Foster carer retention and recruitment in England

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The Fostering Network

"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)
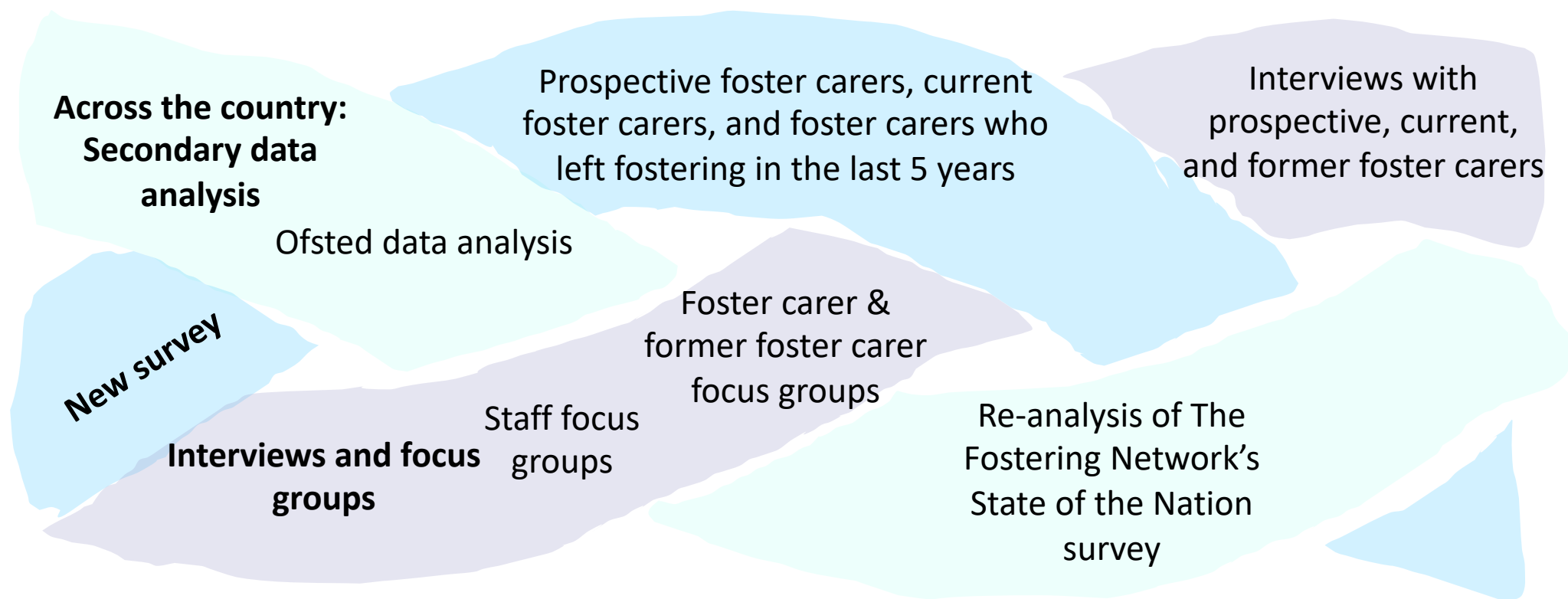
What's the problem?

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.
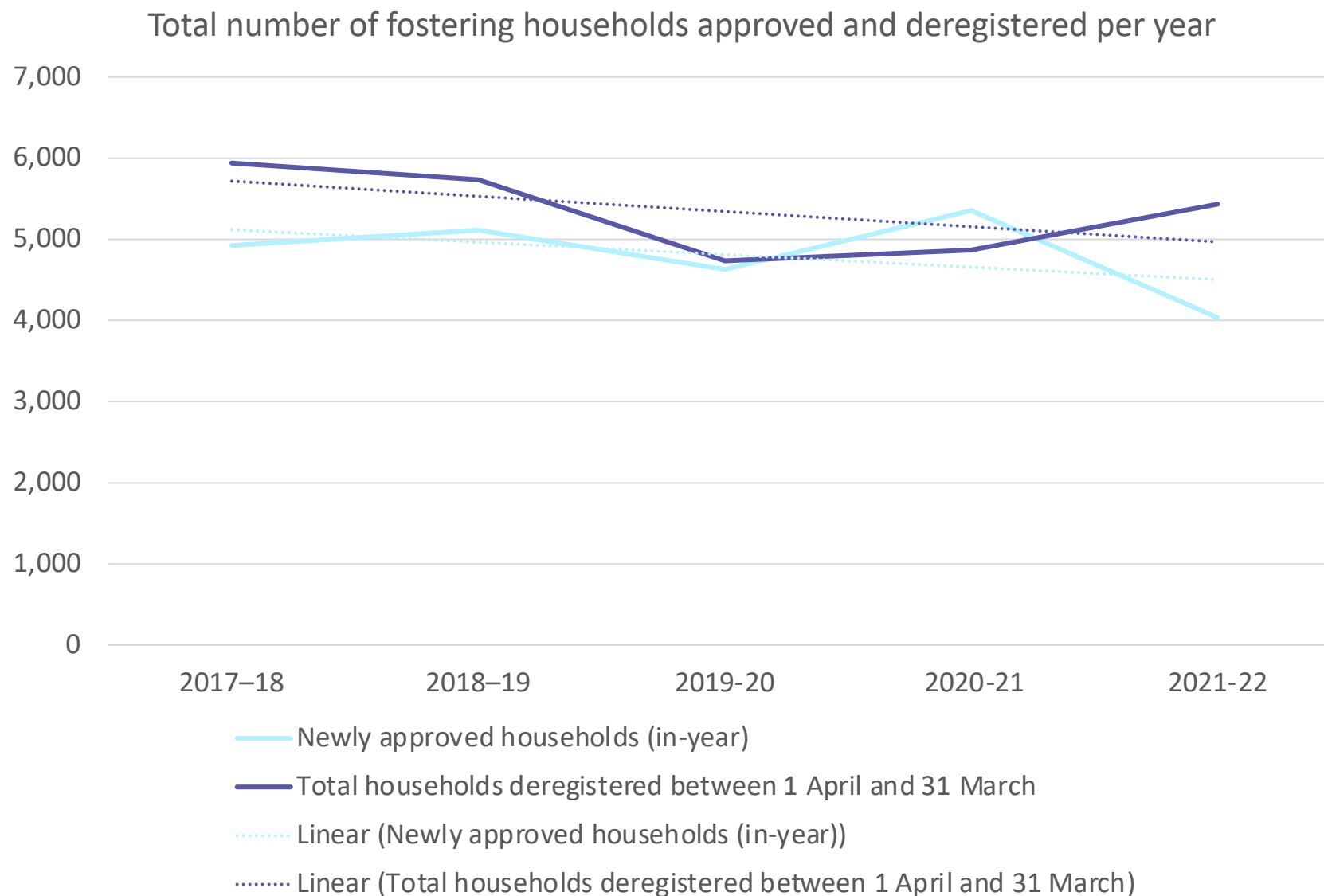
The research

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?

Across the country: Secondary data analysis

Ofsted data analysis

Prospective foster carers, current foster carers, and foster carers who left fostering in the last 5 years

Interviews with prospective, current, and former foster carers

New survey

Interviews and focus groups

Staff focus groups

Foster carer & former foster carer focus groups

Re-analysis of The Fostering Network's State of the Nation survey

Overall picture of foster carer recruitment and retention

Total number of fostering households approved and deregistered per year

- Newly approved households (in-year)
- Total households deregistered between 1 April and 31 March
- Linear (Newly approved households (in-year))
- Linear (Total households deregistered between 1 April and 31 March)

Overall picture of foster carer recruitment and retention (updated)

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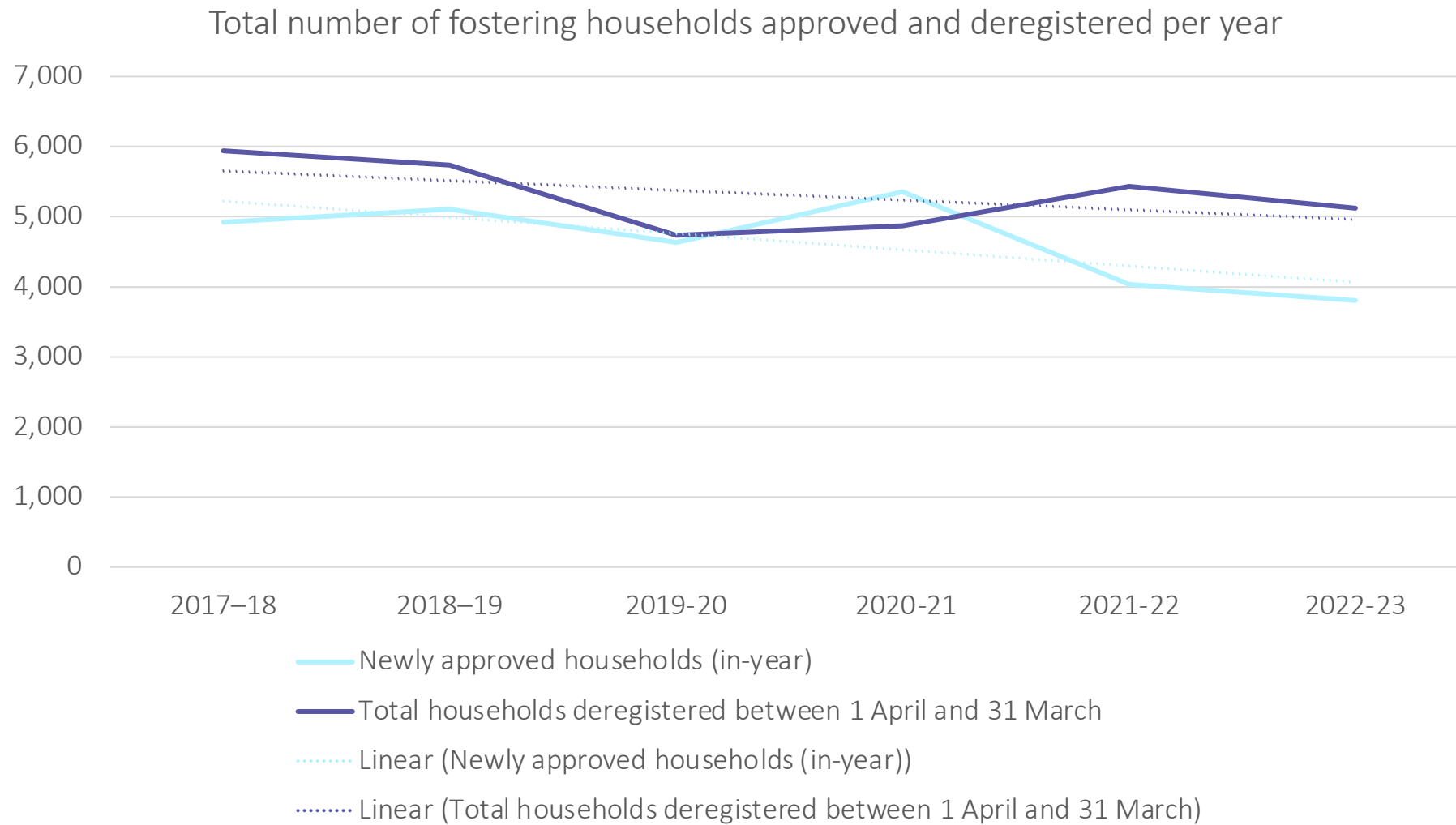
Ofsted statistics on recruitment and approval process (Data and analysis from Ofsted, 2022)

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

8,280 applications received in 2021 to 2022

68%

32%

5,670 applications completed

2,610 still in progress

28%

71%

1%

1,575 approved

4,025 withdrawn

70 rejected

71%

29%

2,875 by applicant

1,150 by service
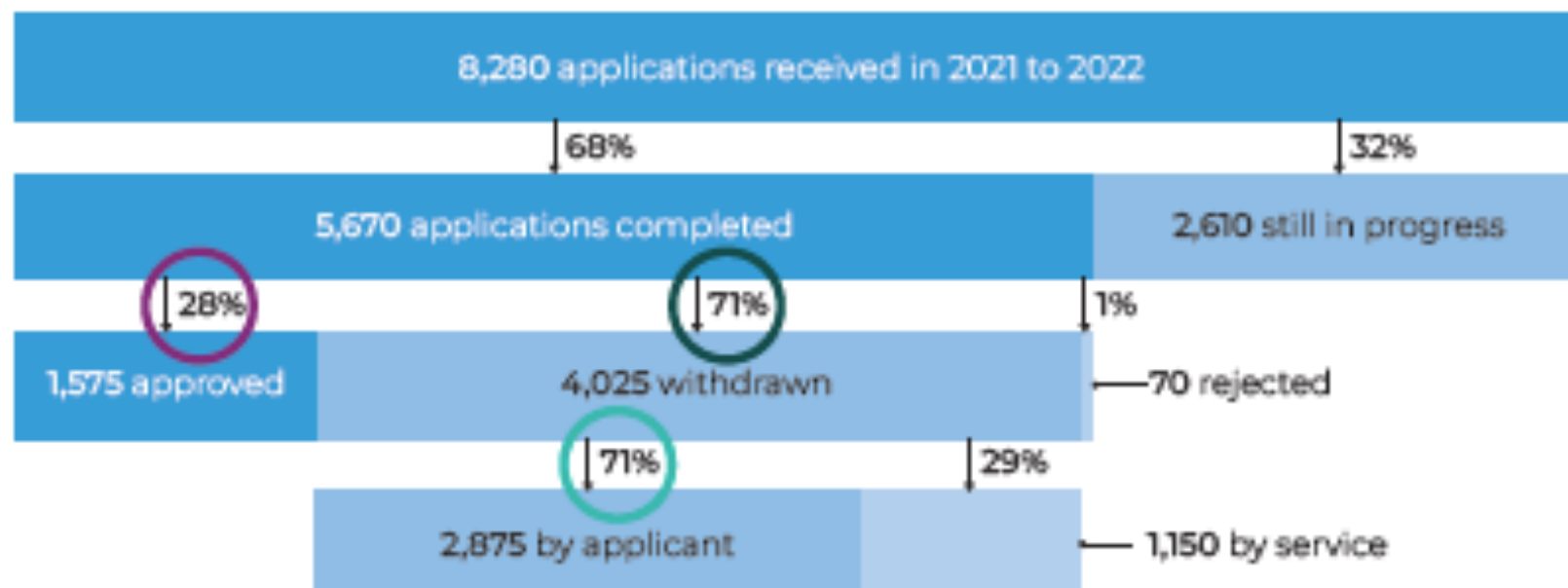
Motivations to foster

Top 3 motivations to foster

Motivation	Percentage
I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care	89%
I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family	67%
I enjoy working with children	58%

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)

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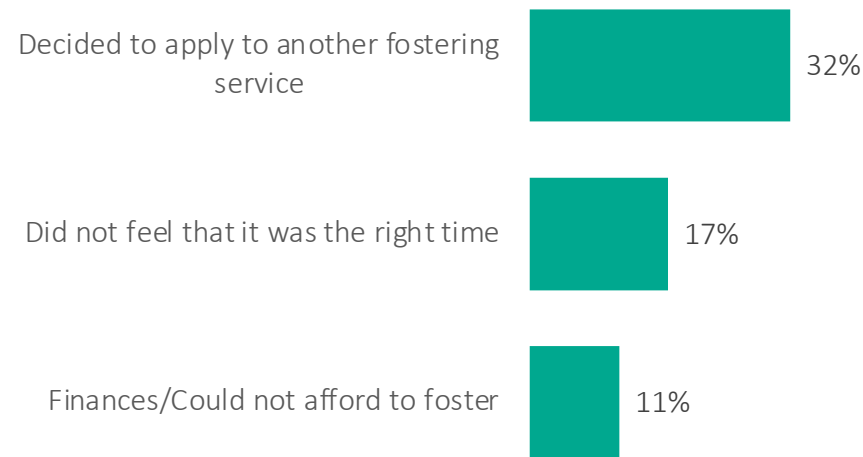# Recruitment strategies and assessment process

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**

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Reasons for not applying or withdrawing applications

Top 3 reasons for not applying, after enquiring

Decided to apply to another fostering service — 32%
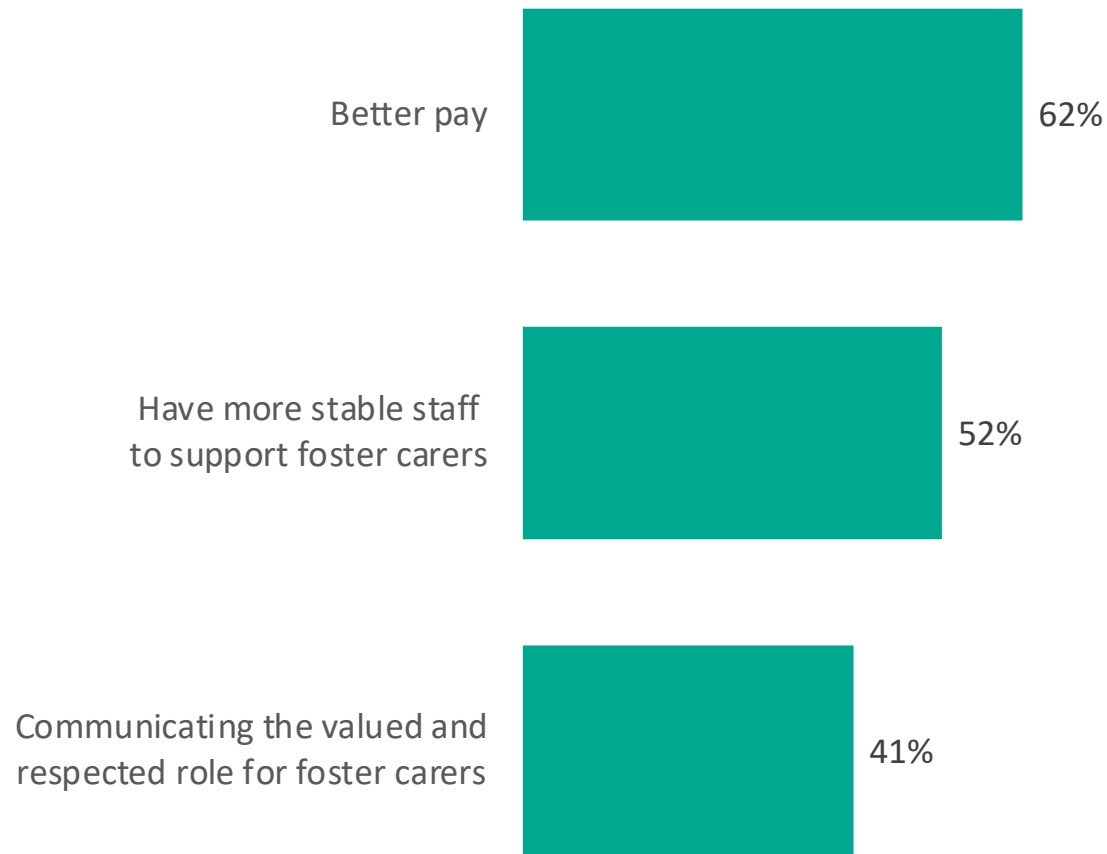
Did not feel that it was the right time — 17%

Finances/Could not afford to foster — 11%

N=382

Top 3 reasons for withdrawing, after application

Decided to apply to another fostering service — 35%

Relationship with the fostering agency/assessor — 19%

Did not feel that it was the right time — 16%

N=88

Top 3 suggestions for improving recruitment

Better pay — 62%

Have more stable staff to support foster carers — 52%

Communicating the valued and respected role for foster carers — 41%

N=1879

Recommendations to improve recruitment

Respect throughout the process

Better communication throughout the application process

A more streamlined application process

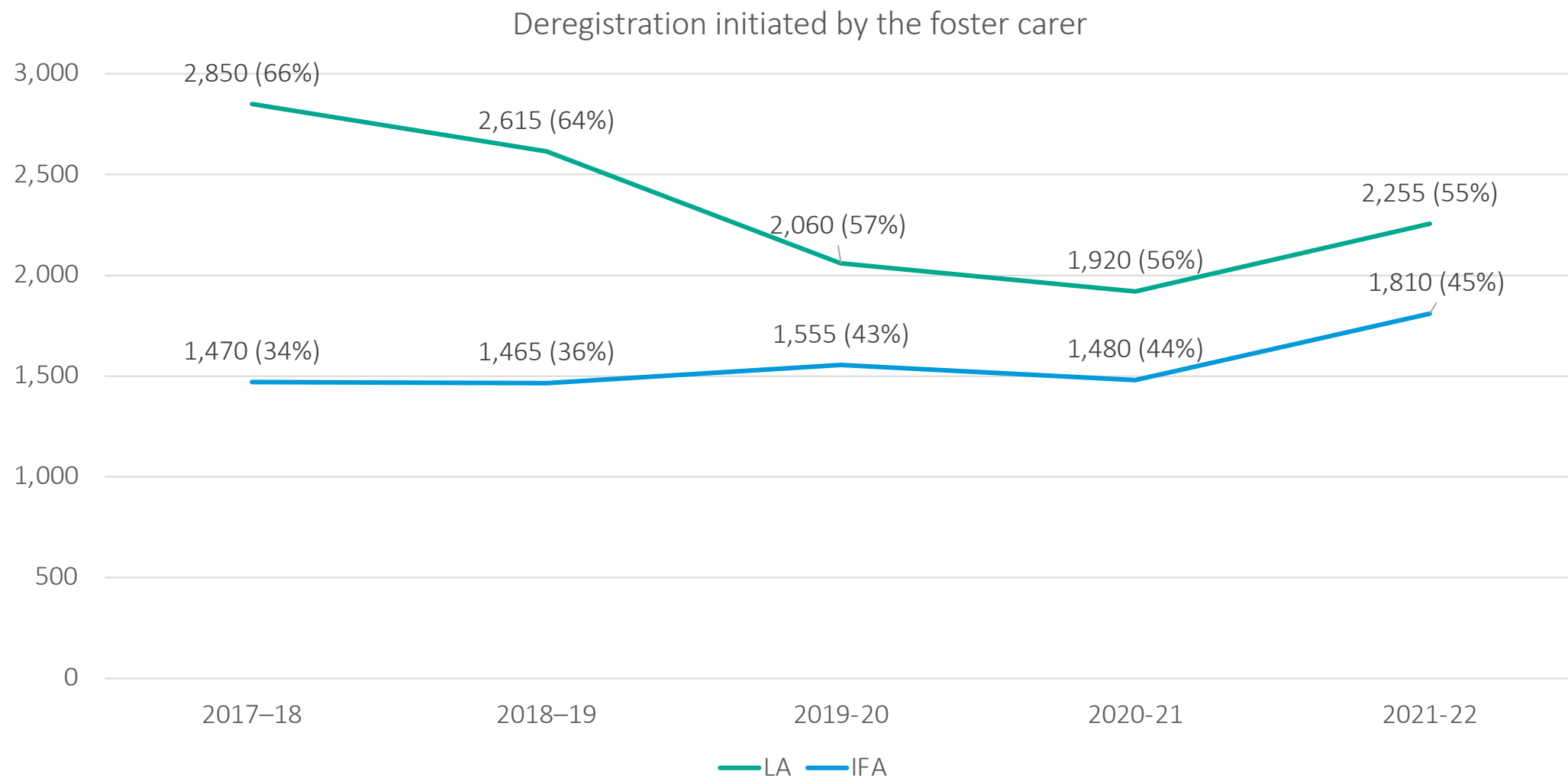More cultural sensitivity

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

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Deregistration initiated by the foster carer

Year	LA	IFA
2017–18	2,850 (66%)	1,470 (34%)
2018–19	2,615 (64%)	1,465 (36%)
2019-20	2,060 (57%)	1,555 (43%)
2020-21	1,920 (56%)	1,480 (44%)
2021-22	2,255 (55%)	1,810 (45%)

LA — IFA

Demographic differences in foster carers' satisfaction

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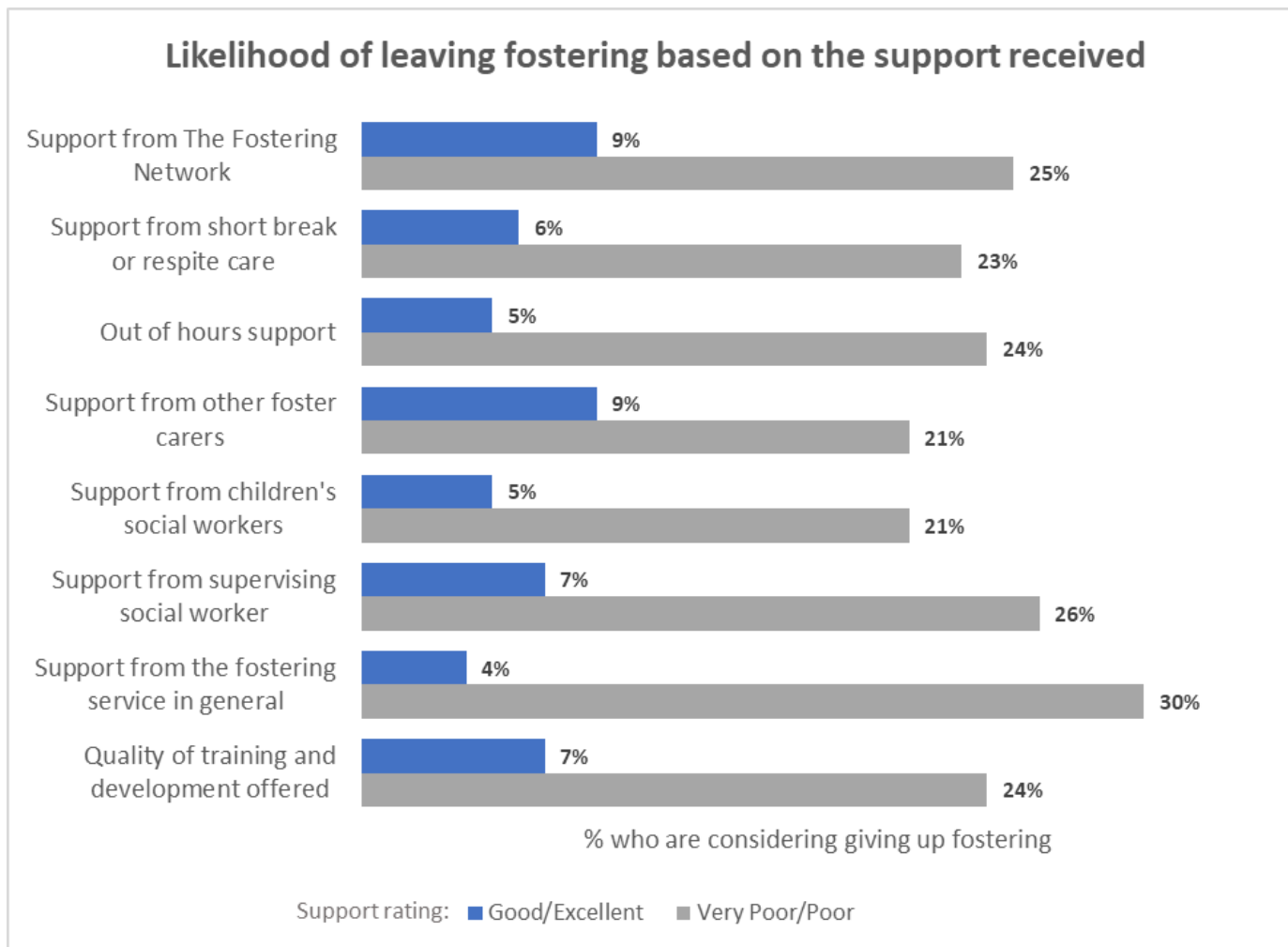(State of the Nation survey)

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)

Likelihood of leaving fostering based on the support received

Support type	Good/Excellent	Very Poor/Poor
Support from The Fostering Network	9%	25%
Support from short break or respite care	6%	23%
Out of hours support	5%	24%
Support from other foster carers	9%	21%
Support from children's social workers	5%	21%
Support from supervising social worker	7%	26%
Support from the fostering service in general	4%	30%
Quality of training and development offered	7%	24%

% who are considering giving up fostering

Support rating: ■ Good/Excellent ■ Very Poor/Poor

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 and hold exit interviews

Treat foster carers as professionals and standardise fostering processes

Be more respectful and aware of different cultures and diversity

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Final reflections from the research

➢ **Foregrounding word 'retention'**

➢ **Findings not new to the sector, but should not be overlooked or discounted**

➢ **Foster carers report staying *in spite of* lack of support, *because of* the children**

What's happened since? How has this fed into further CEI research? Want to find out more about CEI's work?

In the past year…

- **Presentations to the English ministers, Department for Education, Scottish government, practice forums, participation in consultations for Welsh government**

- **Large-scale RCT evaluation of 'Fostering Connections' programme**

- **Evaluation of 'Foster with North East'**

- **Evaluation of 'Sleep, Eat, Move, Repeat'**

- **Research and work with Singapore's government around foster care training, and standards**

Other key children's social care projects:

- **RCT evaluation of My View therapeutic service for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (2024) & Children Caring on the Move**

- **Systematic review of kinship supports (forthcoming, 2024)**

- **Review of mental health services for care-experienced young people (2023)**

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Thank you. Questions?

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https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/research/RR
https://www.ceiglobal.org/work-and-insights/report-foster-carer-retention-and-recruitment-england

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