a Bristol Foster Carer Service manager
- Thematic analysis utilised to draw out key themes and patterns from data

# Final sample of foster carers interviewed



| Foster Carer | Type of Foster Carer | Starting Phase | Ending Phase |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Mainstream | Assessment | Assessment |
| **2 (+Supporter)** | Mainstream | First Placement | First Placement |
| **3 (+Supporter)** | Respite | Waiting for Placement | Waiting for Placement |
| **4 (+Supporter)** | Mainstream | Waiting for Placement | First placement |
| **5** | Mainstream | Assessment | First placement |

# Key Findings

### The SMS Intervention

1. Foster carers had strong pre-existing support networks…
***Naturally having conversations without prompts***

2. Messages too *generic*

### Impact

1. No impact reported by foster carers
*but…*
2. Helpful for supporters:
**a) Normalising conversations**
**b) Prompt to ask different questions**

### Feasibility

1. SMS intervention not resource intensive for staff
*but...*
2. Challenges in recruitment and updating fostering phase information meant messaging was at times out of sync

# Participating in the intervention: Who, Why and What?

## Reasons for participating

**Foster carers described** being grateful for any additional support provided in the foster caring process.
They also described wanting to give family and friends insight into the foster caring process. Part of this insight was around developing appropriate relationship boundaries with the foster care child. For example to teach the supporter that their relationship with the foster care child would not be the same as with their own children.

**Supporters described** participating in order to help in *any way they could* to their matched foster carer. They described being a supporter as 'part of the process', as they already had close relationships with their matched foster carer and this was a natural step in their relationship.

## Choosing a supporter

**Foster carers** chose supporters they already knew really well and trusted. Typically people who they described as having long-term relationships with. For example their partner, mother, in-law or close friend.

## Intervention expectations

**Expectations** of what the intervention would consist of varied depending on how much information they were provided by the social worker. Some had no knowledge beyond it being an SMS service. One thought it would be a support or advice intervention, such as what to do in certain situations.
Not having a clearly defined set of expectations of the intervention may have impacted on the effectiveness of the intervention, as participants were unsure of it's goal so did not know how they were supposed to engage with it.

# Foster carer views on the intervention

## Foster carers did not find the intervention helpful

- Foster carers in general reported the intervention to have had **no impact** on their experience of fostering, their self-efficacy around foster caring or the relationship with their supporter.
- Foster carers were disappointed that the intervention did not provide more tailored and specific information and support.

## They thought the messages were too generic

- Participants reported that the messaging was non-tailored and generic. It repeated information foster carers already had been given during the fostering training phase such as  asking you to think about your support network.
- Participants described that when they had a foster caring issue, it was usually about a very specific problem  around managing challenging behaviour of a foster child. Foster carers suggested that the SMS intervention would have been more helpful at critical times of need, addressing specific problems.

## Messages were delivered at the wrong phase in the fostering process

- **Multiple foster carers reported getting messages targeted at the wrong stage of their fostering phase**
  The messages were out of sync and lagging behind based on their placement progress. For example participants described receiving messages about the assessment phase when they were actually in their first placement. This caused participants to feel frustrated with the messages and led them to disengage from the programme as they did not feel like the texts were relevant to them.

# Foster carers had strong pre-existing support networks

- **While they wanted more support, participating in the intervention highlighted to foster carers that they already had varied networks of support outside of their supporter.** For example they attended support groups, had a foster buddy and friends who were social workers or teachers.

- **This meant that participants were already having conversations about the fostering process *<u>without prompting.</u>***

- All the foster carers said that they were **having informal discussions** about fostering and its challenges day to day. Foster carers and their supporters would speak about issues as they came up and dealt with them as and when.

- Foster carers therefore did not feel that the SMS intervention provided any additional support that they were not already receiving.

*So I guess, I'd spoken quite a lot about that and about the process to friends, I guess the messages were like, catch up with your supporter and why don't you have a chat to them, and it's like, well, I've had lots of chats to them and I'm talking to them regularly, so that's why they're in my support network.*

**FC 04**

# Supporters views of the intervention

**Supporters reported finding the intervention helpful**

**They described the intervention having a prompting and normalising effect**

- Supporters described that the text messages served as **prompt** to get in touch with the foster carer they were supporting.
- The texts also prompted questions that they **might not have thought of asking** before.
- **The texts normalised difficult conversations.** Supporters felt that it was acceptable to ask about sensitive questions or topics.

# Foster carers and supporters recommendations for improvement

## Make the messages specific

**For the foster carer**:

- When they needed need help it was usually about something specific such as managing difficult behaviour with a child. Content around these types of issues would have been helpful.
- Include more specific information around the training to prompt conversations about concepts and techniques.

**For the supporter**:

- They typically had no previous knowledge of fostering. A few specific examples of how to give advice in key situations that the foster carer might encounter would have been helpful.

## Make the intervention interactive

- Include functionality where foster carers or supporters could reply to messages, ask questions, or have a ‘check in’ with a social worker.

## Make the intervention tailored

- There are key times when messaging would be more helpful such as just before or after a foster placement. Messages about challenges tailored to this time period would have been helpful.

# Feasibility of implementing the SMS intervention

## Work loads, capacity and delivery

- **Initial expectations** were that delivering the intervention would be resource intensive and there were concerns around additional workload. However, in practice, updating the system weekly was **not overly burdensome.**
- This is caveated with *a small sample size in the pilot (n=9)* If this were delivered at scale then it may be more labour intensive.
- Wrong timing of messages suggests that the foster phase records were out of sync with the automated delivery system.
- Staff did not receive ongoing feedback about the intervention as the texts only went to foster carers/supporters. We did not ask for or receive feedback during the intervention, only at the end for this evaluation.
- Delivery issues such as wrong timing of messages may have been avoided if these issues were flagged by staff.

## Recruitment challenges

- Foster carers did not want to participate because they felt they already had strong support structures in place.
- Approximately one third took up the offer to participate.
- Raises questions around whom the intervention is targeted at, given participants in the pilot also disengaged because they had extensive pre-existing support networks.

# Discussion and recommendations

# Discussion of findings

The goal of our intervention was to help foster carers feel more supported and improve their wellbeing by helping them better relate to a friend or family member who they may not have felt they could open up to. While supporters found that messages helped normalise conversations about fostering, foster carers did not find their messages helpful and did not notice any effect on the relationship with their supporter.

**Why the intervention might not have worked:**

1. The foster carers who participated said they spoke to their nominated supporters regularly anyway (including about the challenges of being a FC). They did not find our general encouragements to connect helpful, and we think this could have been more beneficial if different supporters were chosen.
2. Participants had much better support networks (or relationships with the person they nominated) than we anticipated. Two foster carers did not wish to participate because they felt they did not have anybody they were comfortable nominating, and therefore some of those who may have benefited most from the intervention didn't participate.
3. Our sample only comprised new carers or those going through assessment, who therefore may not have had stressful experiences that they felt friends/family couldn't relate to (as we heard in our fieldwork). If this were true, more experienced carers may still find this useful where newer carers did not.

**What would be helpful:** While foster carers did not find our general encouragements to connect helpful, they said that more specific tips and prompts to talk about foster carer challenges or the training would have been more helpful.

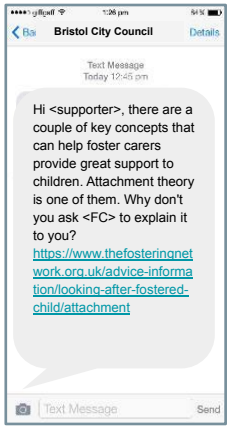
# Recommendations (1)

The programme should be adjusted to provide more explicit tips and guidance to be of more benefit to newer foster carers, if BCC wish to continue this programme. In addition, if BCC wish to also continue to pursue a programme that may increase the emotional support foster carers can receive from friends and family, we believe the programme could be tweaked and focus these messages on more experienced carers.

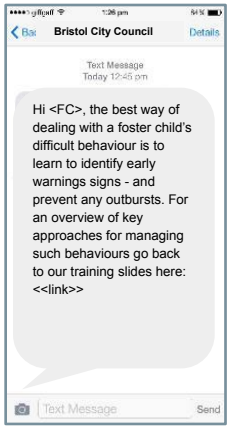
We therefore recommend:

1. **Making messages more specific (focus on newer carers):** Some foster carers suggested that more specific tips, e.g. on how to manage difficult behaviours, as well as more specific conversational prompts to facilitate more in-depth conversations about fostering would have been helpful. We believe that providing more specific content about how to be a good foster carer (incl. reminders of what was taught in different trainings) which can also be used to facilitate discussions between foster carers and their supporters would be very impactful.

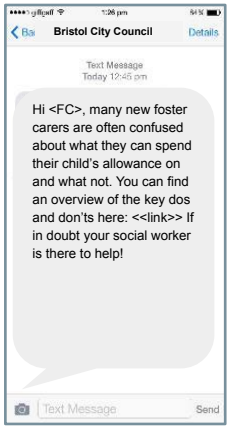
   To ensure texts are most effective, carers could be asked what they would most like support with, or social workers could nominate common topics based on their experience.




**Conversation prompt**




**Practice tip**



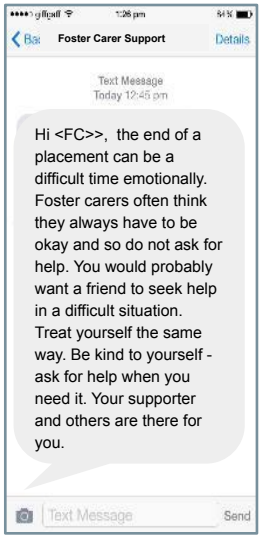

**Admin tip**

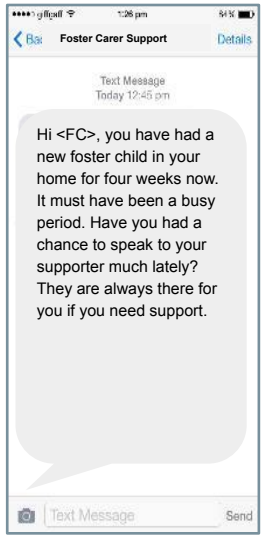
# Recommendations (2)

2. **Expanding the programme to all foster carers (with similar messages to the current trial):** We ran this pilot with new and aspiring foster carers, because we believed they would benefit most from ongoing encouragements to access social support. Offering this to all foster carers would be beneficial and it may in fact be more experienced carers who would benefit from prompts to engage with other friends and family, especially if relationships have subsided due to the pressures of being a carer, and in case burnout increases over time. It could also be helpful to send tips and check-ins at the start and end of placements.

3. **Clarifying who would be the most appropriate supporter:** We suggest encouraging foster carers to consider if they might want to nominate somebody in their social network who they currently dont talk to about their fostering role, but who otherwise would be someone they go to for support to be their supporter.

4. **Ensuring that the purpose of the programme is clearly explained to foster carers** so they can get the most out of it and know what types of conversations with their supporter are most useful.



# Next steps for scaling the intervention

If the service wanted to pursue the development of this programme and the aforementioned options this would require:

- Selecting a platform for sending out text messages on an ongoing basis, such as BIT's Promptable platform, FireText, or Gov.UK Notify. Notify is free for Local Authorities to use, while other platforms typically charge 2-4 pence per text.
- Additional research with foster carers (or their social workers) to understand in greater detail what topics they would like to be covered in messages.
- The development or identification of online resources that foster carers and supporters can access via links in text messages to improve the usefulness of the text messages.
- Nominate someone to manage the sending out of messages and collecting information from social workers on what stage of the process each foster carer is up to.

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