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Looking Past the Stereotypes – Perceptions of Disabled People as Foster Carers

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Acknowledgement

This article is dedicated to the late Jon Powton who, as a Disabled person, was an outstanding foster carer who played a key role in advocating for Disabled people to be given equal opportunity in foster care.

Abstract

England has seen a progressive decline in the number of approved fostering households, whereas the number of children needing foster homes has increased. To address these disparities, this research explored whether an inclusive approach is taken to encourage Disabled people to become foster carers. As part of the Disability Research in Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) initiative, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, a two-year research project was conducted, aiming to promote inclusive practice within the foster care system in England. The project, led by the University of Worcester, worked with four fostering organisations. The initial methodology was to gauge the level of disability awareness via an online survey, followed up with a customised training session for each site. Findings from the training days and a further workforce survey indicated that fostering social workers recognised that disability and foster care were not mutually exclusive, and that Disabled people could provide a valuable part of the workforce, although they were not routinely recruited. For Disabled people to be afforded equal opportunity as foster carers, it was acknowledged that non-discriminatory practice must become standard practice, necessitating significant changes at both institutional and professional practice levels.

Keywords

Disability; Foster Care; Social Model of Disability; Disabled foster carers; Co-production.

Introduction

The term ‘Disabled people’ covers anyone who is living with an impairment, including physical or sensory impairments, mobility impairments, learning difficulties, cognitive impairments or neurodivergent people (the term preferred by many people who are, for example, autistic, dyslexic, dyspraxia, or have epilepsy), long-term health conditions, hidden impairments or mental health issues. This article capitalises the word ‘Disabled’ in line with the preference of disability activist organisations such as Shaping Our Lives National User Network. When written with a lower case ‘d’, the term ‘disabled people’ is associated with the medical model of disability, which views disability as a problem that needs to be fixed (Inclusion London, 2016). In contrast, the social model of disability outlines that people with impairments are ‘Disabled’ by societal barriers, as is further explained below in relation to the processes associated with recruitment and engagement as a foster carer .

Ofsted (2023) found that foster carer applications in 2022-23 were lower than they had been for several years, an estimated foster carer shortfall of some 6.000 families being exacerbated by the fact that more fostering households deregistered over this period (4,690) than were approved (4,080). These figures are part of a downward trend in the number of applications and newly approved households for mainstream fostering since 2019. The number of applications received from prospective fostering households in 2022 to 2023 was around 8,000. This is the lowest number in several years and 18% lower than in 2018 to 2019. At the end of March 2023, there were around 43,400 fostering households in England. Since 2019, the number of mainstream local authority fostering households has fallen by 11%. (Ofsted, 2023).

Overall, these above figures represent a diminution in care choices for children and young people requiring foster care, many of whom will not be matched with a foster family close to home. The traditional fostering pool has shrunk in recent years due to factors such as the need for couples to both work, the lack of salaried roles, less households having a spare room and the professional demands placed onto foster carers who are asked to care for children with a range of increasingly complex behaviours. The foster carer workforce is also ageing, with 65% of English foster carers being aged over 50 and 25% being over 65 (Ofsted, 2020).

UK fostering charity, The Fostering Network (2023) welcomed the English government's planned £25m investment into fostering recruitment and retention, although it is difficult to see where additional foster homes will come from, even with further regional co-operation on recruitment strategies and improved conditions of service. There is no mention in any government initiative of Disabled people being called upon as a potential resource pool of foster carers, despite many Disabled people already being parents in their own right.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Morris, 2003) established a task force designed to improve the lives of Disabled adults by addressing the support that should be made widely available to them as parents. They state: 'Disabled parents commonly face the assumption that impairment or illness *in itself, and inevitably*, leads to child deprivation, potential harm or abuse' (Morris, 2003, p. 8). The task force argued for an approach which recognises that such risks are created and/or exacerbated by the lack of appropriate support, unequal access to mainstream services, negative attitudes, and the poverty and poor housing which can be associated with physical/sensory impairments, learning difficulties, and mental health difficulties.'. These may still be the very barriers that prevent Disabled people from coming forward and being approved as foster carers. The current research came about as a result of a successful co-produced bid for funding from Disability Research on Independent Living And Learning (DRILL) , a National Lottery Community funded programme of research run by, for and about Disabled people.

The research team, between them, had lived experiences of being fostered, as a Disabled person, a foster carer, a practitioner in the field of foster care and a researcher in the field of psychology. The team discussed each other's perspectives on the project, acknowledging that each author had their own motivation for profiling its core messages. This process helped ensure a balance of views, with a focus on the best interests of children and young people. A project reference group, made up of Disabled people, fostering professionals and foster carers, met regularly throughout the project and provided further checks and balances to the rigour of the research team's work.

The research was designed to find the reasons why there appeared to be no profile of Disabled people within English fostering, and to explore whether Disabled people could, with appropriate support and change in culture, become part of the solution to fostering's recruitment crisis.

Literature Review

Literature regarding foster care and disability in the UK is sparse, extant work focusing almost exclusively on Disabled children in foster care (e.g., Wates, 2002), while the views of Disabled foster carers are absent from debate. Tanner (2024) who was diagnosed as autistic some years after her initial approval as a foster carer, is an exception who provides an insightful account of the discrimination and the successes of her fostering career. She provides numerous examples of professional and bureaucratic deficit-based thinking but puts forward a convincing case regarding why neuro-divergent adults effective foster carers – their having coped with discrimination, their commitment to routine, their empathy and ability to think 'outside of the box'. Tanner (2024) also bemoans the fact that some social workers were exceptional in their strengths- based (Saleeby, 1996) style of working whereas others could be the total opposite, suggesting that education and training of professional staff should be mandatory to dispel myths about neuro-divergency and ensure that equality of opportunity is made real. Tanner recognised the challenges in building relationships between neuro-divergent foster carers and fostering services, especially where the fostering staff have had no previous experience or training. Her insights resonate with the experiences of a neuro-divergent parent (Benson, 2023 p.1458) whose work presents social work as a 'juggernaut of bureaucracy', wherein staff take a set perspective and focus on neurodivergent parents as the cause of the difficulties, challenges and adversity experienced by autistic children rather than examining the broader systems, structures and processes which disable. Benson also recommends disability training for social workers but stresses that this should include neuro-divergent people as trainers, their voice being absent from social work education and training.

Most fostering agency websites include information relating to fostering Disabled children, however, few mention that Disabled people, many of whom are already parents, could become foster carers. A failure to acknowledge the positives in Disabled people as parents has been noted elsewhere in social work practice (e.g., McConnell and Llewellyn, 2000; Olsen and Wates, 2003).

At the time of the research , there were no specific national policies regarding recruiting and retaining Disabled people as foster carers, although policies relating to rights, equal opportunities, social inclusion and supporting Disabled people to move into paid employment are relevant key policy initiatives in the UK (HM Treasury, Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care, 2023). The Office for National Statistics, Disability and Employment UK (2019) reported that Disabled people were approximately 30% less likely to be in employment than non-Disabled people.

All fostering agencies have mandatory diversity policies encouraging applications from a range of different ethnicities, genders, and socio-economic circumstances. However, it is very rare to find recruitment adverts that include disability in their list of ‘who can foster’ FAQs. A web-based review of 496 foster agencies in England carried out by Unwin and Torney (2018) found that only six agencies mentioned that Disabled people might be able to become foster carers and found only two examples of Disabled foster carers being featured as exemplars of successful fostering, indicating the extreme marginalisation of Disabled people in England’s foster care agencies. Moreover, the reference to being ‘fit and healthy’, still listed on fostering websites as an essential requirement to being approved as a foster carer, is an off-putting statement, needing context and clarity.

There is, however, considerable mention on fostering agencies’ web sites of Disabled children requiring foster care. Some 9% of all foster children are noted as being Disabled by Ofsted (2019) - this figure is almost twice the number of all Disabled children in England (4%), according to the 2011 census. Disability within foster care marketing and literature seems to have only been considered in terms of finding suitable carers for Disabled children, rather than focusing on Disabled adults in a fostering role, whether in respect of caring for Disabled or non-Disabled children (Wates, 2000). No data is collected, either centrally or locally in respect of the numbers of Disabled foster carers, and the absence of Disabled role models in practice and marketing material must contribute to the exclusion of much-needed and suitable Disabled applicants.

There is undoubtedly a necessity to recruit more foster carers, and a change in culture toward the inclusivity of Disabled people would help fill this recruitment gap, provide greater choice and diversity and positive role models of Disabled people. The Office for National Statistics (ONS), Labour Force Survey (2018) reported that Disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-Disabled people. More recent statistics from the ONS show that 9.6 million people of working age (16 to 64) reported that they were Disabled in January to March 2023, representing 23% of the working-age population. This is an increase of 600,000 people from the previous year. Furthermore, Disabled people were considerably more likely to be economically inactive -   the economic inactivity rate for disabled people was 42.7%, whereas the corresponding figure for those who were not Disabled was 14.3% (Kirk-Wade, 2023). Hence it can be argued that there are significant numbers of Disabled people readily available for fostering careers, if only they were given equality of opportunity to participate.

Aims of the Research

The objective of the research was to evaluate existing practises and determine the scope for positive change across mainstream and kinship/family and friends fostering. With a focus on marketing, recruitment and support structures, ways were explored in which Disabled people may be able to perform valued roles as foster carers, while also providing positive role models for all children, not only Disabled children. The potential of Disabled people as foster carers was also envisaged as a route to helping fill recruitment shortfalls, thereby contributing to halving the unemployment gap for Disabled people as referenced by The All Party Parliamentary Group on Disability (2016). The creation of more diverse foster placements should also mean that fewer children remain in settings which are unsuitable settings for their needs.

Methodology

Since fostering system processes vary across the UK, particularly in terms of independent sector foster care, the focus of this research was on foster care in England. As part of the DRILL initiative, the project was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and approved by the University of Worcester Health and Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The research team recruited four foster care agencies - two from the statutory and two from the independent sector (one charity and one private) across both urban and rural settings in England, via a mixture of website searching and follow-up emails inviting interest in the project. The project was co-produced between Shaping Our Lives, the University of Worcester, Foster Care Co-operative agency and members of the University of Worcester's IMPACT group of service users and carers, supported by a reference group of Disabled people, people with experience of having fostered or been fostered, and academic staff. This steering group met throughout the project on a six-weekly basis to constantly ensure that an authentic commitment to co-production characterised the project.

Co-production is the term used to reflect relationships where service providers and service users share power to plan and deliver support together, in meaningful , rather than tokenistic, ways. In order to claim authenticity, a co-production approach should characterise a research project from inception through to its planning, delivery, review and dissemination (Sealey, Fillingham and Unwin, 2021; Shaping Our Lives (2024). Co-production challenges traditional hierarchies of power and privilege in ways that better guarantee equitable and reciprocal outcomes (Boyle and Harris, 2009).

The project was underpinned by the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 2013), a seminal model which challenges the pathologising of Disabled people, and draws a distinction between impairment and disability, identifying the latter as a disadvantage that stems from a lack of fit between social environment and the physical body. This model falls within the spectrum of strengths-based theory (Saleeby, 1996), a strengths-based approach being defined by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (2021) as an approach that is:

> 'holistic and multidisciplinary and works with the individual to promote their wellbeing. It is outcomes led and not services led. Strengths and asset-based approaches in social care focus on what individuals and communities have and how they can work together, rather than on what individuals don't have or can't do.'

Positive outcomes from strengths-based approaches have been reported in research, including improvements in well-being and satisfaction for people accessing services (Caiels et al., 2024). The principles of such an approach accord with social work values and ethics (British Association of Social Workers, 2021) and with the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (NMS) (Department for Education (DfE, 2011). The latter stipulate the standards required before a fostering service can operate as a legal entity, and are written in a way that expects strengths-based and co-production approaches to characterise the recruitment and management of foster carers, including that reasonable adjustments should be made to accommodate individual circumstances:

- People who are interested in becoming foster carers are treated fairly, without prejudice, openly and with respect (NMS,13.2).
- Enquiries are dealt with courteously and efficiently by staff who have the necessary knowledge and skills. Prospective foster carers are provided with timely and relevant information following their initial enquiry and are kept informed about the progress of any subsequent application for approval (NMS,13.2).
- Prospective foster carers are prepared to become foster carers in a way which addresses, and gives practical techniques to manage, the issues they are likely to encounter and identifies the competencies and strengths they have or need to develop(NMS,13.3).

Additionally, Standard NMS 13.1 also expects fostering services to be responsive to current and predicted demand on the service, which would include giving Disabled people full and equal opportunity to become foster carers, alongside all other members of the community. In regard to fostering applications, the above standards might include ensuring that a fostering organisation’s marketing material was accessible in a range of formats, that websites might be disability-friendly, that training venues were accessible, that Disabled foster carers were advised, and signposted as necessary, regarding contemporary technology requirements of the foster carer role, that reasonable adjustments were made regarding mobility issues and consideration given to timings of meetings. Clearly, the needs of foster children come first, but if fostering organisations are serious about including Disabled people then some ‘out of the box’ thinking might be called for, depending on individual foster carers circumstances, which may fluctuate, as is the case with all families.

Initial approaches inviting participation were made by e mail to all known fostering agencies in England (n.496), but responses were very poor, despite follow-up e mails. Six agencies expressed serious interest, but two dropped out due to business pressures, which left four agencies committed to the project. Unfortunately, halfway through the project the not-for-profit agency dropped out after being transferred to new owners whose attitude was that, unless there was a financial penalty to withdrawal, then they had no interest in the research. This was perhaps an extreme example of the general disinterest/discriminatory attitude toward Disabled people across the fostering industry, and a failure of the collective imagination.

Mixed methods with the four foster agencies comprised pre and post project surveys (hosted by Jisc Online Surveys), sent to agencies via an online link, with the Participant Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form embedded within the survey before the question page. The delivery and evaluation of training input formed the core methods of approach to this new area of study. Furthermore, the Shaping Our Lives team members undertook an audit of each fostering agencies' website and documentation for their 'disability -friendliness' , in addition to an office evaluation regarding access issues. Prior to the fieldwork commencing, Shaping Our Lives provided bespoke training to each of the four sites about working with Disabled people.

In parallel with these above approaches to fostering agencies, local Deaf and Disabled People's organisations were informed about the project, information leaflets were produced (see Appendix 1) and Disability events attended by members of the research team.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data at each stage of the research, and is a method used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns, or 'themes' within qualitative research data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). A six-step process was established as being at the core of thematic analysis - Familiarisation with the data; Generation of initial codes; Searching for themes; Reviewing themes; Defining and naming themes and production of the report Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 86-94).). Themes were generated via discussion between the researchers, who reviewed all data individually, re-reading, stepping away and then meeting as a group to agree themes. This revision of themes process was repeated over several weeks in each research phase, re-reading and re-examining the data after space and time away.

Findings from Pre-Training Survey

Before the core field work commenced, all fostering staff in the four participating agencies were asked to complete an online survey which consisted of 25 questions aiming to gauge levels of disability knowledge and awareness. The questions were presented either via a drop-down selection menu, multiple choice and/or free text response boxes. The findings of the training needs analysis and perceptions survey informed the structure and content of the subsequent training sessions. Relevant information about accessibility issues was gathered from the four organisations, using an information audit checklist. Areas where improvements could be made were identified by the researchers, with a view to immediate rectification where possible. The survey questions were designed to assess participants' levels of knowledge relating to disability issues, including the Equality Act 2010, the social model of disability and co-production as well as the support structures that need to be put in place depending on the particular disability (see Appendix 2 for the full set of questions).

The training needs analysis and perceptions survey was completed by 63 individuals, comprising:

Fostering Service 'H' (Statutory Local Authority): 33 participants: 27 fostering team and 6 panel members.

Fostering Service 'M' (Private): 17 participants - all fostering team members.

Fostering Service 'O' (Statutory Local Authority): 13 participants: 10 fostering team and 3 panel members.

The survey responses from 63 respondents in Fostering Services H, M, and O in regard to levels of knowledge held about the Equality Act 2010, which affords protected characteristics to Disabled people and introduced the concept of 'reasonable adjustments' that certain organisations, including fostering services, must provide, were as follows:

Fostering Service H (33 respondents): 4 ‘a lot’ / 29 ‘little or not at all’
Fostering service M (17 respondents): 2 ‘a lot’ / 15 ‘little or not at all’
Fostering Service O (13 respondents): 1 ‘a lot’ / 12 ‘little or not at all’

The responses were generally positive in nature, even when little knowledge was held and there was general agreement in the narrative sections of the survey that, with appropriate support, Disabled people could be effective foster carers. The main concern identified as an obstacle to fostering was the level of severity or complexity of a particular disability, which may hinder fostering-related task-performance. Regarding particular competencies a Disabled person may have, participants identified attributes such as empathy, understanding and awareness of disability and discrimination, overcoming adversity, overcoming barriers and being more resilient.

Respondents reported a shortfall in their knowledge of concepts relating to disability. The majority of participants did not know what co-production was or how to do it, however, the majority had heard of the social model of disability. Respondents also identified some shortcomings in the survey response choices, constraining participants’ answers to some of the questions .

Training Days at the Fostering Services

Depending on requirements and staff/panel member numbers, one or two training sessions per organisation were delivered by Shaping Our Lives, designed around the gaps in disability awareness highlighted in the pre-training surveys. The training sessions comprised a Power Point presentation, group working, case studies for discussion, a social model of disability exercise and a training evaluation form. Post-training information was also sent to participants to guide their future practice, built around the Equality Act 2010, knowledge of which had proved minimal in the training sessions. Areas covered in the training and surveys sought to explore why there were so few Disabled people engaged as foster carers, what could be done to encourage Disabled people to apply and how to promote foster caring as a feasible and achievable role for Disabled people.

Training evaluation questionnaires were completed by participants in the three remaining fostering services at the end of the training sessions. Participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were with the training content and organisation, the main strengths and weaknesses of the training, how much participants felt they had learnt about issues such as ‘reasonable adjustments’ and legislation relating to Disabled people, and also how they would incorporate this new knowledge into their workplace (see Appendix 3 for the full questionnaire).

Findings from Post-Training Survey

Nineteen staff participants from across the final three fostering organisations completed the online End of Project Questionnaire, which consisted of 13 questions. (Fostering Service O had withdrawn by this stage):
Fostering Services (‘H’): 9 participants
Fostering Services (‘M’): 6 participants
Fostering Services (‘O’): 4 participants

The participants invited to complete this questionnaire were those who had attended one of the training sessions. The questionnaire asked participants to confirm their understanding of the project aims and to raise any issues. The objective was to evaluate post-training perceptions relating to recruiting Disabled people as foster carers and whether the training had any positive impact on future actions /improvements that agencies can take/make to encourage Disabled people to come forward as potential foster carers (see Appendix 4 for the full questionnaire).

Fewer participants (19) from the remaining three fostering services completed the post-training survey, compared to 63 who completed the pre-training survey. Fifty six out of 63 staff members had reported having little or no knowledge about the Equality Act 2010 pre-training whereas the 15 out of 19 staff members who completed the post-training survey stated that the disability equality training had given them a lot of knowledge which would be most beneficial for their future practice. This suggests that there was considerable learning gained from the disability awareness training which was customised to fostering and delivered by a Disabled member of Shaping Our Lives.

When asked about confidence in putting in place reasonable adjustments for Disabled people to be enabled to foster, 40 respondents pre-training stated that they were basically confident and 23 that they were ‘not very confident’ or ‘not at all’ confident. Post-training, 13 out of 19 respondents stated that they were confident in respect of making reasonable adjustments while the remaining 6 respondents remained not very confident or ‘not at all confident’. Although a smaller number of staff completed the post-training survey, the proportion of staff feeling confident regarding reasonable adjustments post-training had increased considerably, again suggesting that significant learning had taken place.

The above responses were mostly positive, indicating a general agreement that, with appropriate support, Disabled people could be good foster carers. Primary concerns identified as obstacles to fostering were the level of severity or complexity of a particular disability (physical, sensory, cognitive or mental), which may hinder fostering performance, and which could prove problematic in the care and safeguarding of the child. Examples of participants’ concerns, as detailed in the narrative options of the survey, were as follows:

‘Unable to fulfil child’s needs’ was quoted by many participants, but several participants stated that this would equally apply to anyone who wishes to foster:

> If unable to meet the foster care standards, but this would be the same if they had a disability or not (‘H’ Staff 2).

> As with everyone…an assessment would need to be completed to identify if the person has the capacity to recognise and meet the [child’s] needs (‘H’ Staff 7).

Other comments were more focused on potential problems particular to being Disabled:

> If their own needs are such that they would be unable to meet a child's needs… (‘H’ Staff 14).

> …ability to look after children if the foster carer had difficulty looking after themselves (‘M’ Staff 5).

> it depends on the complexity of their limitations, their physical ability and any restrictions (‘O’ Panel Member 1).

> Maybe a single applicant with physical disabilities that impair their ability to manage the physical demands of the fostering task (‘H’ Staff 7).

> If…disability was so severe that it would hinder them from caring for the… needs of children (‘M’ Staff 3).

Regarding specific competencies a Disabled person may have, participants identified attributes such as empathy, understanding and awareness of disability and discrimination, overcoming adversity, overcoming barriers and being more resilient. Traits such as determination and hardiness were also highlighted as potential benefits that could help build confidence in children who may feel vulnerable to prejudice and negative judgement. Some of these comments are quoted below:

> It is possible that a disabled person who has experiences of discrimination and exclusion might offer an insight into the feelings and experiences of vulnerable children who might feel marginalised (‘H’ Staff 9).

> The ability to empathise and advocate for children/young people who have a similar need/diagnosis. Being familiar with the range of support services available (‘H’ Panel Member 3).

Participants from two of the organisations reported significant shortfalls in their knowledge around disability. Most of the participants in three of the fostering agencies had heard of the social model of disability, while the staff in the fourth organisation had no knowledge of this approach, no members of staff having ever worked with Disabled adults. In comparison to pre-training levels of disability knowledge most of the staff participants reported that, after the training day, they now understood the difference between `Disabled', `impairment' and `health condition'.

Further areas for learning, identified by participants during the training included disability rights, the Equality Act 2010, the range of disabilities, and how to support colleagues and carers in aspects of disability

Emergent Themes

The two overarching themes to emerge from the post-training survey and the training days, contributed to in full by three agencies, and partly by the agency which withdrew from the research part-way through, were those of 'Potential obstacles to the engagement of Disabled People as Foster Carers' and 'Benefits in the engagement of Disabled people as foster carers'. These are presented in more detail below, followed by their associated sub-themes.

Potential obstacles to the engagement of Disabled people as foster carers

The potential obstacles that emerged across the research findings were those of a lack of confidence and knowledge in working with Disabled adults, a lack of knowledge regarding the Equality Act 2010, and some hesitant and deficit views about the abilities of Disabled people. Concerns were that children who had been neglected and had been caregivers to their parents might again be made responsible for the adults around them; that the Disabled person will be a single carer; and that memory loss could affect the Foster Carers to remember school meetings and other obligations, putting the child at a disadvantage. Most respondents mentioned the severity or complexity of disability as a potential obstacle to fostering. The quotes below relate to staff hesitancies around restricted mobility, sensory and or cognitive impairment, and learning disability /difficulty,and possible restrictions to safeguarding /caring for the child:

> Mental Health that might impact on the child. Physical incapacity to meet a particular child's needs ('H' Panel Member 1).

> … if your assessment evidences that you're not able to provide the required care to meet a child's needs. However, they [Disabled people] should have opportunity within the assessment and creatively consider how things can be changed to support them ('M' Staff 1).

> Some disabilities where they have a moderate or profound learning disability will make it more difficult for them to be receptive to the needs of the child ('M' Staff 7).

> If they do not receive support or do not have a good support network ('M' Staff 2).

> The same applies to everyone who enquires to foster…It's on an individual case by case basis, like all applicants. We cannot say that everyone can foster, but this is the same for everyone, regardless of having a disability ('O' Staff 1).

> Some potential carers will have disabilities which are simply not compatible with the complex children in the care system, and this could put them at significant risk and may not be the most appropriate placement for a child ('O' Panel Member 1).

Potential benefits in the engagement of Disabled people as foster carers

Despite most participating staff having only minimal experience of working with Disabled foster carers, there was widespread acknowledgement that the potential benefits in their recruitment were considerable, given their lived experiences and likely compassionate qualities. Several participants highlighted empathy as a potential strength and a number of respondents also mentioned the potentially heightened capacity of understanding and awareness of being different and understanding of disability and discrimination. There was evidence of willingness to learn more about Disabled people and their potential, and a recognition that Disabled foster carers would provide positive role models / help change a disablist culture for children, staff and wider society.

Many participants believed that a greater understanding of different disabilities would allow for fairer assessments to be conducted, including consideration of the support that might be needed in each case for the foster carer to be successful in their role. These perceptions are reflected in the quotes below:

> Empathy and understanding towards a disability. Knowledge and insight into how best to overcome barriers, good role modelling (‘S’ Staff 1)

> …possibly be more determined because of overcoming their own issues…an understanding of how it feels to be in a minority group within society and how to make their voice heard (‘M’ Staff 3)

> …identity and diversity, understand the challenges of being different in society (‘M’ Staff 5)

> Personal Insight into discrimination and prejudice. Understanding of the importance of diversity and the celebration of difference (‘M’ Staff 6)

> Resilience, experience of adversity, relate to a child's experiences; they would be a good advocate to work with support services (‘O’ Staff 2)

> …having an ability to empathise with children who may experience barriers and discrimination due to their circumstances not themselves as individuals, a strength to show determination, autonomy and courage to overcome obstacles, an ability to work with various professionals and understand care plans etcetera. (‘H’ Staff 1)

Discussion

Although the data above suggest that the participating agencies’ staff held balanced views about the potential of Disabled people as foster carers, the reality was that even these research-involved agencies had engaged very few Disabled people as foster carers. Actions did not match the diversity philosophies of the agencies, and this state of affairs means that not only do children needing foster care miss out on possible local placements with positive role models of Disabled adults, but the agencies miss out on the potential within a large pool of applicants.

The Disabled foster carers who took part in this research, variously gave examples of how their applications to foster had either been treated flexibly via a strength-based approach or a deficit approach had been taken, with the core focus being on what an individual could not do. The examples given above regarding participation/ non-participation in First Aid training is an example of the widely differing approaches by fostering services. Some of the comments from social workers in the pre-project training courses also portrayed deficit approaches to disability, coupled with a lack of confidence in working with Disabled adults. The lack of role models of successful Disabled foster carers on website and marketing material also represent a missed opportunity to attract more Disabled foster carers and a missed opportunity for fostering services to demonstrate their commitment to co-production. These examples, however, are rare in the fostering world, yet if they work in these few fostering services, why do they not happen more uniformly, especially considering that the Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards (DoE, 2011) pertain to all fostering services. This lack of inclusion Is perhaps all the more surprising given the commitment to equality of opportunity and diversity that is intrinsic to social work practice and also given the continuing lack of foster carers which offers less choice to children and limits the reach of fostering services.

The above research findings suggest that the work of Wates (2002) which noted an absence of Disabled foster carers remains relevant and that the failure of social workers in recognising the potential in Disabled people remains the case (McConnell and Llewellyn, 2000; Olsen and Wates, 2003). The very small agencies of who came forward as research sites are not necessarily representative all fostering agencies in England and might be seen as being agencies more disposed towards welcoming Disabled people as full and equal members of the workforce. However, a review of fostering agency websites (University of Worcester, 2018) indicated a nationwide lack of Disabled people's profiles and the DDPO'S survey findings regarding a lack of knowledge of fostering, suggests that both fostering agencies and DDPOs need mutual education about two worlds which currently seem to be very far apart.

Having raised awareness about the potential of Disabled people with fostering staff, the research team also sought to raise the aspirations of Disabled people, who are currently so absent in fostering services. There is no history of DDPOs, who have led on a number of inclusivity campaigns, having been proactive in supporting or encouraging their Disabled members to foster, possibly because fostering is such an unknown world to them. There was no significant interest shown in the research project by DDPOs, organisations which could play an important role in bringing about cultural change. To achieve such change, there needs to be a concerted effort by all involved - fostering teams, social workers, allied professionals, commissioners of services, Ofsted, Disabled people and their organisations. Such commitment should lead to:

- More diversity through inclusivity:
- Effective reach out to Disabled people as potential foster carers
- Greater knowledge of the nature of disabilities, and specific support needs;
- Continued learning and knowledge exchange at all levels.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This research project has been successful in bringing the issue of Disabled foster carers and their absence from the workforce to national attention, including radio and TV profiles. However, such 'one-off' exposure is not enough to change ingrained institutional behaviours and large scale culture change is needed if Disabled people are to be given genuine equality of opportunity in the world of fostering. We have discovered a limited number of very positive case studies of Disabled people successfully fostering and have brought about pro-disability changes in three fostering agencies, for example in their inclusion of Disabled adults in 'marketing' material. There are, however, almost 500 fostering agencies in England and much work remains to be done.

The limitations of this research are that findings pertained to the experiences of three fostering agencies only, agencies that might be seen as among the most pro- disability in the fostering sector, and therefore not necessarily representative. The research team met with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to advocate that foster caring be made eligible for the various forms of 'Access to Work' support available from national government, but this meeting proved inconclusive. The meeting was helpful, however , in clarifying that disability-related benefits would not be affected by a person taking on a fostering role. Clearly some changes need to come ‘top-down’ from national level and cannot be solely brought about by small-scale research initiatives. Ofsted were very supportive of the research mission and stated an intention to include consideration of Disabled people’s engagement in agencies as a standard future inspection focus regarding diversity and inclusion. National-level directives are also required around issues such as full participation in First Aid Training - there was much confusion present in the agencies studied about whether mandatory certification in First Aid is required, or whether the requirement is that a foster carer needs to know when to summon first aid help. The research team also picked up that a medicalised approach to a person’s physical ‘fitness’ prevailed, rather than holistic approach towards an applicant’s overall potential as a foster carer, ignoring the resiliencies and adaptive strategies of many Disabled people.

Responses from local DDPOs

The attendance of research team members at a number of disability events during the research period did not produce any significant levels of interest, and response to the flyers, accompanied by direct approaches to local DDPOs by the research team and the fostering agencies was minimal. This lack of response possibly indicated how far apart the worlds of disability and fostering are in England currently, and present challenges for any future initiatives in this area.

Conclusions

Social workers and their organisations have much to learn about disability, legislation, benefits and Access to Work provision. Disabled people’s organisations need to broaden their horizons also and appreciate that, despite the challenges, a fostering career could be a very fulfilling one, and one which provides positive role modelling to children and young people. Recruitment to foster care has been at crisis point for some time and the research team believes that the huge pool of Disabled people in England could make a significant difference to closing that gap, if only they are given equality of opportunity. It is important that the findings from this project have a wider impact and are used to improve practice in relation to recruiting Disabled people as foster carers. Best practice would include featuring any Disabled foster carers on websites and in marketing material, making reasonable adjustments regarding physical attendance at meetings, facilitating appropriate technological support, interpreting first aid training guidelines and medical assessments from a strengths-based perspective and, as ever, skilled matching with children. The recommendations below are suggested as ways of operationalising the findings reported above and are most likely to become reality once all fostering services staff have been educated about the Equality Act 2010, and work with Disabled people from a strengths-based perspective, seeking to co-produce best outcomes for children. To this end, we hope to undertake further research to build on the progress already made in promoting a culture of true inclusion, through training, open discussion and by encouraging a co-produced approach to the recruitment of foster carers. The research team and reference group sincerely believe that mutual benefits for children and young people, Disabled people and fostering organisations can be realised if the recommendations below are acted upon:

Recommendations

- Fostering agencies' performance should be measured by Ofsted against the Equality Act 2010, to avoid direct and indirect discrimination of Disabled people in recruitment, selection and support services.

- Local commissioning authorities should only approve fostering agencies which demonstrate their commitment to the inclusion of Disabled foster carers.

- Disabled people should be worked with in co-production, recognising their strengths and resilience potential, with 'reasonable adjustments' made to accommodate necessary access/communication requirements.

- Training for all foster agency staff in disability equality and awareness, delivered by Disabled people, should be a mandatory requirement of registration.

- Current Disabled foster carers should be asked to act as ‘disability champions’ by their agencies to encourage other disabled applicants.

- Government should target potential Disabled foster carers as part of their new recruitment and retention campaign to help reduce the shortfall in foster placements and provide greater choice and diversity for children and young people needing to be looked after.

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Appendices (supplementary material)

Appendix 1: Project Information leaflet

Appendix 2: Training Needs Analysis (Pre-training) Questionnaire

Appendix 3: Training Evaluation Questionnaire

Appendix 4: Post-Training End of Project Questionnaire