

# Foster carer retention and recruitment in England

To achieve a diverse and stable foster care workforce

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*“Retention is how you recruit.”* (Focus group participant)

*“I really admire the social workers. I think it’s an amazing job... really hard ... But they need to accept the foster carers are doing a good job too, and that without the foster carers, the entire thing does fall apart... [Social workers] should be doing nice things, and... giving [foster carers] just a bit more encouragement... We’re really easily pleased.”*

(Interviewee who left fostering)

# What's the problem?



## The problem

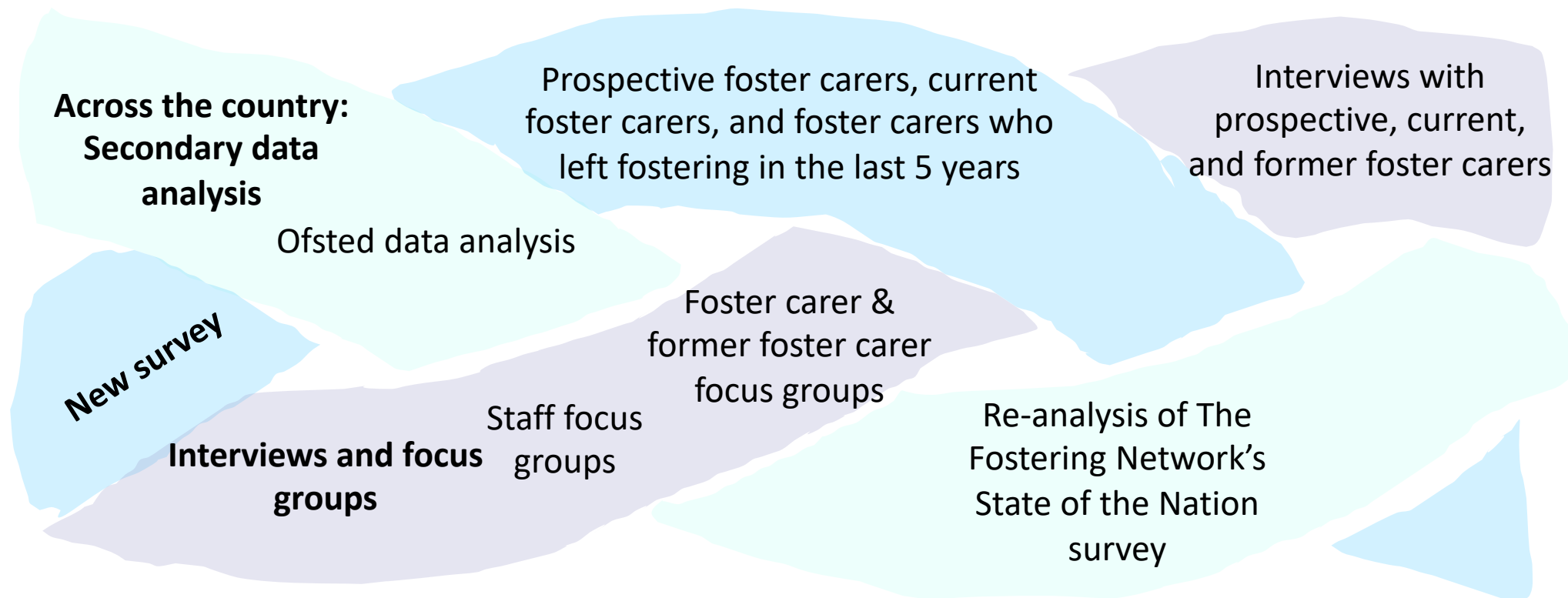
More mainstream foster carers stopped fostering than were approved, leading to a net decrease in fostering capacity. At the same time, the number of children in care increased.



## The research

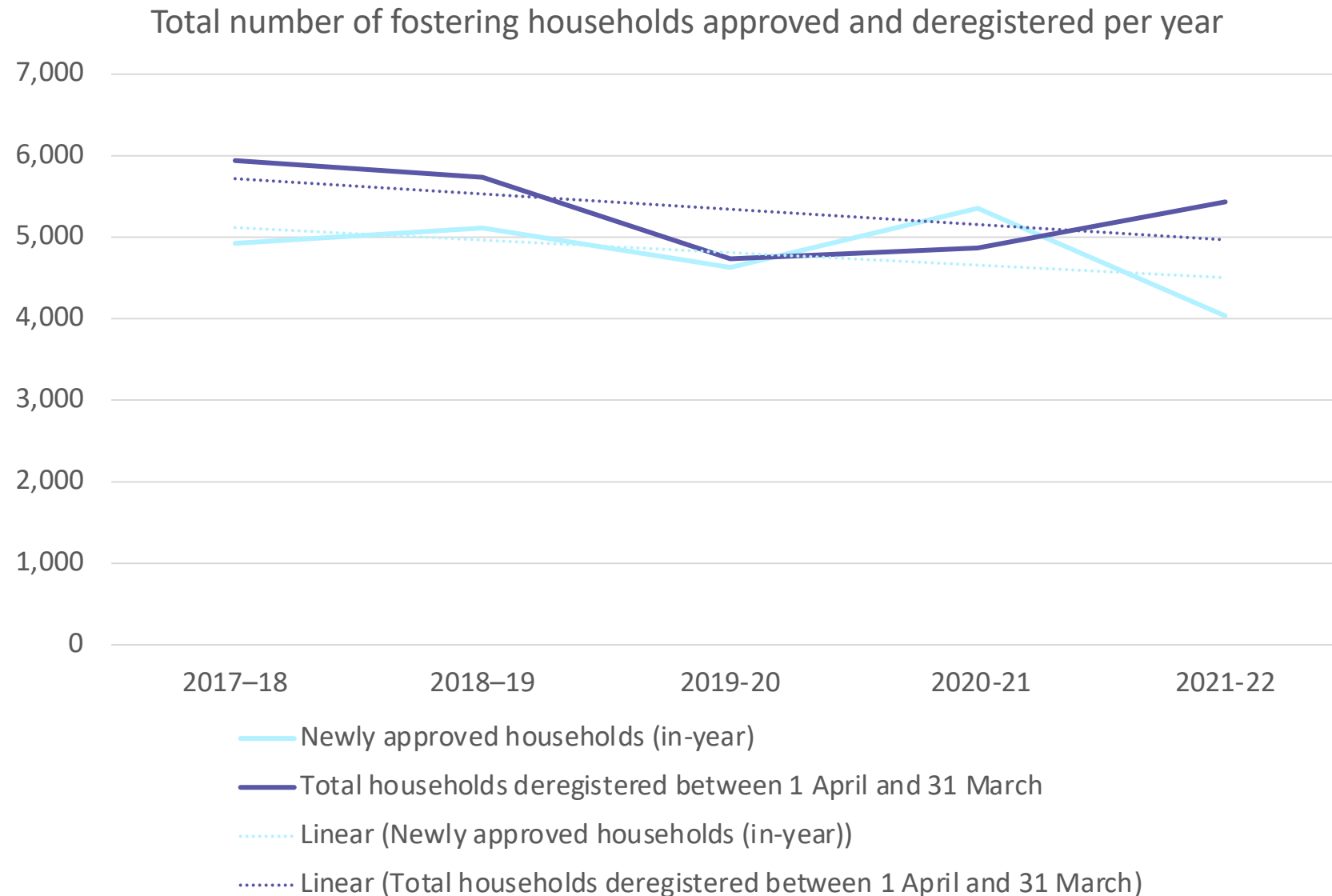
To provide an evidence base to improve the retention and recruitment of a diverse and stable pool of foster carers.

# What was our research design?



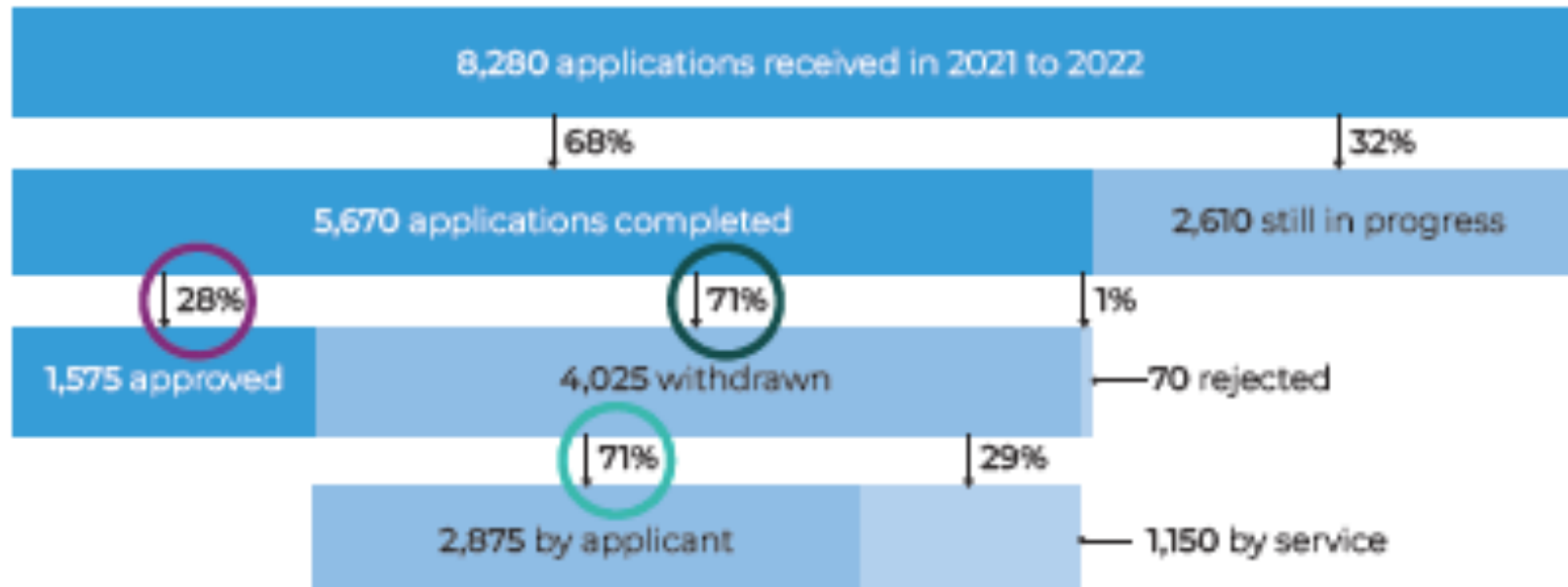


# Overall picture of foster carer recruitment and retention



# Ofsted statistics on recruitment and approval process (Data and analysis from Ofsted, 2022)

Applications received in 2021 to 2022, by status on 31 March 2022 (Analysis taken from Ofsted, 2022)



# Motivations to foster

Top 3 motivations to foster



N=1879

***“[We foster] to try and make these children’s lives better, give them choices they never had” (focus group participant)***

***“Getting a sufficient [payment] rate is important but it’s not the hook that’s gonna get people to apply” (focus group participant)***



# Recruitment strategies and assessment process



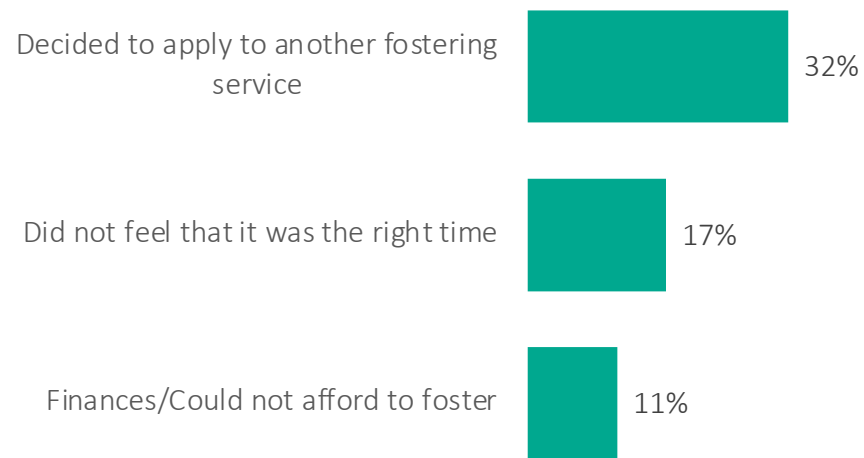
1. **Services discussed ‘back to basics’** along with social media (schemes like ‘refer a friend’)
2. **Struggle to get quality enquiries and applications**  
*‘We will consider anybody’*
3. **Increasingly upfront on finances and benefits** like council tax
4. **Foster carers critical of some messages** – want per Kantar (2022) “realistic, concrete, inclusive and nurturing”
5. **Carers reported application process helpful, long, gruelling,** with room for improvement
6. **Opportunities for being more culturally sensitive** (e.g., feeling judged when asked social workers to take off shoes)
7. **Important to have realistic idea of fostering**





# Reasons for not applying or withdrawing applications

Top 3 reasons for not applying, after enquiring



N=382

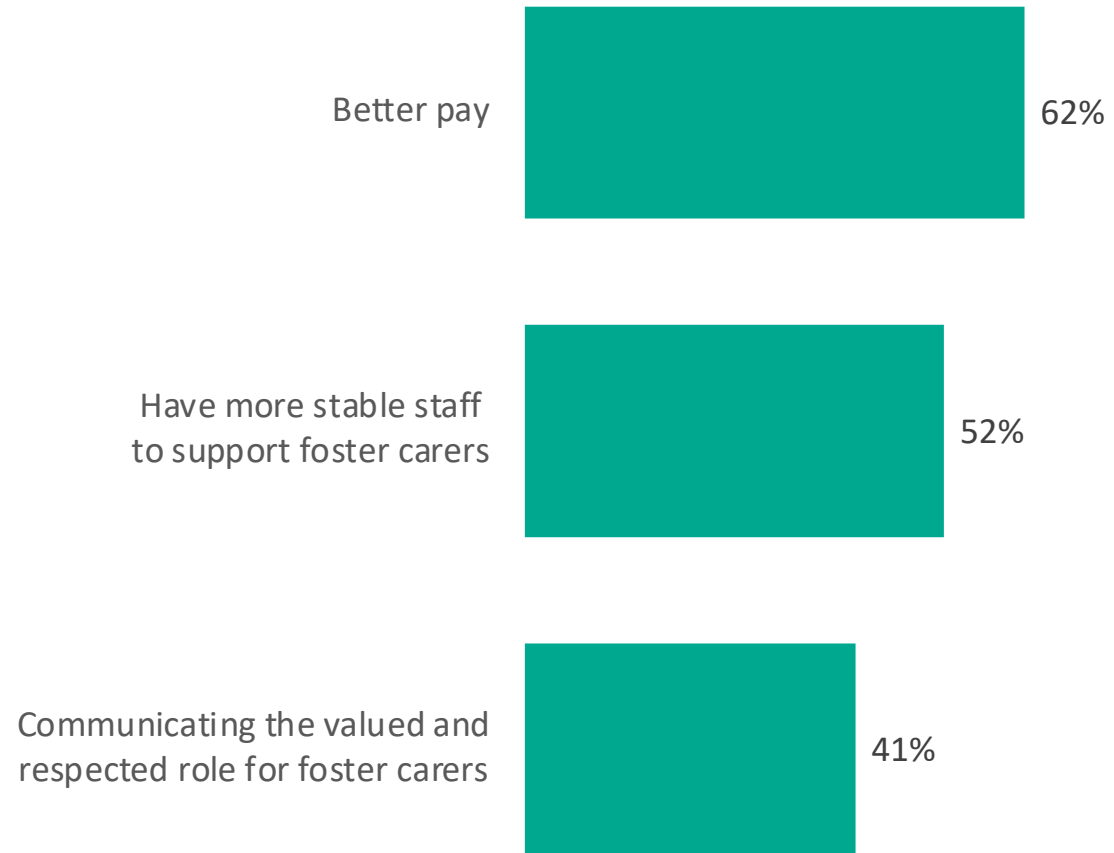
Top 3 reasons for withdrawing, after application



N=88



## Top 3 suggestions for improving recruitment



N=1879



# Recommendations to improve recruitment



Respect throughout the process



Better communication throughout the application process



A more streamlined application process



More cultural sensitivity



More personalised approaches



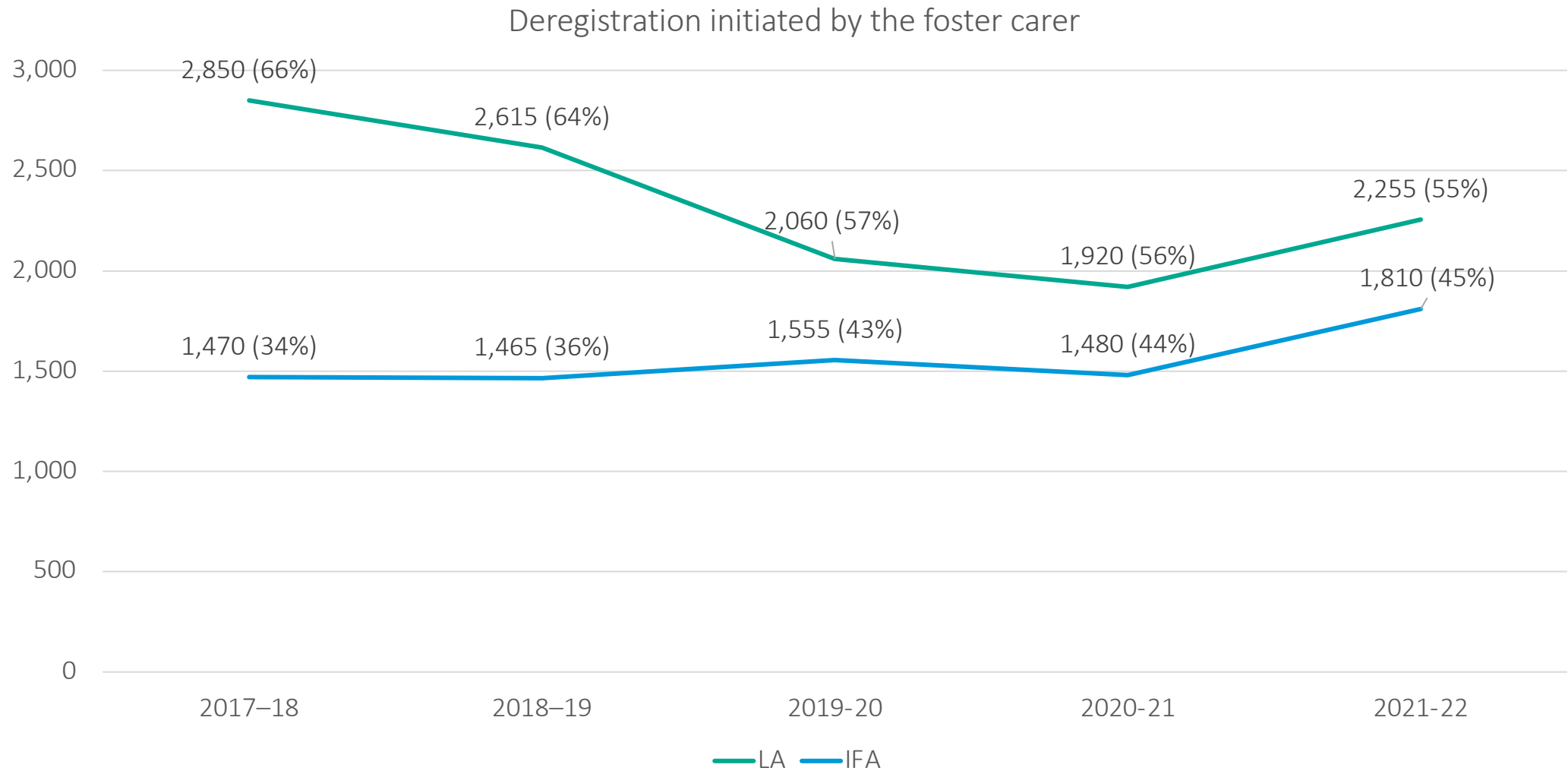
Discuss finances early



Assistance for prospective foster carers deciding whether fostering is a good fit for them



# State of foster carer retention



## Demographic differences in foster carers' satisfaction



**No statistically significant associations between overall satisfaction with fostering, and gender, employment status, age, ethnicity, education or religion**  
(State of the Nation survey)



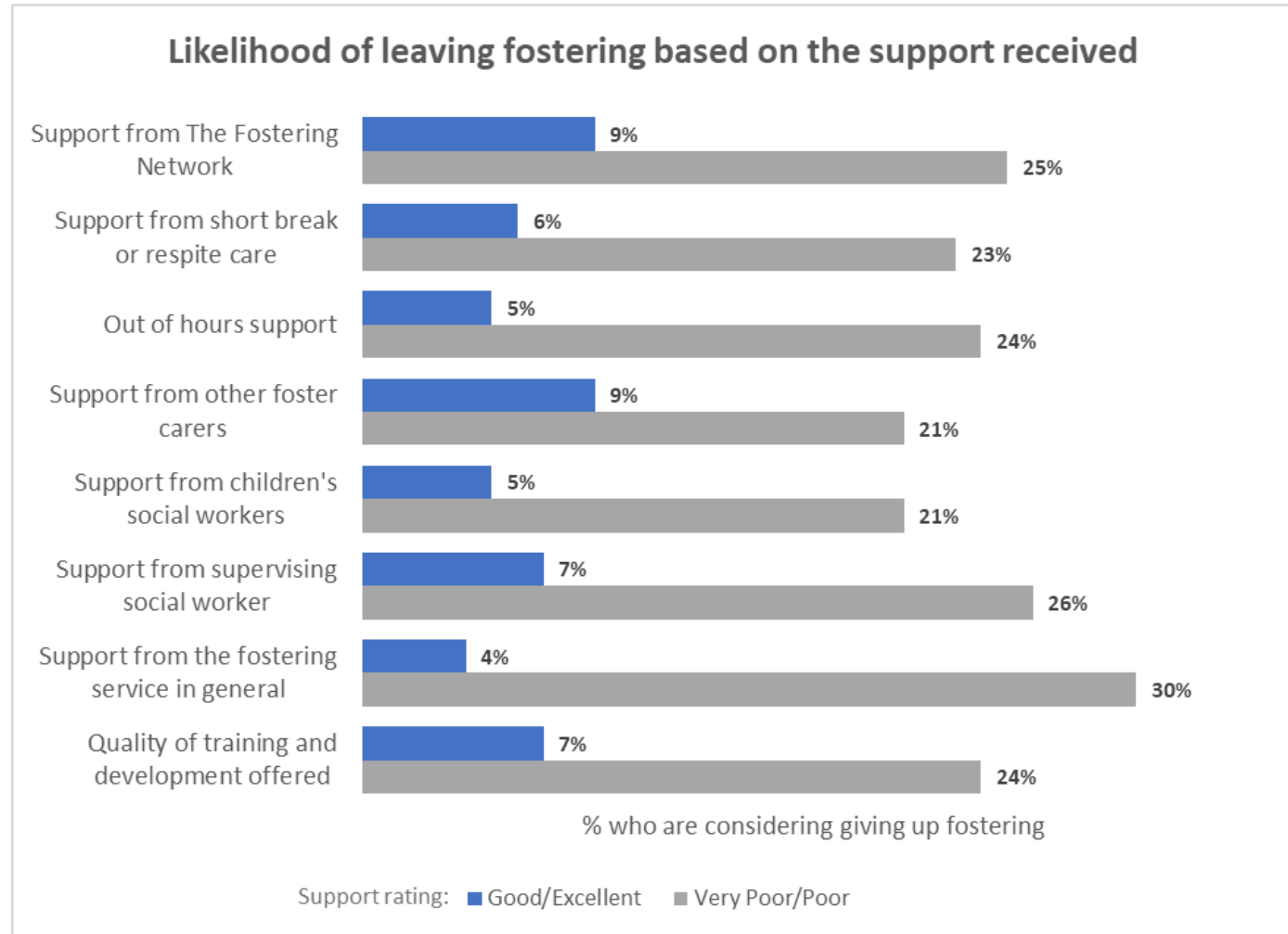
**Older foster carers (65+) more likely than 35-64s to...**  
- recommend fostering  
- agree that fostering has matched their expectations  
(this research)



# Importance of support and feeling valued

***"We're all trying to do the same job. We're all trying to look after children, but you need to look after the foster carers too."***

(Interviewee who left fostering)





## Financial factors and administration

*“They need to get this right, so as soon as you start you are properly compensated and don’t have to fight for it” (focus group participant)*

63%

of those who said **costs are met** would recommend fostering

7.5/10

overall experience rating of those who said **costs are met**

44%

of those who said **costs are not met** would recommend fostering

6.6/10

overall experience rating of those who said **costs are not met**





## Other reasons for considering continuing or stopping fostering

- **Challenges around children's needs, supports and flexible arrangements**
- **Being given honest and clear communication about children**
- **Difficulties around allegations**
- **Relationships with staff**





## Suggestions for improving retention



Improve pay for foster carers



Provide greater appreciation and respect for foster carers



Reduce the rate of turnover in social workers



Act on foster carers' feedback and complaints



Treat foster carers as professionals and standardise fostering processes



Be more respectful and aware of different cultures and diversity



## Final research reflections

- **Foregrounding word ‘retention’**
- **Findings not new to the sector, but should not be overlooked or discounted**
- **Foster carers report staying *in spite of* challenges in support, *because of* the children**



# Recruitment

## **Recommendations for Government:**

- Introduce buddy/mentor schemes during approval
- Co-produce regional marketing and comms recruitment content

## **Recommendations for fostering services:**

- Application processes incorp. lived experience, facilitate building quality relationships, are flexible, transparent and culturally sensitive.
- Seek relevant permissions to store the details of, and stay connected with, people who enquire to foster but don't apply or withdraw an application.

# Retention

## **Recommendations for Government:**

- Improve financial support, access to short breaks/sleepovers and allegations process.
- Introduce information sharing standards.
- Develop best practice framework for fostering.

## **Recommendations for fostering services:**

- Specialist out-of-hours and peer support.
- Timely and transparent administration of payments
- Exit interviews – [toolkit](#)

## Next steps

- Working closely with Government to implement ‘Stable homes, built on love’
- Translating research findings into practice
- Sharing the research findings across the UK
- Identifying opportunities for further research

# Thank you.

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