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A report to Staffordshire County Council

Evaluation of the Big Fostering Partnership (BFP): Final Report

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Contents

Glossary of terms

The Big Fostering Partnership = BFP

Local authority = LA

Big Issue Invest Ltd = BII

National Fostering Group = NFG

Life Chance Fund = LCF

Supervising Social Worker = SSW

Children and young people = CYP

Bridge to Foster = BtF

Registered managers = RMs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings from an independent evaluation of the Big Fostering Partnership (BFP) project. BFP was intended to provide specialist fostering arrangements for children and young people (CYP) currently living in residential children's homes. It was delivered over a four year period (September 2020 to September 2024) across seven local authority (LA) areas (Staffordshire, Dudley, Telford and Wrekin, Stoke-On-Trent, Sandwell, Warwickshire and Surrey) and through a Social Impact Bond (SIB), with Big Issue Invest Ltd (BII) providing the social finance and National Fostering Group (NFG) as the delivery arm. The partnership also accessed some funding via the Life Chances Fund (LCF) which provides top up contributions to outcomes-based contracts involving social investment.

The BFP intervention involved developing a long list of CYP with potential for step-down (111 CYP in June 2024), accessing referral information (88 CYP), undertaking family finding consultations (60 CYP), and making placement exploration offers (19 CYP). From this, a total of 16 progressed to planning and transition for a placement with foster carers. This was against a target of 92 placements over the four years, with no new placements made since April 2023.

Amongst the 16 BFP placements that were made, three were sustained over the 24 months of the project, one was ongoing, 11 disrupted before the 24 months and one was withdrawn by the LA before it started. The placements made resulted in a range of benefits for the children and carers involved (including in some cases where there were disruptions). These included long term placement stability for some, and positive relationships, experiences of family life, engagement in education and other activities, and development of social skills. It is also likely that LAs made some cost savings associated with residential step-down (e.g. for Staffordshire more than £200K per completed placement).

Where placements disrupted, the reasons reflected the complex challenges faced by the CYP involved, including behaviour and educational engagement issues, managing transition from institutional to family life, and capacity to invest in a fostering family environment. These are commonly the very reasons why bespoke and enhanced wrap-around support packages are required for those that may benefit from residential step-down.

The low number of placements made through BFP was affected by a shortage of foster carers (exacerbated through the COVID pandemic) and in particular restricted access to the experienced and skilled carers required for residential step-down. Equally, some stakeholders indicated that there had been potential for a more proactive partnership approach to recruit and source carers for the CYP identified for potential step-down.

Stakeholders valued some aspects of the BFP delivery model which sought to manage placements within this context. They cited regular review meetings between NFG and LAs, the flexibility of the NFG team to consider and accommodate needs, and senior leader commitments and active focus on internal readiness assessment and actions within some LAs. Delivery factors that contributed to some of the positive outcomes arising from placements also included the skills and experience of carers, a smooth transition process and the valued input and role of CYP key workers.

Equally, delivery lacked some consistency and fidelity in some cases which may have impacted overall effectiveness and placement stability. This includes some variable LA practices and diminishing interest over time, misinformation regarding CYP's presentation and needs, poor communication and capacity constraints amongst children's social workers, unsuitable placements made, and variable or missing elements of wraparound support.

It is also evident that features of the underpinning structural and management environment of the SIB partnership led to some mission drift from original aims and ultimately limited potential achievements. These included:

- Difficulties associated with the initial development of the SIB partnership arrangements meant that a "low maintenance" special purpose vehicle (SPV) was implemented, with reliance on just one carer agency as the delivery organisation.

- Weaknesses associated with contractual and performance management mechanisms, such as a focus on transactional (rather than relational) delivery, limited performance scrutiny and oversight and a lack of an independent and dedicated project management team with clear expectations linked to original delivery model intentions.

- Variable senior leadership, ownership and drive amongst some LAs and within NFG; the latter being impacted also by its own ongoing change linked to its commercial status.

- A support model that lacked flexibility, together with some delivery challenges and gaps, meant some lack of focus on specifying unique support needs and sourcing bespoke enhanced support packages to meet needs.

Over the four years since its launch (2020), therefore, the BFP did not fully meet original intentions. Benefits were evident for those involved in the placements made and disruptions were commonly linked to the complex challenges faced by the CYP involved. Ultimately, the low number of BFP placements made and sustained was undoubtedly affected by a national and local shortage of foster carers. Nevertheless, the evaluation also identified a mix of strategic management and delivery themes that hindered achievements for this residential step-down project.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from an independent evaluation of the Big Fostering Partnership (BFP) project. BFP was intended to provide specialist fostering arrangements for children and young people (CYP) currently living in residential children's homes. It was delivered over a four year period (September 2020 to September 2024) across seven local authority (LA) areas and through a Social Impact Bond (SIB). The partnership also accessed some funding via the Life Chance Fund (LCF) which provides top up contributions to outcomes-based contracts involving social investment.

1.1 The BFP Intervention

Intentions

The Big Fostering Partnership (BFP) was intended to provide residential step-down placements through:

- **Aim 1:** Promoting and growing the number of specialist foster carers provided by independent fostering agencies.

- **Aim 2:** Investing heavily in joint planning and transition activity prior to any CYP moving into a foster home.

- **Aim 3:** Providing a tailored bespoke package of support which is then regularly reviewed.

Partnership structure

The project was commissioned by a group of LAs (Staffordshire, Dudley, Telford and Wrekin, Stoke-On-Trent, Sandwell, Warwickshire and Surrey) to form a partnership including the LAs, a social finance organisation (Big Issue Invest Ltd (BII)), and a delivery arm (National Fostering Group (NFG)). BFP was delivered through a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) which was contracted by Staffordshire, as the lead authority. The SPV sub-contracted to NFG as the delivery organisation.

BFP's fee structure included a weekly placement fee and then regular outcome payments over a two-year period. This was intended to support the ultimate desired outcome of a stable family placement.

Delivery model

The team at NFG included the Head of the Creative Solutions Team who was project lead for BFP, a referral manager and a referral coordinator. Together this team were responsible for working with:

- LAs to identify CYP that may be ready for step-down from residential to foster care.

- The Group's fostering agencies to source and match foster carers.

Identification: The NFG team used a tracker which identified CYP with the potential for residential step-down across the participating LAs:

- LAs initially provided the NFG team with a long list of CYP with this potential. LAs had different systems for identifying this, often based on age or length of time in residential.

- Through discussion with LAs and further assessment, a short list was identified of CYP that were more immediately ready for step down or may be so within the next 6 to 12 months (currently completing assessments or waiting for circumstances to change in residential homes).

Readiness: Readiness assessments were undertaken to provide a view of the potential for CYP to be cared for within a foster home, including consideration of the presentation, needs and circumstances of the CYP, likely timescales and further work that may need to take place before a move could take place. Different approaches were taken across the LAs involved in BFP - some led the readiness process themselves (e.g. Staffordshire), whereas for others NFG completed the assessments (e.g. Dudley) working with the CYP's social worker and staff at their children's home.

Matching: The NFG team liaised with their fostering agencies (five in the relevant LA areas but potentially up to 32 agencies in the Group) to source potential foster carers and consider appropriate matching. This matching process considered geographic location, skills of the family, behaviour of the CYP, other children in the family and pets. The residential home would often have a role in the matching process, taking part in meetings and potentially undertaking a home visit.

Planning and transition: Based on the NFG's existing Bridge to Foster (BtF) model, a 4–6-week period (which could be extended if required) involved a gradual introduction of the CYP and the foster family. The CYP's residential home were engaged to deliver preparation work with the CYP, using books and story boards to introduce the family. Planning meetings involved the NFG team, the CYP social worker, and supervising social worker (SSW) from the carer agency. A transition plan was bespoke to each CYP, and might involve introduction meetings, visits to the home, building up to overnight and weekend stays before the final placement was made.

Wraparound support: This involved identification and delivery of wrap-around support for foster carers and the CYP to help increase the chances of a stable placement. Again, based around BtF, support packages included:

- Increased supervision for the family, initially delivered every two weeks by the care agency's Supervising Social Worker (SSW).

- A support worker for the CYP (referred to throughout the report as CYP key worker). Six hours of support per week as standard with extra support available where needs dictate (e.g. if child won't leave the house).

- Clinical support: A minimum of three sessions in the first 18 weeks and another three before the end of the first year. Reviewed by NFG and increased or decreased as required to meet the specific placement or carers' needs.

The intention was that levels of support would vary overtime according to the needs of individual placements, reducing where placements were stable or increasing if challenges were faced.

1.2 Evaluation Framework

The evaluation was commissioned to assess project delivery effectiveness and achievement of outcomes for the CYP that engaged with the project. Building on aims set out in the initial evaluation specification and scoping interviews with the LAs, BII and NFG, an Evaluation Framework was developed and is included in Appendix A. The core themes addressed are:

- Stakeholder experiences of the BFP intervention

- Outcomes and benefits - young people, foster carers, LAs

- Effectiveness of:

  - Elements of the BFP delivery

  - Operational and strategic management

  - Relationships between SIB partnership members

  - Shared practices and joint working

- Contribution of LA partnership, social finance and SPV arrangements

- Successes, challenges and constraints (and how these were overcome)

1.3 Evaluation methodology

The evaluation involved an initial scoping phase followed by primary research involving stakeholder interviews and case studies with nine BFP placements. Scoping took place between November 2023 and January 2024 and included consultations with strategic stakeholders (LAs, BII, BFP and NFG) and a review of programme documents and data.

During the primary research (August – November 2024) we further consulted strategic staff, interviewed operational stakeholders (carer agencies) and completed the 9 case studies. The latter involved interviews with registered managers, supervising social workers (SSW), CYP's social workers, CYP key workers, and foster carers. Whilst it was also the intention to speak with the clinician assigned to placements, this was not possible as they had left employment with NFG. Equally, the ambition to speak with some of the CYP was not in the event feasible or appropriate given individual circumstances.

Whilst feedback from across the nine case studies was used to inform the findings that follow, we do not reference any details or circumstances that could be used to identify the children and young people or the carers involved. Throughout we refer to the children and young people as **"the CYP"** and the foster carers as **"the carers"**.

Fieldwork was completed via a combination of one-to-one and group interviews on Teams and over the phone. Table 1 overleaf shows a breakdown of those interviewed by stakeholder group.

Table 1: Evaluation fieldwork

Stakeholder group	No. interviews
Strategic stakeholders:	
Social investor	2
BFP (Special Purpose Vehicle)	2
Operational stakeholders:	
NFG	3
Carer agencies – registered managers	4
LA commissioning and delivery teams	8 (including 16 individuals)
Placement stakeholders:	
Foster carers	2
CYP key workers	2
Children's social workers	1
Supervising social workers	3
Total	**27**

Source: York Consulting BFP fieldwork data 2023-24

Alongside the primary research, the following documents and data were reviewed:

- BFP Contract Review Reports – Nov 2022, September 2023, December 2023
- BFP management report – June 2024
- Service review meetings reports (Staffordshire)
- Placement and outcome data
- Background documents - BFP at a glance, SLT Business Case 2018, Pyramid SIB Subcontract

1.4 Report structure

The remainder of this report outlines:

- Programme performance and outcomes (Section 2)
- Delivery effectiveness associated with:
    - BFP placements (Section 3)
    - Sourcing foster carers (Section 4)
    - BFP delivery model (Section 5)
    - SIB model and LA partnership (Section 6)
- Conclusions (Section 7)
- Next steps for the evaluation (Section 8)

2. PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES

This section summarises features of performance for the BFP intervention, commenting on placements made, benefits arising, placement disruption reasons, and cost savings.

2.1 Outputs and placements made

As of June 2024,[1] the BFP intervention delivered the following performance outputs:

- There were 111 CYP on the tracking long list, with a total of 308 CYP added since the start of the contact, and 197 withdrawn. This was across the seven LAs.

- Full referral information (including LA referral, BFP referral and readiness assessment) had been provided for 88 CYP.

- Family Finding Consultations had been undertaken for 60 CYP (this includes discussing CYP at Family Finding Forums).

- A total of 19 placement exploration offers had been made, and 16 of these progressed to stage one (planning and transition) for a BFP placement.

The target of 92 placements delivered across LAs over four years was not met. Stakeholders reflected that this initial target had been optimistic within the context of a constrained market for foster carers. Seven placements were made in year 1 (June[2] 2020 to September 2021), one in year 2 (October 2021 to September 2022) and eight in year 3 (October 2022 to September 2023). No new placements have been made since April 2023.

Table 2: Placement length

Placement status	Start month	Length of foster placement
Completed (3)	June 2020 June 2021 June 2020	Ongoing – 4+ years Ongoing – 3+ years Ended – 2+ years
Withdrawn (1)	Nov 2020	0
Disrupted (11)	Jan 2021 Jan 2021 June 2021 Sep 2022 Oct 2022 Dec 2022 Feb 2023 Feb 2023 Feb 2023 Feb 2023 Apr 2023	4 months 4 months 9 months 18 months 5 months 2 months 4 months 4 months 9 months 10 months 2 months
Ongoing (1)	Jan 2023	22 months

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[1] BFP Management Report June 2024

[2] The BFP management report covers years beginning October and ending in September. However, in the first contracting year a couple of placements were made prior to the October 2020 start (June 2020).

Source: BFP Placement and outcomes data

Amongst the 16 BFP placements that were made:

• **Three were sustained over the 24 months of the project**, with two of these still ongoing; the other disrupted 3 months after completion.

• **One was withdrawn by the LA** before it started as the young person decided not to move.

• **Eleven disrupted** due the CYP's needs being too high for fostering and/or the CYP's behaviours. There was a mix of the LA and carers serving notice.

• **One placement was ongoing** (at 22 months when last data provided in November 2024).

2.2 Benefits arising from BFP

Children and young people

LA commissioners, operational and placement stakeholders identified several benefits (summarised in Figure 1 below) arising from BFP placements for the children and young people. This included stability within a foster placement for some and outcomes linked to relationships, family life, engagement in education, positive activities and health. Benefits were cited both for sustained placements and for most of the disrupted placements included as evaluation case studies. Some stakeholders also said there had been an opportunity for the practitioners supporting CYP to better understand and learn about their needs.

Figure 1: Outcomes and benefits for children and young people

• Long-term stability in foster placements • Positive experience of family life • More appropriate education provision • Increased engagement with education • Positive relationships • Better physical and mental health • Engagement in activities • Development of social skills • Practitioners learning about CYP's needs	*"The CYP is now part of a family and never had that experience before. The CYP now has stability"* (SSW) *"We developed good relationships and still keep in touch"* (Foster carer) *"The CYP positively experienced some mothering and some practical hands-on activities"* (Registered manager) *"The CYP's self-care and eating habits have improved"* (Foster carer)

Local authorities

LA commissioners and operational stakeholders said there had been some value for LA teams associated with the systems introduced for identification and matching elements of BFP delivery. This included through, for example, NFG resourcing and co-producing readiness assessments and providing a dedicated fostering agency team to look at referrals and make placements. Service review meetings had also provided a specific arena for discussing children's needs.

Nevertheless, LA commissioners and strategic stakeholders did not feel there had been any real potential to share learning across LAs or to support any wider system changes for the LA teams supporting children and young people in care. Equally, given the small number of placements made there had been no impact on the LAs' ability to meet their sufficiency duty.

Cost savings

In addition to the benefits observed for children and young people, there were also potential benefits associated with cost savings for the LAs in being able to step CYP down from more expensive residential care to a foster care placement. Data provided from Staffordshire LA[3] provides an indicative view of the level of cost saving achievable for both sustained and displaced placements:

- The total saving for the three completed placements over the 2 year period for which they were sustained was just over £633,000.

- This is an average of over £210,000 per placement (over £8,750 per month per placement).

- For the two placements that continued beyond the 24 months of the BFP intervention, this monthly saving continued to be made.

- For the placement that was disrupted, before this took place a saving of just under £40,000 had been achieved, representing a monthly saving of just under £5,000 per month.

2.3 BFP disruption reasons

Each placement disruption had unique circumstances. Nevertheless, feedback from LA commissioners, operational and placement stakeholders for the evaluation case studies suggested a series of common, often interrelated reasons, including:

- CYP behaviour issues at home and/or school e.g. dysregulation, verbal aggression.

- CYP education challenges e.g. avoidance, behaviour, inconsistent attendance.

- CYP engagement with family e.g. not ready for transition nor able to invest in family life.

- Birth family involvement/disruption.

- Incomplete or misleading information about the CYP's presentation, needs and interests provided at the matching stage.

- Family environments unsuitable to specific needs of CYP (e.g. placed with other children or with animals).

- Delays and challenges associated with putting in place education provision.

- Variable support in place e.g. changes in social workers, no key workers, limited support for transition/managing CYP expectations.

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[3] Given that Staffordshire has the only sustained placements, it was not considered necessary to request similar data from the other LAs.

3. EFFECTIVENESS: BFP PLACEMENTS

This section captures the range of stakeholder perspectives regarding factors that contributed to the success or otherwise of the BFP placements made.

3.1 Worked well or not so well

The table below summarises features that stakeholders identified as working well or not so well in relation to the identification and placement of young people through the BFP intervention. This includes evidence from across the interviews and cases studies, including LA commissioning managers, NFG, registered managers (RMs), supervising social workers (SSWs), children's social workers, CYP key workers and foster carers.

Table 3: Successes and challenges for BFP placements - summary

Worked well	Did not work well
• CYP able to invest in family life • Good carer skills - experienced, therapeutic, mothering • Positive/smooth transition process – regular visits, build up to overnight and weekend stays • Regular professional review meetings • Excellent carers – supportive, advocate for and understand CYP needs, part of family • Effective clinical psychologist input • Valued role of CYP key worker • Delivery of effective respite for carers	• Poor information regarding CYP presentation/ interests • Managing CYP expectations • Unsuitable family environments – other children, animals, single parent • Unsuitable carer matches – inexperienced • Insufficient consideration of CYP needs (complex needs, moving from institutional to family life) • Frequent SW changes • Insufficient time for professional meetings • Not all relevant professionals involved in review meetings • CYP/key worker not involved in review meetings • No CYP key worker in place • Clinician not in place immediately • Respite care not in place • Lack of support after completion

YCL analysis of qualitative evaluation evidence, 2024

3.2 BFP placement success factors

Success factors were linked to the skills and experience of the carers, a smooth transition period, valued input from the clinical psychologist, and the role of the CYP's key worker:

• Skills and experience of some carers, including those that were resilient and experienced, able to offer therapeutic support and offer a family environment:

> *"They have gone above and beyond, understand how to support the CYP, and advocate for them"* (key worker)

- Transition involved getting to know visits, building up to overnight and weekend stays.

  "Transition went at the right pace, carers and CYP involved in decision making – only moved to full placement when they felt ready" (SSW)

- Effective joint working amongst professionals, including thorough discussions initially on how to support and manage, regular progress and stability meetings, and engaged and supportive social workers.

- Valued input from the clinical psychologist, providing an opportunity for carers to offload, helping to reframe CYP's behaviour, identifying strategies for managing CYP's behaviour and expectations.

  "The therapist was brilliant, easy to talk to and offered more sessions than originally planned – offered us ideas and strategies to support our CYP to invest in family life and develop better sleep routines" (foster carer)

- The role of the CYP's key worker, providing some tailored one-to-one support and offering respite for the carers:

  "The key worker provided someone else for the CYP to have a relationship with, that could talk through issues with" (RM)

3.3 BFP placement challenges faced

Challenges faced, particularly by those placements that disrupted, were commonly interrelated and included some misinformation, unsuitable matches, lack of joint consideration of needs, external influences and variable support packages:

- Information not provided during readiness/planning phases regarding the CYP's presentation, needs and interests. This included information about previous behaviours (at school and home environment) and CYP's preferences regarding living with other children.

- Placements in family environments or with carers that were unsuitable for the CYP's needs. Stakeholder reflections suggest that matching was sometimes ill-informed or had not effectively taken account of the carers' experience or the family environment. This included CYP inappropriately placed in families with younger children or animals, and newer less-experienced carers or single-parent carers being put in a position of risk.

- Some lack of joint consideration of CYP needs during planning and delivery of placements:

  – Support planning did not always reflect the CYP's complex needs, expectations, and need to manage transitions from institutional to family life.

    "There could perhaps have been more joint consideration from the outset of the CYP's past, the support they needed and what we were trying to achieve" (SSW)

  – Progress meetings or joint professional meetings did not always consistently involve all relevant professionals. Several stakeholders also said it would have been valuable to include the CYP or the CYP key worker in professionals' progress meetings.

> *"It might have been helpful to have a meeting with the CYP, the carers, SSW and clinician – sometimes they spend a lot of time talking about the children but not with them"* (SSW)

- External influence of birth families that impacted on the CYP's ability to invest in family life.
- Missing elements of the support package and variable support during placements, including frequent changes in social workers, an example where therapeutic support was not in place straight away, and some CYP who did not have key workers allocated to support them.

> *"There was a lack of consistent and informed input from children's services when it was needed most (potential for disruption) – it was hard for the CYP to cope with change"* (SSW)

> *"There was no CYP key worker in place, which also meant no respite for the carers"* (Registered manager)

These placement specific factors impacted effectiveness and ultimately contributed to some of the disruptions that occurred. Stakeholder reflections also, however, pointed to a broader range of underpinning issues that influenced the effectiveness and fidelity of the BFP intervention and elements of support provided. These are explored in the following sections of the report.

4. EFFECTIVENESS: SOURCING FOSTER CARERS

This section considers stakeholder perspectives regarding the most commonly identified challenge for the BFP intervention: that of being able to source appropriately skilled and experienced foster carers to support the complex needs of the CYP identified for potential step-down.

4.1 Shortage of carers

Strategic and operational stakeholders referenced a shortage of carers as the most fundamental reason for the low number of placements made through the BFP intervention. This is both a national and local issue and has evidently restricted success for other similar residential step-down initiatives (for example Fostering Better Outcomes and DN2 Stars) [4]. Some stakeholders also reflected that:

> ***"The overall target for 92 placements had not taken account of the COVID pandemic which had far reaching impacts on foster carer availability."***
> *(Operational stakeholder)*

The COVID pandemic exacerbated an existing shortage, given that some foster carers decided to leave fostering as children became 18 or moved on, and others experienced loss or changes to family structure that meant they could no longer foster. Equally, increased opportunities for home working through other jobs meant fostering lost part of its unique appeal, resulting in fewer available foster carers. Carer agencies cited significant reductions in the pool of carers they had on their books. They said their carers are heavily utilised and they have faced challenges in growing their pool of specialised carers, with agencies competing over the smaller pool of existing foster carers.

4.2 Access to experienced carers

These changes also tightened the market in particular for the experienced carers required for residential step down for CYP with the most complex needs. RMs emphasised the small number of foster carers (commonly estimating around 5% of their total carer pool) that had the skills, experience or environment appropriate for taking CYP stepping down from residential care.

Stakeholders cited a range of additional factors that served to restrict availability of the most experienced and skilled foster carers required to meet the often complex needs of CYP stepping down from residential care. These included:

- Post COVID, carers have had more influence over decisions with many choosing to support younger children with less complex needs.

> ***"Why wait for a transition period if another CYP needs a home today"*** *(RM)*

- Payment models and targets for carer agencies (focussed on occupancy rates and number of CYP placed in families) tend to incentivise faster transitions for CYP with less complex

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[4] YCL is aware of this through our evaluations of these other interventions. Phase 2 of the BFP evaluation will explore these and other similar interventions to further consider the question of "what works in residential set-down?".

needs. There is therefore a tension between the demand for general and specialist placements.

> *"It may be possible to fill three general placements with one foster carer, whereas a specialist placement for a CYP with more complex needs may need to be with a foster carer that doesn't have any other children"* (RM)

- Whilst the BFP model includes a retainer payment during the planning and transition period, this is less than payments when a CYP is with the carer and there is no guarantee that the placement will be made at the end of the transition period.

- When BFP was initially launched, the payment model (£1,500 per week) was attractive, but as the market has changed over the four years, this offer has become less attractive to agencies.

It is important to recognise that these wider challenges facing the foster carer market may also have influenced some of the decision making for those cases that disrupted, and in particular where CYP were placed with less experienced carers or in environments unsuitable to their presentation or needs.

4.3 Recruitment and sourcing

Actions taken by the NFG team to support recruitment and sourcing of potential carers for those CYP identified on the short-list included:

- Meeting regularly with RMs at NFG's carer agencies to identify carers for current and future potential placements, including discussion of:
  - Carers becoming available, recent applicants and those in the pipeline.
  - Identifying ways to upskill during assessment or undertake training/case studies with them until they are approved.
  - Making the most of transferable skills and talking about the Bridge to Foster package so carers are ready.

- More recently, sourcing potential carers for referrals directed via a central referral hub.

- Putting in place the retainer payment to help maintain potential carers through the planning and transition phase.

- Attending support groups to promote BFP and raise awareness with potential new carer applicants, and meeting with applicants during assessment.

- Providing training to agencies' Carer Recruitment Officers, attending step-down training to discuss potential referrals and answer questions, and meeting with assessment managers to discuss the assessment pipeline.

- Local information events and targeted recruitment (via social media channels) with populations who work/have worked in residential care to advertise step-down fostering.

- A robust training system with online modules, plus a therapeutic model and in-person training to support carers in advance of matching to the more complex cases.

Operational stakeholders noted that recruitment of more experienced carers had started to pick over the past year, but this was too late for the BFP intervention, given that LCF funding came to an end in September 2024.

Nevertheless, feedback from LA commissioners and strategic stakeholders indicated that the BFP model also lacked a clearly defined or proactive partnership approach to recruiting, sourcing and matching carers in an individual or personalised way:

• Some thought there was potential for NFG to have taken a more aggressive approach both for recruiting carers externally but also targeting internal NFG carers to see if they would be willing to explore the model and upskill.

> *"There was some discussion of action plans around recruitment, but it felt like we were only ever looking at the existing pool of carers."* (LA)

• Some suggested the reach of the project and its ability to source local carers for the CYP identified was restricted by the SPV contract being with just one delivery organisation (NFG), who engaged only with the care agencies within its group. The original vision had included an intention to engage more carer agencies. The initial payment model and market conditions had made it difficult to achieve this.

> *"I'm not sure how much genuine priority BFP referrals are given or what was done to look for more independent fostering agencies to join."* (LA)

• Equally, based on discussions and intentions considered through the initial development of the BFP concept, some stakeholders had anticipated more proactive campaigns, which were not in the event taken forward (nor specified as an expectation). These included:

  – A "market place" approach, where carer agencies have monthly meetings to discuss potential matches, and social workers present individual children's profiles and needs.

  – Relationships between fostering agencies and social workers to help identify potential carers who, with appropriate support and training over time (6 months) could take step-down placements for specific CYP who also need time for step-down preparation.

  – A recruitment drive to attract potential carers with transferable skills (e.g., those working in education, SEND or similar), including incentives, rewards and a training package to develop their skills. To "create a production line" of carers to support CYP ready for step-down.

  – A focused piece of work to develop visual profiles to help promote CYP on the long list with potential carers, to describe their personas and interests and help make them more accessible to carers.

> *"Had there been a more active partnership between the LAs and care providers, they could have been more creative about encouraging foster carers to come in and training them"* (Strategic stakeholder)

5. EFFECTIVENESS: BFP DELIVERY MODEL

This section outlines stakeholder views regarding successes and challenges associated with elements of the BFP delivery model, including identification, readiness, matching, planning and transition, and wraparound support.

The table below summarises some of the successes and challenges identified by the stakeholders interviewed.

Table 4: Successes and challenges for BFP delivery model

Worked well	Did not work well
Identification of CYP for step-down	
• Some systematic LA processes • Active focus from senior leaders within LAs • Regular review meetings NFG/LAs • Flexibility from NFG on referrals	• LA resource and priority challenges • More recent declining interest from LAs
Readiness assessment	
• NFG provide resource for readiness for some LAs • Some helpful in learning more about CYP	• Lack of LA ownership • Information inaccuracies and delays from residential homes • Capacity constraints impinged on readiness actions
Matching	
• LA dual search for carers alongside BFP matching	• Higher complexity of need than anticipated – requiring solo occupancy and specific locations • Limited number of placements found • Delay sourcing education provision • Unsuitable matches and BFP placements
Planning and transition	
• Added value time and opportunity • Planning education changes • Some good information sharing	• Information on behaviour management strategies • Communication with social workers • Some inaccurate and delayed information
Wrapround support	
• Respite for carers • Additional supervision • Dedicated clinical support	• Gaps in support for new carers and wraparound and therapeutic input for CYP • Responsibility for sourcing and delivering enhanced support

YCL analysis of qualitative evaluation evidence, 2024

Several positive elements of the model have been highlighted, such as some effective LA identification processes, NFG's flexible approach to review and referral, the valuable planning and transition period, and some crucial support and respite in place for carers. Nevertheless, the range of challenges point to some unsuitable placements and inconsistent delivery (misinformation, capacity constraints and delays, and gaps in support). Case study evidence and stakeholder perceptions indicate that the intention to identify and deliver a bespoke and tailored package of support was not achieved.

> *"It's another well-meaning service, to have step down, but very difficult to deliver on."* (Operational stakeholder)

5.1 Identification of CYP for step-down

There was some variance in approach taken by LAs to identify CYP for the initial long list to share with the NFG team. Some had been able to put in place effective internal processes, with senior leader commitment to the approach and an active focus on internal readiness assessments and actions.

Example LA processes

We had an internal panel (with representatives from education, team managers and social workers) which regularly reviews all residential children and identifies those suitable for BFP (with a long-term fostering goal).

We set up a panel to regularly monitor and discuss whether CYP were ready for step-down. The panel included representatives from district teams, disability, therapy, social workers, education and fostering/residential commissioners. The panel considered CYP on a case by case basis, alongside up to date documentation, looking at stability of the CYP, mental health, behaviour, how they were coping and whether they would be able to transition to foster care.

There were regular visits to consider children in residential, what their care plans are, and whether we can step them down. Social workers could see that there was a commitment from senior leaders, and as it was being revisited and discussed regularly it became something they were aware of.

Other LAs had faced resource or priority challenges which meant they had not developed similarly systematic approaches either for identifying or supporting readiness assessments for CYP.

> *"We lacked the dedicated resource required to support identification and readiness activities for the long list of CYP"* (LA)

> *"BFP wasn't promoted, and we are encouraged to use in-house carers as much as possible. Senior leaders make decisions around who goes where and then this filters down to the social workers"* (LA)

Commonly LA stakeholders said that the regular review meetings between NFG and individual LA teams were valuable discussions about the needs and potential readiness of CYP on the long list. There were also some useful and targeted discussions regarding live placements and the risk of breakdown.

Nevertheless, the limited success with finding matches, together with disruptions for placements that were found, negatively impacted on the interest and engagement amongst LAs over time. LA and operational stakeholders cited diminishing confidence and social workers being disheartened when matches did not materialise. In this context, stakeholders recognised some flexibility from the NFG team in considering CYP for referral and seeking to accommodate their needs. More recently, given the challenges in sourcing carers for those on the list, the NFG team had started to consider referrals for those on the edge of residential provision.

> *"The NFG team were very active and flexible in discussing potential referrals and suitability, but it was always in the context of carer availability concerns."* *(Strategic stakeholder)*

5.2 Readiness assessments

Stakeholders described an intention for the readiness element of delivery to build on assessments from residential homes, social workers and NFG. These would capture the CYP's voice and provide an action framework for CYP (to support step down) and carers (skills development and support). Positive reflections on this process from LAs included:

> *"Readiness meetings take place with residential teams, and they are helpful in learning more about child. This seems to work really well."* *(LA)*

> *"NFG listen and co-produce the readiness assessment – we would not have the resource to do this ourselves"* *(LA)*

Evidence from other stakeholders, however, identified some barriers associated with delivering readiness steps for CYP. Strategic stakeholders perceived a lack of ownership amongst some LAs of the readiness assessment process meant some did not always actively work with CYP to change things (e.g. attendance at school). Information sharing and capacity constraints were also highlighted.

Information constraints

Evidence from residential homes did not always effectively capture CYP's presentation and needs and sometimes reflected inaccuracies. Operational stakeholders cited examples:

- The residential home had not provided accurate information about the CYP who was not good with other children (and was placed in a family with other children).
- There was a delay in receiving information which meant the children were placed before information about their aggressive behaviour (which became apparent during the placement) was provided.

> ### Capacity constraints
>
> LA and strategic stakeholders said that a mixture of motivations (amongst residential staff) and capacity constraints (social worker caseloads) could act as obstacles to taking forward readiness actions with CYP.
>
> *"It can be convenient for residential staff to have a CYP settled"* (LA)
>
> *"Social worker caseloads are high and so if they know the CYP is safe, they are unlikely to allocate time to challenging residential about taking steps towards stepping down with the CYP"* (LA)

5.3 Matching CYP to foster carers

The matching element of BFP faced a series of constraints, not least of which was a higher complexity of need than originally intended amongst the children identified by LAs. This added challenge to the matching process, within an already restricted market (as referenced in Section 4), sometimes requiring matches within solo occupancy placements or with carers within very specific locations due to the need to maintain existing education placements.

> *"As the project progressed, LAs wanted to try and place older children and children with more complex needs than had been intended."* (Strategic stakeholder)
>
> *"Due to needs, some CYP are not able to move school which increases difficulties in finding placement within very specific locations."* (LA)

Step-down placements also require specialist carers with the right mindset and dedicated homes, placing further limits on carer availability. Registered managers commonly stated they would not go ahead with matches if they couldn't match need with a high level of confidence that the placement will last, and that carers would be able to manage – *"otherwise, there is a risk of retraumatising the CYP."* (Operational stakeholder)

As a result, LAs commented on the number of CYP being ready to step down and on the list for some time, but no BFP placement being found. Or, in some cases, placements being found but delays due to sourcing appropriate education provision within the relevant location. Due to these limitations, some LAs said they had not relied on BFP and had tended to conduct a dual search for carers alongside the BFP search/matching process.

Equally, there is evidence from case studies (see Section 3) and stakeholder perceptions that the challenging environment led to some 'unsuitable' matches, including with newer carers and/or households with other children (where the CYP presentation required solo occupancy). Operational influences may also have encouraged placements being assigned to BFP that *"did not fit the model"* (strategic stakeholder).

Unsuitable matches

Some BFP placements were made with newer carers and some within households with other children (where the CYP presentation and needs required solo occupancy). Stakeholders reflected that this was sometimes because these were the ones that were available, rather than because they were suitable for supporting the needs of the CYP. LAs cited examples where there were poor relationships with other children within the household, that carers did not sufficiently understand the CYP's presentation and needs or carers had not met expectations by being available full-time as a carer and at weekends.

Internal pressures to make BFP placements were also evident, including the LCF funding incentive (LAs could reclaim around a fifth of placement fees from LCF funding for BFP placements). Strategic and LA stakeholders identified cases that did not fit the BFP model, including one CYP that required a long-term personal assistant (rather than key worker) and another with *"too many risks associated with their mental health – they should have been a placement for service, not a 2-year payment by results contract"* *(strategic stakeholder).*

5.4 Planning and transition

Stakeholders identified the planning and transition phase as an important feature of the BFP delivery model. Registered managers said it added value compared to the 'business as usual' model for foster care placements, providing time and opportunity to meet children's social workers, sort practicalities and consider CYP views and preferences.

> *"Sorting out the practicalities can make or break a placement – sorting out schools, contact with birth family etc "* *(operational stakeholder)*

One of the most common risks for this phase of delivery relates to sourcing education provision for the CYP. Operational stakeholders said that where education change is required (e.g. moving from in-house residential provision to mainstream) this can be a big change for the CYP that needs to be planned for, and there can be some significant delays.

Effective information sharing during this stage was also highlighted as crucial, with perceptions that this had been "generally good" but there was room for improvement. Stakeholders cited examples where:

- More information could have been offered regarding behaviour management strategies used in residential settings that could be mirrored through the foster placement.
- Communication with social workers had been a challenge or subject to delay.
- There was some inaccurate, limited or delayed information regarding the CYP's presentation and needs, as referenced earlier.

5.5 Wraparound support

The support package provided for placements that were made through BFP was based on NFG's existing Bridge to Foster model. This incorporated the transition phase plus increased

supervision for carers (from the carer agency's supervising social workers), a support worker for the CYP (also providing daytime respite for carers) and clinical support delivered by an NFG psychotherapist. Some operational stakeholders reflected positively on elements of this model in practice, particularly in relation to the support enabled for carers:

- Respite for carers is particularly important in the context of CYP moving from residential (where staff have the opportunity to recharge between shifts, which is something not afforded within the foster care environment).

- Additional supervision alongside clinical support for carers is equally valued given the more complex presentation and needs of the CYP involved.

- Carers engaged well with clinical support which allowed them space to talk and access practical advice on building relationships and supporting CYP needs.

- A dedicated clinician working with foster carers enabled a clinical package which operated in a bespoke needs-led way, increasing where stability had been difficult.

> *"The carer agency provided more intense support for the carer as it was clear that the CYP's behaviour was deteriorating – this is more than you would see for normal placements."* (LA)

However, LA and operational stakeholder perceptions suggest that the support model lacked flexibility or a focus on tailoring to meet CYP and carer needs and included gaps in the support offered for individual placements. The case studies in Section 4 highlight examples where CYP key workers were not in place and some missed opportunities to involve key workers and the CYP's voice in clinical/professionals meetings. In addition, stakeholders point to some poor engagement from children's social workers, uncertainty about supervision and clinical support, potential for more advanced training for newer carers, and a lack of wraparound and therapeutic input for CYP.

> *"There is lots of change in social workers, and sometimes a poor response – feels like we are doing their job sometimes."* (Operational stakeholder)
>
> *"It was not clear that supervision or a support worker was in place for two placements – we would have expected a lot more going in from NFG."* (LA)
>
> *"Future matches will push for more advanced training for new carers during the early stages of placement."* (Operational stakeholder)
>
> *"Enhanced packages of support with other agencies would use psychological support for CYP – execution of BFP has not been as we had hoped for."* (LA)
>
> *"If we had been aware of the challenges, there may have been something we could have wrapped around the CYP, or we could have asked NFG to do this."* (LA)

Some questions were also raised about whose responsibility it should be for sourcing and delivering wraparound support for CYP.

> *"The agency has to source the enhanced support, when it should be provided by Bridge to Foster/NFG."* (Operational stakeholder)

"It is sometimes difficult to source and deliver the packages of support, and we are not always fully informed about needs when the placement is made." (Operational stakeholder)

6. EFFECTIVENESS: SIB MODEL AND LA PARTNERSHIP

This section reflects stakeholder feedback regarding the Social Impact Bond (SIB) management and LA partnership approach adopted for the Big Fostering Partnership (BFP). In doing so it considers a range of structural and management factors that have underpinned and (often negatively) impacted effective BFP delivery.

6.1 Initial development

Development of a SIB delivery approach for the original BFP concept was beset with difficulties from the outset. The LAs' initial communications and negotiations (with Staffordshire as the lead) with the social investor involved in the original Life Chances Fund (LCF) funding bid were not successful. Big Issue Invest (BII) were identified as an alternative funder, though at the time they had limited prior experience of working in children's care.

Strategic stakeholders also reflected that the LCF requirement that delivery should involve a social investor and SIB approach ruled out the potential for an open LA procurement process to identify an appropriate delivery partner. Instead, BII determined through market testing that the National Fostering Group (NFG) was the only agency with **"social purpose wanting to engage with pay by results (PBR)."** (Strategic stakeholder)

6.2 SIB partnership and structure

Alongside identifying NFG as the delivery partner, BII set up what one stakeholder described as a **"low maintenance special purpose vehicle (SPV)"**. This had a skeleton structure and placed onus on, or "trusted" the delivery partner, to lead and manage the BFP delivery model. Stakeholders reflected on some weaknesses associated with the contractual and performance management mechanisms in place as part of this:

- **Lack of incentives for delivery partner:** *"The outcomes-based incentives were not reflected within the contract with the delivery partner, which meant all the risk was with BII – there was nothing to influence NFG's behaviour and whether they made placements or not." (LA)*

- **Limited scrutiny and oversight:** *"There was no separation between management/ oversight and delivery." (Strategic stakeholder)*

- **No clear specification:** *"Expectations were not clearly defined nor set out in terms of the package and how original goals would be achieved." (Strategic stakeholder)*

- **Ambitious targets:** *"The target of 92 placements across five of NFG's care agencies was unrealistic especially in light of the impact of the COVID pandemic." (Operational stakeholder)*

- **Transactional rather than relational:** *"The PBR outcomes approach focuses arrangements on transactional rather than relational arrangements required with LA and social worker teams. (Strategic stakeholder)*

As a result, some of the mechanisms that might be expected to be in place (either within the SPV or delivery partner) to drive delivery and performance were not evident, for example:

- An **independent and dedicated delivery team, with clearly specified roles and responsibilities** to manage and deliver the BFP intervention (including sourcing carers, understanding and planning for needs, and putting together an enhanced package of support). Whilst the Creative Solutions Team within NFG fulfilled some of these aspects, they lacked some independence (delivering alongside broader roles within the organisation) and clarity of expectation or delivery for some functions (feedback from earlier sections suggests some lack of specification and/or delivery e.g. sourcing carers or determining tailored packages of support).

- A **well-defined and transparent delivery model and theory of change**. Whilst initial process maps were developed at the outset, a clear service specification or framework was not evident, for example setting out what was expected to:

  - Achieve a proactive partnership approach to recruiting and sourcing carers (beyond just NFG's carer agencies).

  - Understand CYP's presentation and needs, then source, deliver and monitor the tailored support package required.

- Independent **performance management and scrutiny structures**.

NFG organisational changes

Within NFG, progress with setting up BFP delivery mechanisms was driven by the senior leader involved with initial contracting, who *"had some understanding of and was committed to original intentions* [as set out in the three aims in Section 1]*" (Strategic stakeholder).* This included some initial process maps and arrangements to develop LA relationships and review meetings.

However, due to changes in NFG's business and commercial structure, this strategic lead for BFP left the organisation. Ongoing change within NFG and its allied fostering agencies meant a loss of continuing ownership or strategic commitment to the original BFP delivery concept and intentions.

Mission drift

Most stakeholders identified that the loss in commitment and drive within NFG, combined with a low maintenance SPV and lack of clear contractual expectations contributed to *"mission drift"* for the BFP programme. Reflections from earlier sections also highlight factors that have limited focus or achievements in relation to the original goals:

- Variable commitment and diminishing interest from LA partners, plus social worker capacity constraints impacted on the 'investment in joint planning and transition' (Aim 2).

- The lack of a proactive partnership approach to recruiting, sourcing, training and matching carers limited the potential to 'promote and grow the number of specialist foster carers' (Aim 1).

- Use of a model which relied on care agencies to source the support, together with misinformation, inconsistent delivery and gaps in support packages meant a lack of focus

on specifying unique support needs and sourcing 'tailored bespoke support which is regularly reviewed' (Aim 3).

Care agency involvement

The SIB model was reliant on just one care agency (NFG) as the delivery partner. Whilst they had access to five independent foster agencies in relevant LA areas, the original intention had been to ***"widen the net to involve other carer agencies"*** *(Strategic stakeholder)*. Some exploration and discussion did take place over the lifetime of BFP delivery to consider engagement with other agencies, but economic and pricing structures meant they were difficult to engage.

Stakeholders identified the following implications arising from this 'one agency' focus:

- It restricted access to a wider pool of potential carers and meant the originally intended 'market place' approach to identifying carers was not achieved (again limiting the potential to achieve Aim 1 to promote and grow the specialist carer market).

- A lack of independence from NFG as the only delivery partner – with their position in the market (and turbulent commercial context) resulting in an apparent ***"focus on thinking about sourcing CYP for the carers they had (in other LA areas) rather than carers for the CYP already on the short lists"*** *(LA)*.

6.3 LA partnership

As identified in earlier sections of this report, some positive communication and relationships were developed between NFG as the delivery partner and individual LAs. Operational stakeholders identified some benefits from this including a dedicated team looking at potential referrals and making placements, and service reviews providing a specific arena for discussing children's needs. However, other than some information sharing around the contract, stakeholders did not identify any additional value arising from the partnership across LAs (for example, wider system change or ways of working amongst social workers or shared or joint practices for residential step-down).

7. CONCLUSION

Over the four years since its launch (2020), the Big Fostering Partnership did not fully meet original intentions: 16 placements were made against a target of 92, and two thirds of these disrupted. There were evident benefits for those involved in the placements made (including in some cases where there were disruptions) linked to stability, positive relationships and engagement, and experiences of family life. The reasons for placement disruptions were commonly linked to the complex challenges faced by the CYP involved, such as behaviour and educational engagement, managing transitions and capacity to invest in family environments.

Ultimately, the low number of BFP placements made and sustained was undoubtedly affected by a national and local shortage of foster carers and restricted access to experienced and skilled carers. Nevertheless, the evaluation also identified a mix of strategic management and delivery themes that hindered achievements for this residential step-down project. These include:

- Implementation of a 'low maintenance' SPV and associated weaknesses in contractual and performance management.

- Lack of a clearly defined model linked to original goals for the BFP delivery model.

- Some delivery consistency and fidelity limitations which impacted overall effectiveness and placement stability.

- Variable senior leadership, ownership and drive within the delivery organisation (affected by ongoing change linked to its commercial status).

Within this context, a final phase of the BFP evaluation was undertaken to consider residential step-down and SIB delivery models in other local authority areas. This research addressed the questions:

1. What has worked well or not so well for residential step-down interventions/projects in other LA areas?

2. What are the factors, drivers or incentives that have facilitated (or otherwise) successful and sustained step-down placements?

3. Are there any lessons from other SIB partnership models regarding aspects of effective commissioning, management and delivery?

A summary report of the findings will be made available via the York Consulting website (yorkconsulting.co.uk).

Appendix A: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

	MI	Mgmt staff interviews	Foster Carer provider consultations	Social worker interviews	Key worker	Therapist	Young person interviews	Foster carer interviews	Outcomes data	Comparative analysis
Process evaluation										
How have young people experienced the project, including the referral and transition process?					x	x	x			
How have foster carers experienced the project, including the preparation and referral process?					x	x		x		
Have all those young people that could have benefitted from this project had access to it and been considered for the project? What factors have constrained access and identify what could have broadened access?	x	x	x	x						
Has the initial use of just one Fostering provider been beneficial and what evidence can be provided to underpin this?	x	x	x							
Has increasing the number of foster providers made a difference in placement numbers?	x	x	x							
What have been the challenges and constraints in delivering the project?		x	x	x						
How have challenges and constraints been overcome, if at all?		x	x	x						
How effective have the relationships between LAs and the special purpose vehicle been?	x	x	x	x						
Is there evidence of variance in engagemnt and achievement across LAs and what were the reasons for this variance?	x	x	x	x						
How effective have the different elements of the support been: referral/allocation, matching, preparation, transition, settlement, stabilisation and maintenance, elements of wrap around support, trauma-informed support.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
How effective has the operational and strategic management of the project been?	x	x	x	x						
In what ways, if any, could the partnership be improved to increase the number or range of young people identified, engagement and successfully placed?		x	x	x						x
Outcomes and impact										
How have the young people who engaged with the project benefitted from it, if at all?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
How have foster carers benefited from the project, if at all?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Have young people or foster carers experienced any negative impacts of the project?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Has the project resulted in key intended benefits regarding: - Placement stability - Engagement in education - Maintained access to healthcare services (dentist, opticians, therapy, CAMHS) - Returned to local authority area	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
What has worked well or not so well in achieving the above benefits?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
What measures and/or support would have prevented placements ending in an unplanned way?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Has the Local Authority partnership, the use of social finance and a special purpose vehicle contributed to the effectiveness of the project, this is to be measured by the improvement in outcomes for young people that have been delivered through the project?	x	x	x	x						
Has shared practices and joint working led to any wider system change or impact on awareness on the way in which social worker teams engage or consider options for step down for young people?	x	x	x	x						
What impact has the project had on availability or otherwise of resources for other children and young people and on each Local Authorities Sufficiency Duty; the difficulties in assessing this in a meaningful way is acknowledge and therefore not considered a priority	x	x	x	x						
Have there been any specific/unique elements of partnership delivery present in the BFP project that might have led to (or otherwise) young people being identified and successfully placed with foster carers.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Value for money										
Was the project good value for money?	x	x	x							