

Hampshire Hive: fostering through a community of families.

Episode 2: Exploring myths around fostering – a conversation with Andrea and Johnny

[Kirsty Ayakwah]

Hello and welcome to the Social Work Community Podcast, where we speak directly to social workers about the topics and issues impacting them and shaping the profession. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care, and in this episode, we introduce you to the second in a three-part series in collaboration with Hampshire County Council's fostering service, called *Hampshire Hive: fostering through a community of families*. Hampshire Hive is a support network funded by Hampshire County Council that assists fostering families across the county.

To date, the network helps 27 Hampshire Hive groups with 23 foster care support workers and around 500 registered foster carers collectively. In this episode, foster carers Johnny and Andrea explore and challenge some of the myths and misconceptions often linked to a career in fostering. Andrea kicks off the conversation.

[Andrea]

I was going to come into fostering as a part-time mental health nurse and when I reached out to Hampshire, they said, yeah, absolutely.

[Johnny]

On that note then, Andrea, how was that for you? How did you find that they adapted it to enable you to foster as well as keep your job?

[Andrea]

Well, they made it really easy for me, especially the first part of it around the training. The courses were on a weekend, so that made it really easy because where I was working nine to five initially, I was able to obviously do my training over the weekend.

And I spoke to an awful lot of people who were on the training and there was people there who were foster carers already and they were also in those positions where they were doing part-time as well. And they gave me that confidence to go forward.

And I think one of the biggest worries for me was financial. I think a lot of people get really worried around, oh, you know, am I going to be able to afford to give up my job? You know, am I going to be able to afford to just to do it in this way? And they were really confident and they was; 'you know, Andrea, you'll be fine. You'll be absolutely fine'.

And there's always, if you want to go to work and you're finding that you've got to go into work and something's coming up, you can just reach out and you can get backup carers. They can be your family. They can be part of the Hive. And that's something that we'll explain later.

But you can reach out and you will get support. You will get support. You can even reach out to the children's social workers. There's a massive network and you'll be able to go into work and there won't be any issues.

[Johnny]

So how long, Andrea, would you say it roughly took for you to transition from a mental health nurse to a foster carer?

[Andrea]

The whole process from start to finish was approximately nine months. So, I was assigned an assessing social worker, and they went through the whole process with me.

We spoke about my background. We spoke about some of my experiences. Obviously, you would have your DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check.

And through that period as well, you'd be doing some weekend training. And the more you sort of get into it, the more you explore what fostering is all about and whether that's going to fit in with what you want to do as well as how you're going to provide for the children that come your way. And I think it's really important.

I was really quite concerned about giving up a job that obviously I'd trained quite a long time for. But as the process was going along and over the nine months, you just know that you're doing the right thing. And there are times when you think, oh, you know, again, like I say, you are worried about doing that sidestep from a profession that you've spent a long time training for and being in, and that is an identity - in itself.

When you start thinking about becoming a foster carer, you're bringing along all that experience that you've already had along the road that you've already developed, you know, and you're bringing all of that in and you're thinking, actually, I can relate to that. That rings a bell. I've been in those similar situations, and I'm not so scared to actually take that jump.

And when I eventually got to the nine months, and at the nine months, you'd go to panel. At that point, I decided that I wasn't going to do it part time. I was going to do it full time.

[Johnny]

What made you want to make the commitment to just focus on the fostering?

[Andrea]

I think a lot of it was because I realised that I wanted to give it 120%, 150%. I think that's my nature. You know, it's not for everybody.

You know, it's brilliant that we can get some part-time people in who can actually get that flexibility, and that's amazing, because we do need you. We need you out there. But I think you've got to look into yourself and say, how am I going to feel if I don't do my 110%, 20%, 30%, 40%? It's who you are.

It depends who you are, you know, and what you want to do. But I just knew for myself, I thought, no, I'm going for it. I'm going to go for it because I want to be able to give that time, put a lot of energy and effort into these children that are coming my way.

And also because of my previous experience, I knew that I would probably be going, be having a few children that were a little bit more complex. But that was great because that's what makes me thrive and get up in the morning, and it makes me want to work with these children to find their way. And I think that's where you've got to ask yourself.

It does sound a little bit dreamy, but you've got to ask yourself who you are and what you want to do and how you want to give and envision how the children are going to be around you and in your care.

[Johnny]

So obviously, you think the transition into Hampshire Hive, what would you say the strengths of, you know, being part of a Hive? How do you see that as supporting you?

[Andrea]

When I first came in, the Hives were very much a new concept. I think I was probably about a year or so in before the Hives were actually available.

And at that time, you are quite a little island, and you did meet up with other foster carers and you did have a basis, but it wasn't anywhere near what it's like being in a Hive group. I've obviously been with you now for probably about nine months to a year maybe. And the difference that it's made for my children and the friendships and the support that they all get with each other and the way that the children don't feel so alone and stigmatised, you know, they're all one unit.

They're all looking forward to seeing each other. And I've made some really lovely friendships with some of the other foster carers where you wouldn't be able to reach out and do that before. It was really difficult.

You might meet people on training. Pre-COVID, obviously, that's how you probably would meet people. But during COVID, you didn't get the opportunity to develop those friendships.

And then after that, now we're back in. We've done some fantastic days. Oh, my goodness.

Going out on the boat, watching the seals over in Hayling (Island). That was amazing. And, you know, these are unique experiences for these children, let alone the adults.

They're having a fabulous time. And again, you know, I can just name two of our young people. They literally, as soon as they looked at each other, that was it.

It was like, they were like magnets. And they developed a really nice relationship.

[Andrea]

So, Johnny, how did you find coming into being a foster carer as a man? And did you have any obstacles to get over with that?

[Johnny]

The biggest obstacle was myself because I actually had a bit of a psychological thing inside me thinking that this was primarily a female role.

But as we went deeper into it and explored further, we went through the process, like you say, with assessing social workers, trying to unpack that in myself and trying to grapple with the idea of identity is a big one, isn't it? And my identity as a foster carer and the primary foster carer, so I'm the one at home doing the day-to-day care. And I'm not going to lie. Initially, that took me some time to overcome that and start to actually say to people.

At first, I didn't used to say, if people spoke to me, I didn't used to say I'm a foster carer. I didn't ever sort of kind of own it. And it took me a period of time for me to turn around and say, I'm a foster carer.

And I can say that with pride. But it wasn't a natural thing for me. I'd largely worked on building sites.

And so I'd come from that kind of background and coaching for children's football. So a very masculine-driven background, if you like. But then we'd had a life-changing event in our family, which then took me down to youth work.

So my commitment to young people had become really strong. And I wanted to make a difference to young people's lives. So then I went down the line of youth work.

And then for actually, the biggest thing I can do is become a foster carer. And while I was doing youth work, what there was a real lack of was positive male role models. That's in all sectors, whether it's in primary school, secondary school, not so much.

There seem to be more male teachers in secondary school, but certainly in lower years. And in foster care, when I first started, I'd sometimes turn up to training, I'd be the only male there. But I thought, no, actually, this is about the young people.

This is not about me. This is about the young people, what's really good for young people to see. Some of these young people, and again, I'm not stereotyping - some of these young people would have come across some males that don't provide the best role models. Actually, I wanted to break that. I wanted to say, actually, this is what a healthy relationship looks like.

This is what a male that's happy within themselves looks like. And that support I can provide for these young people. And even if it is that on a psychological level, the way they perhaps unconsciously register it.

You know, I'm not David Beckham. I'm not going to be that role model that they may select. I would deliberately make sure I'm washing up.

I would deliberately make sure I do cooking. I would deliberately make sure I do what were perceived as female roles. I will do that.

And certainly fostering, there is no barriers with that, which is what I'm so proud of. The fact is that you can become a foster carer as a male. And there are ways to ensure that you can do that safely.

And you can provide these children with that positive male role model in their life that in some cases has been missing. And it's so important. It's so important for that male role model coming in for them.

[Andrea]

And I've noticed that, you know, alongside bringing children in with us. Do you actually have like a support group for other male foster carers or even a support group for the family, you know, male family members?

[Johnny]

That's a great that's a great question, because I remember having this discussion with Amy and saying, look, actually, I think there's something that's missing in Hampshire. And that is a male support group, because in the same way as a female will have their own unique experiences and challenges, we as men do as well.

So, you know, I went to Amy and said, look, I've got this idea. Can we provide a man-to-man support group, which is what we do now. So we have that monthly.

We meet up at local Wetherspools or whatever and we just sit and chat. And it may be about football. It may be about fostering.

There's no agenda. It's actually what do we need to talk about? If we need to talk about football and how well the women have done or we want to talk about particular issue that a male foster carer is facing at that time. And then they've got that supportive network that

we can actually sit around that table and troubleshoot and just provide different solutions to these complex dilemmas that some people face.

[Andrea]

So when you first started, were you one of the only original male foster carers coming in? And have you actually found that more people are becoming more interested in actually coming as a male foster care and sole male foster care as well?

[Andrea]

When I first started to foster, it did feel like I was only male in the room. However, now we're just seeing more and more men are actually coming forward, seeing that these young people really do need male positive male role models. And they're coming forward and they're prepared to say, actually, I'm the primary carer.

In some cases, they're the only carer and they may be same-sex male couples that are fostering in the same way that there's same-sex female couples that foster. So we're now seeing that we're breaking down some of those barriers that were in place. Like you say, these big myths about it's primarily a female role.

We're starting to deconstruct that and see it completely differently because actually men are just as important as women in providing care for young people. And I say that as in we're all important as a collaborative group, but we're needed just the same way as a woman's needed.

[Andrea]

I think it's amazing that we're getting more men coming in as well, though, Johnny.

[Johnny]

Absolutely. I mean, I always say to foster carers, just try it. Just put yourself forward.

You're not going to be held to it. If you get halfway through the process and think this isn't for me, you can always pull out. But absolutely, if you don't try, you'll never know.

And I remember that this is one of the things that stayed with me when we started to think about the idea of fostering. It was like, well, if I don't try, I'm never going to know. So I wanted to know.

I wanted to know what that felt like, how that worked, how I provide that outcomes for young people and if I can improve young people's lives. And I'm not saying it's always going to be a landslide that, you know, these young people's come from, you know, these extreme adverse situations. And then suddenly they come to me and like a magic wand, it's all fine.

I'm not suggesting that for five minutes, but we do make incremental changes. We make those small changes, which is the bits that really, really ignite me and just make me want to

do this over and over again. And sometimes it's the most challenging young people that keep me wanting to do it.

Because actually, young people that have had these adverse experiences find it really hard to communicate their needs in a healthy way. It's normally in the most challenging way. And that, to me, really gets me thinking, actually, I really want to work with this person.

I really want to try and provide that support that will enable them to lead a healthy life where they actually believe in themselves, where they say, actually, I'm worthy. I'm a worthy person.

[Andrea]

So, Johnny, have you ever had any of your previous young people come back and let you know how they're getting on and how they've reflected on their time with you?

[Johnny]

We had a young person that come to us after they had several placement breakdowns, including in a children's home and come to us from the children's home.

He had many trust issues. He didn't trust people. And it was an extremely difficult time for him to come back into foster care when he had these kind of issues trusting adults.

Anyway, he'd kind of come to us when he was about 14, so he stayed with us until he was 18. He's kept in touch with me ever since. So when he left us, he had gone to college, got an apprenticeship as a mechanic.

So, again, this was someone that had come, was in people referral unit when he come to us. So, the educational outcomes were never going to be brilliant academically. But what he was, he was very mechanically minded.

He loved cars. He went to college and then said he wanted to do an apprenticeship. So he managed to knuckle down, get his English and maths, went on to Halfords and got an apprenticeship with Halfords.

He wanted to leave us at 18 because that's where he felt he wanted that next line of independence. And he stayed in touch with us. And about a month ago, he messaged me to say his girlfriend's expecting their baby.

And last week, he messaged me with a photograph of his baby. And he's making such a wonderful dad. And this is from somebody that, again, I can't describe this young person, how much, how many trust issues he had. I never had children. He loved dogs, but I never had children.

No, I can't deal with children. And now he's making a brilliant dad. And to send me that photograph the other day and send me the little one on his lap.

Oh, my God. You know, and it's moments like that. We had a golden rule in one of the training that we had.

And it always stayed with me because a lot of the skills that are developed from youth work were transferable into fostering, especially this empowerment. We empower young people to have their voice heard in a positive way. Very much stayed with me, but also a little nugget of information come from one of my supervisors.

And it was like, if you're expecting instant results when you work with young people, you're going to be disappointed. See your results in 10 years. Then if you're prepared to do that and defer that expectation, then you will see and you will get the gratification that you want.

And that is a true piece of nugget. Absolutely. Because we don't see it.

But what I see in that young person now sending me that photograph of him and his little baby boy from this person that comes to our door at 14. You know, after having such a traumatic time. And I actually got to know his mom as well.

So his mom would come to what they call looked after child review meetings and she would come to our house. That was a massive step because she'd never been to a foster carer's house before but she'd come here.

So, yeah. And she would always make a point of going over Tesco's, getting a bar of chocolate, coming back and giving us a bar of chocolate. And from that family, it's times like that that you really sit back and say, well, actually, I have made a difference.

I'm so passionate. I could just go on all day about it. So I won't bore you.

But actually, there's many I could pull out.

[Andrea]

Thank you for that, Johnny. It was brilliant.

[Kirsty]

Thank you for listening to this, the second of three episodes in our podcast series with Hampshire County Council's fostering team called *Hampshire Hive: fostering through a community of families*. If you'd like to find out more about fostering with Hampshire County Council, please visit hants.gov.uk forward slash fostering to download their comprehensive information pack.

You can also sign up for one of the upcoming virtual Q&A sessions attended by both a member of their recruitment team and a Hampshire County Council foster carer. And listen out for our next episode with Johnny, fellow foster carer Andrea, and Amy, the team

manager of Hampshire Hive, who will be speaking about the skills that they brought to foster caring from other professions and showing what you can bring to the service. Thanks for listening to this podcast.

Visit us at www.communitycare.co.uk for more content like this. Bye for now.