

The Cocoon Experiment

a research project to introduce
chaplaincy as a resource
to support the well-being and
spiritual development of foster carers

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The COCOON Experiment

(A Masters research project)



The Cocoon Experiment - a research project to introduce chaplaincy as a resource to support the well-being and spiritual development of foster carers

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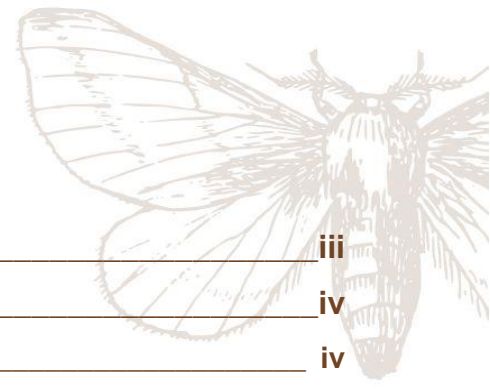
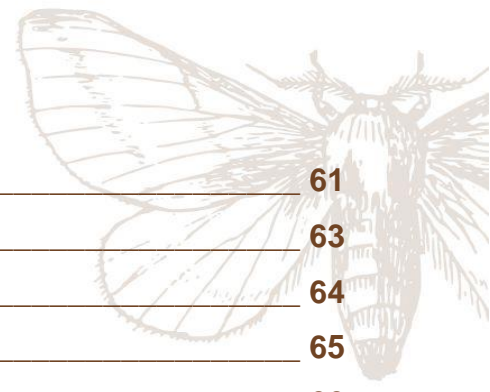


Table of Contents

1	Dedication and thanks	iii
2	Abstract	iv
2.1	Aims	iv
2.2	Key Words	v
2.3	List of Tables	vii
2.4	List of Figures	vii
3	Introduction	1
3.1	Background	1
3.2	Chaplaincy	2
3.3	Spirituality and Faith	2
3.4	Fostering, not Adoption	3
4	Theology – The Good Samaritan	6
5	Literature Review	7
5.1	Chaplaincy	7
5.2	Spirituality and Faith	10
5.3	Fostering	12
6	Methodology	18
6.1	The Cocoon Experiment	21
7	What The Cocoon Experiment Revealed	24
7.1	Research from Questionnaires	24
7.2	The Cocoon Experiment	28
8	Discussion	34
8.1	Available Support for Foster Carers	34
8.2	Recommendations	41
8.2.1	For Fostering Providers	41
8.2.2	Church	42
8.3	Was The Cocoon Experiment Successful?	43
8.4	Next Steps	43
9	Conclusion	45
	Bibliography	46
	Appendix A – Certificate of Ethical Approval	51
	Appendix B – Advertising for Questionnaire	52
	Appendix C - Questionnaire	54
	Appendix D – Additional Selected Data from Questionnaires	58



Appendix E – Magic Wand Response	61
Appendix F – Advertising for the Event	63
Appendix G (i) – Tour Of The Cocoon Experiment	64
Appendix H - Clay	65
Appendix I – Fingerprints and Paint	66
Appendix J – OutOfTheBox Story ‘Catching Up’	67
Appendix K – ‘Catching Up’ Responses	68
Appendix L – Emotions Gauge	69
Appendix M - Identity	70
Appendix N - Pebbles	73
Appendix O – Butterfly Net	75
Appendix P - Rest	76
Appendix Q - Labyrinth	77
Appendix R – Refreshments and Final Blessing	78
Appendix S – Evaluation Form	79
Appendix T – Social Media Pages & Links	80



1 Dedication and thanks

When I began my theology journey, I did not imagine that I would come full circle back to fostering - that part of my journey, I thought, had ended. The Cocoon Experiment is a testament to God knowing it was not completed and carrying on the good work that was begun all those years ago when I was a teenager watching 'Home and Away'¹. This research project is because of, and dedicated to, the children I cared for in North Somerset and to the foster carers, social workers and wider team there.

Thank you to all those who listened to me talking about this project and the foster carers who completed questionnaires and came to The Cocoon Experiment.

I am grateful to my theology tutors, past and present, – CYM, Trinity and St Mellitus – thank you for believing in me and encouraging me to keep going!

And of course, a big thank you to my family, without whom I would have never even started on the journey.

¹ 'Home and Away' – an Australian television soap opera focused around the Fletchers and the young people they fostered.





2 Abstract

'In any context where human beings are emotionally, spiritually and physically tested, there will be chaplains standing alongside them, accompanying them in their search for meaning and for the presence of God' (Williams, 2018, p. 4). Foster carers are, without doubt, emotionally, spiritually and physically tested in their vocation, statistically shown to put the needs of others before themselves and at high risk of burnout and secondary trauma (Bridger, Binder and Kellezi, 2020; Lotty, Bantry-White and Dunn-Galvin, 2020), all within a context that should be a place of refuge and safety; their home. Yet there is no established, recognised chaplaincy stream for foster carers and the fostering community. This research project set out to show chaplaincy could, and should, provide a valuable source of well-being support for foster carers. The project's focus became 'The Cocoon Experiment' – a chaplain-led, creative enterprise that provided time and space for self-selected foster carers to consider their well-being through creative and mindful style activities, designed to aid spiritual wondering and wandering. The Cocoon Experiment creatively introduced the concept of chaplaincy for foster carers of all faiths and none.

2.1 Aims

- To identify what support foster carers have access to.
- To identify how foster carers could be supported through chaplaincy.
- To discover whether foster carers could benefit from chaplaincy.
- To hold an experimental introduction to chaplaincy through 'The Cocoon Experiment' and raise awareness of spirituality within foster care.

2.2 Key Words

Foster Care – A temporary solution for children, from birth to eighteen, who are unable to remain with their birth family. Foster care can be emergency, short-term, long-term, permanent, kinship, respite or specialist, including parent and baby provision.

Children Looked After/Looked After Children (CLA/LAC)– Children from birth to eighteen who are unable to live with their birth family, through no fault of their own, and are placed into foster care. At eighteen a child becomes a ‘care leaver’. The local authority is responsible for children looked after.

‘Under the Children Act 1989, a child is looked-after by a local authority if he or she falls into one of the following: is provided with accommodation, for a continuous period of more than 24 hours [Children Act 1989, Section 20 and 21], is subject to a care order [Children Act 1989, Part IV], is subject to a placement order’ (*Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023, 2023*).

Foster Carer – an adult who provides a home and care for a looked-after child, with support from a **Supervising Social Worker (SSW)** and **Child’s Social Worker (CSW)**, approved and registered through a **Local Authority (LA)** or **Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)**.

Placement – the term used to describe both the child being looked after and the place where they are living.

Staying Put/Supported Lodgings – When a young person reaches 18 and is no longer a looked-after child they may remain with their fostering family or move into a similar environment. Instead of a social worker, they have a **personal advisor (PA)** to offer some support until the age of 25. The fostering family no longer receive supervision and their financial support is reduced.

Trauma – Experienced by any child who is removed from their birth family. Trauma can be experienced in utero or at any stage following birth. Trauma can be through experiencing domestic violence, physical violence, neglect, alcohol and substance misuse, sexual abuse and emotional and mental abuse. Trauma can also be caused through isolated incidents such as an accident. Trauma can impact the way an individual views the world and themselves, often displayed through behaviour.



Secondary Trauma/Compassion Fatigue/Blocked Care – Caused through caring for someone who has experienced trauma, absorbing the needs of others and then being unable to respond to their own well-being and needs.

Christian Chaplain/Chaplaincy – Incarnational, journeying alongside as a spiritual, practical, listening companion. For all faiths and none.

2.3 List of Tables

Table 1 – Chaplaincy Support Relating to Foster Carers Needs	37
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2.4 List of Figures

Figure 1 – Length of Years Fostering.....	24
Figure 2 – Range of Placement Styles.....	25
Figure 3 – Type Fostering Provider.....	25
Figure 4 – Additional Roles Outside of Fostering	25
Figure 5 – Number of Foster Carers Who Believe They Have Experienced Secondary Trauma/Compassion Fatigue Through Fostering	26
Figure 6 – Those Who Practice Well-Being Activities.....	26
Figure 7 – Benefits of Well-Being Practice	26
Figure 8 –Types of Support Networks That Foster Carers Access	27
Figure 9 – Foster Carers Who Would Value Chaplaincy	28
Figure 10 – Feelings of Participants Before the Cocoon Experiment.....	29
Figure 11 – Feelings of Participants Before the Cocoon Experiment.....	32
Figure 12 – Well-Being Frequency and Type Activities	58
Figure 13 – Those Foster Carers with a Faith Background	58
Figure 14 – Listening Service Provision to Foster Carers.....	59
Figure 15 – Foster Carer Support From Other Foster Carers.....	59
Figure 16 – How Foster Carers Have Changed Their Perception of God Due to Fostering.....	60



3 Introduction

The first 'chaplain', Martin of Tours, is described as being 'commissioned to work away from the main church building in places where people were in special need' (Haslam, 2022, p. 3). This suggests there are more areas where chaplaincy could be introduced, with foster carers being a demographic who fit the description of St Martin's commission.

This research project set out to show how chaplaincy could be a valuable source of well-being support to foster carers through the development of 'The Cocoon Experiment', a resource to introduce chaplaincy and spirituality to foster carers. It seeks to identify what support foster carers have access to and how they could be supported through, and benefit from, chaplaincy. It will hold an experimental introduction to chaplaincy through 'The Cocoon Experiment' and raise awareness of well-being and spirituality within foster care.

My literature review will highlight the work of chaplaincy and the connections with fostering, the necessity of support, well-being and self-care for foster carers and the benefits of spirituality. The Cocoon Experiment used a variety of methodologies, including questionnaires, action research and ethnography, which will be discussed following the literature review. This section will finish with a description of The Cocoon Experiment. Next, the findings of the questionnaires will be shared, including diagrams to illustrate the data, followed by the results of The Cocoon Experiment as a resource. I will then discuss the support that was found to be available for foster carers and how chaplaincy could provide additional support. I will then make recommendations for the fostering community and the wider church, before suggesting further developments for The Cocoon Experiment, including a longer research project to include the families of foster carers. Finally, I will conclude that chaplaincy for foster carers is a valid addition to chaplaincy, the church and the fostering community. First, I will briefly explain why The Cocoon Experiment matters to me and then introduce chaplaincy, fostering and spirituality.

3.1 Background

I was a foster carer for over fifteen years, caring for fourteen children from birth to teenage years. My exit from fostering was to become a 'staying put' provider, enabling my young person to remain with my family as they navigated the next stage of their lives. They continue to be a very important addition to our family and loved beyond measure. When I reflected on my fostering journey, I began to see how the support of a chaplain would have



given me the space to process some of the fostering challenges that came my way, that were too difficult and confidential to share with anyone else. I began to develop The Cocoon Experiment to provide for other foster carers what would have been beneficial for my journey.

3.2 Chaplaincy

Chaplains, from the Christian faith, journey alongside others as the practical and spiritual presence of Jesus, holding the space for those who might find themselves looking at the world in a new way. Although chaplains represent and walk with their own faith tradition, they journey with those of all faiths and none (Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt, 2011, p. xvi).

Chaplaincy has a place within tradition and formality and as pioneering and unexpected, historically found in military contexts and evolving to include settings such as education, hospitals, shopping centres, courts and airports. Chaplaincy continues to be developed and find a place in new contexts where there is a need (Swift, Cobb and Todd, 2016, pp. 201–202; Caperon, Todd and Walters, 2018, pp. 88, 132–133; Haslam, 2022, pp. 3–4).

As already referenced in the Abstract, there is not an official stream of chaplaincy for foster carers and their community (Children Looked After, Social Workers and the wider team). However, as my research will illustrate, foster carers are a demographic in our society who could benefit from chaplaincy provision.

3.3 Spirituality and Faith

As part of their role, foster carers respect the rights of a child to practice their faith tradition. While there is an attempt to match children to a family with a similar faith background, or who are willing to accommodate the needs of a different faith, it is not always possible. It is not usual practice for foster carers to discuss the faith expression or spiritual development of the child, or themselves, in supervision meetings. Faith or spirituality is perhaps rarely considered beyond a tick box.

Schools provide well-being support for children through exploring spirituality; encouraging an awareness of self, others, the world and the divine or other. The school curriculum encourages the ongoing development of pupils' spirituality, as well as their cultural, social



and moral development as a legal requirement (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p. 7; Nash and Roberts, 2016, p. 11).

3.4 Fostering, not Adoption

It is also important to recognise that although fostering is often referred to alongside adoption, they are not the same. This has been highlighted by Dr Tim Davy, theologian in residence for Home For Good, noting that, unlike adoption, there is not a developed theology of foster care with limited resources in this area (Davy, 2023).

Both, children who have been adopted and children who are looked after, are vulnerable through the trauma of being removed from their birth family, and their life experiences. They are placed with unfamiliar strangers, in a place that looks and smells different to their known world. When an adoption is finalised, the child's place within a new family is legally recognised as a permanent home. Children who are looked after are not joining a family with a hope of permanence. A child who is looked after continues to experience ongoing changes, including social workers, school and even their foster family². At the age of eighteen, they become classed as a care leaver and no longer in foster care. Foster carers can transfer to become supported lodgings/staying put, enabling the young person to remain with them. They may be unable to stay with their foster family and, instead, move into independent living (ibid.).

83840 children are looked after by 43,400 fostering families in England (*Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023*, 2023). This equates to seventy-one looked-after children per 10000 children, almost one per cent of the childhood population (ibid.). Every child is unique and different, some children overcome their initial traumatic starts to life and flourish. However, there are additional complexities to caring for children who are looked after compared to caring for birth children (Lotty, Bantry-White and Dunn-Galvin, 2020, pp. 2–3). Children who are looked after are also likely to display challenging behaviour, struggle with attachment difficulties and have other additional needs (Miko, Berger and Krishnamoorthy, 2023, p. 334). Van der Kolk names the collective of these challenges as Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD) (Van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 179–202).

² One in ten children looked after experienced three or more placement moves in one year (*Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2023*, 2023).



Alongside providing care for children, foster carers are involved with, and follow, individual care plans for each child, work professionally with the wider team of social workers, educational professionals, medical services, mental health practitioners and more, and keep up-to-date records of each child. They transport the child to different appointments, such as therapeutic sessions and activity groups, in addition to the usual activities a child might attend. Foster carers have regular supervision meetings with their social worker, attend meetings with other professionals, such as annual reviews and education reviews, access face-to-face or online training, and keep up to date with what is required of them, to best support the children they are looking after (Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson, 2004, p. 156).

Living alongside primary trauma and challenging behaviour can lead to foster carers experiencing secondary trauma, also known as compassion fatigue or blocked care (Adams, Hassett and Lumsden, 2018, p. 341). This can display itself with symptoms akin to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Self-care is suggested as a strategy to prevent this from becoming a chronic condition, with the belief that self-care may build resilience and the ability to cope with challenging situations (Bridger, Binder and Kellezi, 2020, p. 483). Self-care as an intervention should therefore be increased (Miller, Green and Lambros, 2019), with the recognition that there are a wide range of applications which involve personal choice (Bridger, Binder and Kellezi, 2020, pp. 489–490). Despite well-being practices being deemed as essential for foster carers, they are often overlooked due to exhaustion or the child's needs (Gowan *et al.*, 2023, pp. 200–201).

Due to the trauma children looked after have experienced, foster carers are encouraged to look after children therapeutically. Strategies such as PACE (Playful, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) promote good attachment and aid a child out of a shame state as quickly as possible (*What is meant by PACE?*, 2024). This style of caring is used to build relationships between children and those caring for them. This is discussed further in the literature review.

The well-being of foster carers is met formally through supervision, training and financial reimbursement. Social activities and the foster carers network provide informal support. Mainstream fostering providers do not provide spiritual support.

The Cocoon Experiment, as a practical, spiritual resource, is the beginning of a journey to establish a chaplaincy stream for foster carers and the fostering community. Foster carers will have an alternative resource, in the form of a chaplain, to turn to in times of need and



times of joy, someone to journey with them as they question the world around them and explore what makes life meaningful. The Cocoon Experiment will provide time and space for foster carers to be creative, share and reflect, wonder and wander, and, of course, eat cake, and leave feeling more at peace than when they arrived.





4 Theology – The Good Samaritan

Although Davy (2023) highlighted the lack of developed theology for fostering compared to adoption, my theology of chaplaincy, through my school chaplaincy background, compliments my understanding of chaplaincy for fostering communities. The parable of The Good Samaritan was one that I drew on when I first began exploring chaplaincy and has become my theology for fostering chaplaincy.

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows individuals going about their daily activities and the unexpected outcomes. The person did not know that they would be attacked and left for dead, they did not realise they were vulnerable and on a dangerous path. They may not have been there through choice. The person is like a child looked after, vulnerable through their circumstance and status as a child, without the autonomy to make decisions for themselves, and, when they do, putting themselves in greater danger. Those who walk by, without stopping to help, could be the overstretched professionals on their way to another emergency or meeting regarding another child. Or perhaps those walking past are other children, reluctant to play with someone who does not quite fit in, who might have unexpected outbursts, make inappropriate comments, or disrupt lessons. Or perhaps an individual who has no realisation or understanding that, for some children, life is very difficult. The overstretched professional could be the Good Samaritan who moves the person to safety and accesses the resources available to support. The innkeeper is like the foster carer, trusted to keep the individual safe, restore them to health and begin to plan a new path to journey along. Both are supported through regular visits and financial reimbursement. It is a story of being cared for by strangers, of being cared for by someone from a different family, a story of being seen and not seen. The chaplain is not seen in this version of the story, they do not have the role of moving the person, but they could be an unseen character. The one who journeys with the person, the innkeeper and the Good Samaritan – the child, the foster carer and the social worker - offering practical and spiritual support, listening to and sharing stories, being who they need in their time of need. The story additionally illustrates the incarnational aspect of chaplaincy, of bringing the presence of and being the presence of Jesus to every situation. The image of God is seen in each character, by each character. The Good Samaritan treats the person as though they are Jesus, caring and tending to their needs, bringing and being the presence of Jesus (Caperon, Todd and Walters, 2018, p. 26).



5 Literature Review

The Cocoon Experiment aims to develop chaplaincy for fostering communities. Therefore, this literature review will focus on; chaplaincy and how it connects to fostering; faith and spirituality and; fostering and foster carer's well-being. This will help to identify where chaplaincy could be a well-being and spiritual support to foster carers. The literature review will inform the methodology for research and guide the contents of The Cocoon Experiment.

5.1 Chaplaincy

Ryan provides an overview of chaplaincy through a qualitative and quantitative report, sharing stories and providing a useful analysis of the chaplaincy world. Ryan points out that some chaplaincies form part of the structure of an organisation, such as prisons, hospitals, military and education, whereas, others take place alongside and with, such as waterways or agricultural contexts (Ryan, 2015, p. 10). The diversity of locations, organisations and faith groups represented in the research is vast, with chaplains working independently, within a team, solely for their faith group or in a multi-faith context (ibid., p. 17). Ryan discusses the pastoral role of a chaplain for service users and shares the story from a paediatric chaplain who developed a programme for staff, recognising that those working with very ill children will ultimately question why that happens. They provided a space where those questions could be looked at when they arose (ibid., p. 49). Ryan goes on to reference an army officer saying, 'Evil and sin are not interesting discussions for me – I have seen the mass graves and slaughter. In that environment spirituality is important. It's the moral component of which chaplaincy is a key component' (ibid., p. 50). This resonates with my fostering experience, questions of children suffering need a safe space to be examined. A friend once asked me, in a time of high fostering stress, what I thought about creation theology. My answer was rather blunt as, at that time, I was more concerned with the realities of how to care for a child who had suffered extreme trauma rather than God's capabilities. A safe space to explore why a loving God who creates such beauty can allow such pain might have been more beneficial.

Ryan's research shares the impact of chaplaincy on organisations through stories of personal and corporate reactions and change (ibid., p. 51). Five factors that aid a chaplain to be effective are highlighted as, religious and personal appeal, trust and neutrality, distinct from other services the organisation provides and a space for chaplaincy to take place

within (ibid., p. 52). Ryan highlights the usefulness of having a background or knowledge of the organisation with an understanding of a shared language. (ibid., p. 56). The neutrality of a chaplain is recognised as a highly valued characteristic, providing a level of trust found through not being part of the organisation's hierarchy. A chaplain joins in with the organisation but avoids becoming part of the system, maintaining their independent stance (ibid., pp. 56–57). A chaplain provides a different service to the rest of the organisation, offering something unique, they are known as someone tangibly different (ibid., p. 58). The isolation some feel is also noted, along with disconnect and lack of support from their sending organisation. Ryan suggests a higher level of interest from others would be achieved through adopting an assessment process with regular evaluation of the impact of chaplaincy and a format that enables chaplains to share with others about their role (ibid., p. 67).

Williams explores identity through the story of the biblical exile. Children who are looked after are, perhaps, placed into exile, away from their birth family and unsure of when, or if, they will ever return. They learn the 'songs in a strange land' (Ps 137:4), adapting to new customs and traditions, rituals, foods, timetables and structures. The fostering family adapt to a new face at the table, not a guest, but not familiar either. The blurred lines of when a strange land begins to feel like home and the complex emotions and feelings for the family left behind (Williams, 2018, p. 3).

Williams discusses identity as a fundamental concern in chaplaincy using the exile as an example of how the identity and faith of the Israelites were challenged, how God, their circumstances and their own selves were questioned This is not dissimilar to the journey of fostering. The children themselves are exiled from what is familiar, they are placed somewhere new with little autonomy. Part of their identity, their way of life, has been removed, they are in a 'strange land' (ibid.).

Williams suggests that 'in any context where human beings are emotionally, spiritually and physically tested, there will be chaplains standing alongside them, accompanying them in their search for meaning and for the presence of God' (ibid., p. 4). My experience as a foster carer echoes the context Williams describes, suggesting that other foster carers would have similar experiences and benefit from a chaplaincy provision.

Williams also shows the practical support that chaplains provide, to all faiths and none, not expecting anything but responding to the need they see (ibid., p. 5). Within fostering,



friends, family and church communities are often good at responding to practical needs, such as providing meals. The challenge for that support network is how to respond to challenging situations and how to support fostering families emotionally and spiritually.

Williams acknowledges that chaplains rarely see the end of the story (ibid., p. 20). This too parallels the life of a foster carer, they do not discover the outcomes of what happens next, but for the time they are journeying with, and caring for the child, they are building a relationship and being a presence for the child, providing what the child might, at the time, not know they need.

Browning describes a chaplain as a 'visible reminder of the Holy' (Browning and Spivey, 2022, p. 4). Browning also highlights that chaplains are those who are in difficult and sometimes dangerous contexts (ibid., p. 5). Browning describes a calling or call as a 'primary pathway of life', suggesting it gives life meaning. The calling is lived out through the role we inhabit (ibid., p. 16). There is a sense of identity within that role. Browning says being a chaplain is 'a call to be rather than a call to do' (ibid., p. 22). This resonates with the role of a foster carer, it is a 'being' role, despite the level of 'doing' that is required.

Baker reminds chaplains that self-care is essential for ministry and highlights well-being concerns for chaplains that echo that of foster carers: stress, burnout and compassion fatigue (Baker, 2021, p. 169).

Baker's concern for chaplains is shared within research regarding foster carers well-being and support. Several reports (Octoman and McLean, 2014; Midgley *et al.*, 2019; Miko, Berger and Krishnamoorthy, 2023) indicate that well-being is an overlooked area of concern for foster carers and an area that social workers are unclear of implementing, advocating or supporting. It falls into the grey area of responsibility – is it for the provider to equip foster carers with wellbeing strategies, or is it the responsibility of foster carers to develop their own self-care and well-being programme? To provide the best possible care for children, foster carers need to be in good mental health themselves. However, foster carers are likely to put the needs of others before themselves, forgoing their own well-being for the sake of others.

Caperton discusses school chaplaincy but there are overlaps with chaplaincy for foster carers, particularly when considering spirituality and the language of God. The world of fostering does not have a chaplaincy link like church schools, the military, health and prisons, there is no precedent to follow. The language of God and the concept of God might

not be 'awake' in those the chaplain meets. The chaplain begins the process of revealing God in the everyday and in the extraordinary. This includes drawing attention to the unnoticed sacredness, to bring alive spirituality through their 'presence, influence and specific work...' (Caperon, 2015, p. 118). This concept of 'awakening' is explored by Morisy (2004) as a need to aid others in recognising God in the world around them before they can begin to know God. The chaplain provides a different view of the world, away from the ordinary and towards 'the *possibility* of God' (Morisy, 2009, pp. 155–153). Caperon's collection of essays from a variety of chaplains includes helpful words from Williams for multi-faith chaplaincy which fostering chaplaincy will include. It is pointed out that religious language and images are not neutral for all participants and can exclude, rather than include. Times of silence and quiet can provide a sacred space and personal response for all. The suggestion of mindfulness and meditation is also given (Caperon, Todd and Walters, 2018, pp. 61–64).

5.2 Spirituality and Faith

The Equality Act 2010, Section 10, states that religious belief is a protected characteristic (*Equality Act 2010*, 2010). Although there is not a clear strategy for supporting foster carers' well-being or spirituality, as previously discussed, children do have a right to spiritual development, wherever they live. The right for a child to explore spirituality is important as spirituality and faith are shown to impact an individual's brain health, with those claiming a faith belief or spiritual practice having stronger, healthier brains than those who do not (Miller, 2022, p. 7). Evidence shows the cerebral cortex becomes thinner where there is a risk of depression (ibid., pp. 147–148). This is relevant as the cerebral cortex processes emotion and a person's ability to plan and reason as well as affecting a person's attitude. It affects the way a person views themselves, their place in the world and their relationships with others. Those at a high risk of depression are thought to benefit more greatly from spiritual practices (ibid., p. 152). Spiritual practices that focus on being part of something bigger in the world, or an awareness of nature, either in the context of a religious framework or building or out in the natural environment, give the experience of being at peace with a heightened awareness (ibid., p. 156). Both religious and non-religious spiritual experiences provide the same physiological and biological impact. The same area of the brain reacts regardless of whether individuals are part of a faith group or identify as non-religious. Therefore, 'The spiritual part of the brain can be accessed at any point, in any place, by

anybody' (ibid., p. 162). Recognising that foster carers are at high risk of burnout, secondary trauma and relinquishing their role as a foster carer, along with the complexities of the children they are caring for, suggests there is a need for a greater level of support, which could be realised through chaplaincy provision. Furthermore, the scientific evidence and research, correlating the benefits of spiritual and mindful practices for well-being, also indicate that chaplaincy resources would benefit not only foster carers but also the children they care for. Mindfulness as a practice enables the individual to focus and take part in the world in the present moment, rather than thinking and responding to events in the past. It embraces curiosity and acceptance to become more aware of life as individuals and the surrounding world (Welch, 2016, p. xii. xiii).

Gowan's report references the value of spiritual and mindful self-care along with physical and social activities. They identify that those who routinely engage in regular self-care have better physical and mental well-being. They also report that activities that encourage a deeper awareness of feelings and emotions, such as mindful and spiritual activities, increase the ability to be more resilient in caring for others. Mindful activities incorporated into a life rhythm improve the management of stress and life enjoyment (Gowan *et al.*, 2023, p. 194).

Prayer Spaces in School design creative prayer spaces for children to engage with, focusing on different themes or world issues, spirituality, questions of life and faith (Stern and Shillitoe, 2017, p. 5). They provide time and space for children to reflect on their relationships with themselves, others, the world and/or the Divine. There has been a positive response to prayer spaces with the most notable spiritual impact being on the children's relationship with themselves and how they view themselves, followed by their relationships with others (ibid., pp. 2–3). Pupils reported feeling calmer and less stressed (ibid., pp. 11–12). Children were observed asking thoughtful and reflective questions which surprised their teachers (ibid., p. 13). Prayer spaces are effective in developing children's spirituality and having a positive impact (ibid., p. 39). This resonates with mindful practice and spirituality positively impacting well-being and brain development.

Van der Kolk is a key text for any foster carer who wants to understand more about the impact of trauma on the children they look after. Although the focus is on those who have experienced primary trauma, understanding what happens to the body and strategies for repair is beneficial for those caring for others. Amongst the concepts explored is the

suggestion of activities to allow the body to heal from trauma, such as yoga and teaching the body to relax and developing connection with the self (Van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 324–331). Theatre work is also recommended as a way to embody emotions and use the whole body to allow others to experience a story. This work needs to be managed safely for participants, allowing them to build trust in their group and themselves (ibid., pp. 401–405).

5.3 Fostering

Kandiah brought the subject of fostering to the attention of the wider church, through establishing the charity 'Home for Good'. As a charity, they are tackling the shortfall of foster carers through their relationship with local churches and Local Authorities, to provide homes for children and support for foster carers. Home for Good suggests strategies and resources to encourage churches to support foster carers in their vocation and offers additional support through localised groups and mentors. Kandiah brings a Christian perspective to fostering and adoption, intertwining personal stories and scripture to provide an argument for more churches to become aware of vulnerable children and for families to hear God's call to foster and adopt. The book is an encouragement to explore fostering as a vocation and for churches to provide support to those who do. However, Kandiah acknowledges the challenges for foster carers; the exhaustion they can suffer from constantly thinking of therapeutic, creative strategies and responses, along with the questions that arise from the role. Kandiah uses Job as an example of the struggles of questions by noting that God does not answer Job's questions and instead asks over sixty more unfathomable questions in response (Kandiah and Kandiah, 2014, pp. 85–88). Williams also draws on the story of Job to remind chaplains that they do not need to provide answers, rather their presence through the challenges is what may be required (Williams, 2018, p. 19).

Challenging behaviour impacts a foster carer's well-being, so strategies to manage behaviour are beneficial for foster carers to embrace. Dan Hughes developed PACE (*What is meant by PACE?*, 2024), a strategy for foster carers to use when caring for children who have attachment disorders and trauma. This style is familiar to me as a foster carer and a chaplain. PACE involves using a style of caring that is Playful, Accepting, Curious and Empathetic. This was developed through observing attachment styles and disorders in

children and aims to help foster carers and other adults develop positive relationships with the children they are looking after. 'Creating Loving Attachments' explores each stage of PACE and suggests how it can be incorporated into everyday life. It acknowledges the challenges of foster care and the potential secondary trauma experienced by foster carers. Creative stories provide a fuller understanding of PACE and how to apply the concepts. As practitioners, Hughes and Golding do not initiate solutions but provide a space to listen. They use the tools of PACE in their interactions with carers, building a relationship of trust to enable them to discuss the challenges they are facing. Attachment is a key area discussed, along with the development of relationships. They suggest that PACE is not only used as a parenting strategy but as an approach that is beneficial to all relationships. Hughes works with and references the whole family, not just the child. The methods developed are to create a safe base for children to begin to feel secure and develop attachments. Within this, Hughes recognises that working with traumatised children brings a risk of causing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue for foster carers. Hughes highlights how carers who experience parenting as traumatic become less able to parent therapeutically and have reduced empathy, less curiosity and are less connected. Hughes suggests that carers need a good support network of family and friends who identify when secondary trauma is beginning to occur. Carers themselves are so focused on the needs of the child that they are less likely to recognise what is happening in their desire to be in control of the situation. They go on to advise that carers need to make time to relax and to have time to themselves, especially during stressful seasons of caring. The challenge is that during these times it feels less possible, and even selfish, for a carer to put their needs above the child. After all, a carer's responsibility is to care for the child. Carers can feel like they have failed when they seek support. Hughes, however, reiterates that to care for a child and build the necessary relationship, support is essential. The relationship is the key to successful fostering and overcoming trauma. Being curious is challenging when experiencing secondary trauma, especially when a child is behaving in a way that is so hard to understand. Hughes suggests that being reflective is a way to stay curious and to develop different ways to respond. This gives the child a new way to respond and prevents the same cycle from repeating (Golding and Hughes, 2012, pp. 159–161). The work of Hughes assisted the direction of The Cocoon Experiment in creating activities that were playful and curious, to encourage reflection, as well as creating a space that offered time to relax and rest, away from the home.

There have been steps in the right direction for supporting foster carers. The Reflective Fostering Programme (RFP) is a strategy developed to support foster carers in meeting the needs of children looked after. A pilot and feasibility study found that foster carers valued and benefitted from meeting with other carers and building trusted relationships. The programme gave space to acknowledge and value their own needs and feelings, rather than dismiss them. The report reflected one carer's experience of focusing so much on the children, that they could think of nothing else. I resonated with this and remembered having no space in my mind for anything other than the children I was caring for. The carer acknowledged that the RFP had allowed them to think in a new way (Midgley *et al.*, 2019, p. 54). Those involved in the study felt that the RFP provided space that was open and non-judgemental (*ibid.*, p. 53). This report equipped me to develop The Cocoon Experiment and include activities that absorbed the foster carers in processes, not just providing questions to think about.

It was observed by RFP participants that other courses they had attended suggested self-care was necessary for carers to continue as a foster carer, however, they did not provide strategies to equip carers to put that self-care in place. RFP, however, did provide the support they felt was necessary on how to care for themselves as well as the children. This report acknowledged that participants were self-referred for the study which may have affected the results (*ibid.*, pp. 54, 57).

Sinclair *et al* researched why foster carers leave and why they stay and suggested that there is a connection between the stress levels of a foster carer and placement breakdown. They suggest that '...appropriate and timely support might diminish the number of fostering breakdowns or disruptions' (Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson, 2004, p. 11). They considered the type of support required and what support has been successful. They found that informal support from family and friends was of value and important but physical neighbours provided less valuable support (*ibid.*, p. 105). They also found that training provided by the fostering provider was regarded as valuable support, but equally, as a facility to meet and bond with other foster carers as the content of the training. The foster carers recognised that the children they cared for required a different approach and an understanding of issues that differed from the usual families they were connected with. Building relationships with other fostering families would therefore provide support from those who understand the issues more fully than family or friendship groups (*ibid.*, p. 123). Social workers were also regarded as part of the support network for foster carers in this study. Social workers who

kept regular visits, listened well and gave well-informed advice were viewed positively. However, social workers who were often unavailable and did not respond to communication attempts were found to have a negative impact. This view reiterated to the researchers that support for foster carers needs to be of a high standard (ibid., p. 124).

Foster carers have the risk of allegations being made and need additional levels of support if this happens. This is also the case in the situation of any other fostering crisis or incident the carer faces. If a carer experiences a placement breakdown or other painful event, they are likely to reconsider their role as a carer and whether to continue on their journey. Good support in these situations equips carers to continue in their role and allows those who find fostering is not the path for them, to end well with less hurt (ibid., pp. 167, 170). This research also emphasises that carers need support that 'respects their family contexts, their commitment and their skills' (ibid., p. 171). They also state that the '...overwhelming reason for providing support is a moral one' (ibid., p. 11).

England's fostering evidence review recognises fostering as a rewarding but stressful vocation. Good support from formal and informal sources is described as essential for foster carers, especially as foster carers are at a greater risk of experiencing stigma and social isolation when the child they care for has behavioural challenges (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017, p. 107). This review drew on data from other reports and observed that there is not a single support solution that will suit all foster carers as they have different experiences and needs at different stages of their fostering journey. Significantly, it observed that foster carers had a higher level of burnout compared to other similar professionals, with lower levels of compassion satisfaction and similar levels of secondary trauma. It was also noted that foster carers who sought support from other professionals, as well as their supervising social worker, were likely to experience fewer symptoms of stress than those who did not. This section went on to suggest that independent support for foster carers would provide a space to express what could not be openly shared with supervising social workers (ibid., pp. 121–122). This suggests that a chaplain, by nature independent from the organisation, could play a relevant role in supporting foster carers. (Ryan, 2015, pp. 56–57).

Miko et al.'s study set out to consider how self-care benefits well-being and foster carer retention through a discussion group of foster carers. The report recognises that self-care for foster carers has not been widely written about and is not often advocated. They

observed that those with usual parental roles focus on sports and active pursuits as part of their well-being, however, their research found that well-being activities for foster carers should be focused more on mindful practices, as well as rest and enjoyable activities (Miko, Berger and Krishnamoorthy, 2023, p. 336). They found that self-care was beneficial to role retention and dealing with the stresses of the role (ibid., p. 333). They found support from the fostering agency was required as foster carers could not always identify their well-being needs. The needs of the children were placed above the well-being of foster carers (ibid., p. 351). It was suggested that a resource was developed to create self-care plans for foster carers, enabling a conversation between foster carers and social workers and for self-care to be advocated in training and meetings. Foster carers, with the support of their fostering provider, would then become more aware of, and monitor, their well-being (ibid., p. 350).

A report in 2014 set out to explore the support foster carers want and what could be put in place to encourage carer retention and recruitment. Their report highlighted that foster carers expect, and want, training that is provided through those with lived experience of fostering, good relationships with the professionals around the child and an accurate portrayal of the children that social workers place with them. They found that forty-three per cent of their participants found 'having someone or somewhere to talk about issues' as being 'extremely helpful' (Octoman and McLean, 2014, p. 153). Peer groups and foster care support were ranked as 'moderately helpful'. This was observed to contrast with other reports (such as Sinclair et al., previously discussed) indicating peer foster carer support as a valuable addition (ibid., p. 155).

Gowan's Australian study shows that foster carers are at risk of secondary trauma due to their exposure to children who have experienced primary trauma. They also have subsequent stress from the situations that arise from caring for traumatised children. The report also highlights that the usual strategies, that might be employed to alleviate stress in alternative settings, are less possible for foster carers due to their direct work and relationship with the child in their shared home. They give the example of avoiding stressful situations as a way to manage stress and facilitate well-being; however, a foster carer is not able to do this. The report discusses the additional needs children looked after often have, compared to their peers. This results in further appointments with specialist services for the carer and the child, which in England would include services such as CAMHS, GP, therapeutic services and education, as well as regular social worker visits and meetings. These extra appointments place additional stress on the carer (Gowan *et al.*, 2023, p. 193).

A report exploring the experience of foster carers and the support they received found that interaction with other foster carers was regarded as beneficial for foster carers. Support from family and friends was also valued (Samrai, Beinart and Harper, 2011, p. 41). The report noted that little research has been completed concerning the emotional impact on foster carers from fostering and observed the 'emotional investment...and their experience of loss when children leave' (ibid., p. 46).

Donachy discusses the theme of loss for foster carers, focusing on those who have chosen to end a placement where the children are under the age of five. This was a challenging and uncomfortable read. The research involved the stories of the foster carers, the children's social worker and the supervising social worker, providing, through triangulation, a perspective from all angles. The children involved were described as having disorganised attachment, with high levels of stress, controlling and out-of-control behaviour, behaving as if they were still in danger and not able to recognise, or feel safe, in their new context. Donachy focused on the loss of self felt by foster carers as a result of caring for traumatised children. I recognised the mixture of emotions shared by the case studies, the conflicting language used to describe the child they had cared for with the positive and challenging spoken in the same sentence. Being on edge and waiting for the next storm to arrive also felt familiar. The foster carers shared that they did not recognise themselves during their time of fostering these children.

Donachy notes that there is nowhere for foster carers to process the loss they experience through fostering, the loss is acknowledged but not explored. In my case, like the case studies in the report, I would prepare for the next child's arrival and not have the space or time to grieve or contemplate the loss (Sloan Donachy, 2017).

My literature review identifies the necessity of better well-being support that is advocated and demonstrated by the agencies for foster carers. The research suggests that foster carers are a demographic less likely to implement well-being practices as they are inclined to put the needs of others before themselves. Chaplains and chaplaincy, by nature, are well-suited to provide additional well-being support for foster carers through practical and spiritual accompaniment.



6 Methodology

My literature review revealed that the well-being of foster carers is under-researched.

I chose not to use methods such as longitudinal or cross-sectional as I focused on a small group of foster carers rather than gathering data from a large group. These methods can involve revisiting participants over a set timeframe, examining changes, or using various groups, who share characteristics, simultaneously, to note relevant variables. These research method did not apply to this project (Thomas, 2010, pp. 129–133).

My research was overt as the foster carers who chose to participate had been made aware of the project and gave their informed consent to take part (Denscombe, 2017, p. 86). Consent was gained for the completed questionnaires and for the experiment itself. This may have caused participants to respond in a way that was not typical of their usual response. Participants were all self-selected and voluntary (ibid., pp. 86–87).

This research project used qualitative research and began from an autoethnographic perspective. I drew on my own understanding of fostering and ongoing experiences to develop questionnaires to identify whether other foster carers echoed my experience. The results of the questionnaires, along with data sourced from government statistics, research journals and my own experience, equipped me to develop a practical response with the 'The Cocoon Experiment' and move on to use action research along with ethnographic research. The Cocoon Experiment used informal conversation and observations to assist in identifying whether chaplaincy and related resources would be beneficial for foster carers.

Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the perspective of the world from a particular group of people, with the intention of making a difference to those involved. In my case, this was foster carers, with the intention to identify chaplaincy as making a difference to the well-being of foster carers (Iyadurai, 2023, pp. 39–40, 54).

My initial questionnaires gathered data regarding the general experiences of foster carers, such as how long they had been carers, what type of care they provided, what support they received and whether they took part in any well-being activities. The questionnaires informed the development of The Cocoon Experiment and the activities I included [\(Appendix C\)](#).

Although The Cocoon Experiment took foster carers out of their natural environment in the home, foster carers are used to being in unfamiliar environments as the role is not solely

home-based. They may attend therapeutic settings, different schools, hospitals, meeting rooms, hospitals, prisons and so on, which may become familiar to foster carers. The Cocoon Experiment, as a setting and experience, was unusual as foster carers were required to focus on themselves rather than the needs of the children in their care.

The Cocoon Experiment used ethnography and action research to find the 'story of a group' (ibid., p. 59). Although, in this case, I was not able to be absorbed into a wider group of foster carers due to no longer being a foster carer myself, my shared experience of fostering and my role as a chaplain did create a safe space where foster carers voluntarily expressed their experiences and responses.

Although the foster carers I engaged with do not live in a community together and may not be considered a communal group, they do have a shared belonging, membership and identity through their role. This identity is further established through their fostering provider registration, either local authority or private agency (Denscombe, 2017, p. 83).

Ethnography is complementary to chaplaincy in settings such as schools, as the chaplain is amongst the people, involved in their stories and taking part in daily activities. The researcher becomes a part of the group and does not just observe. My fieldwork was limited to The Cocoon Experiment sessions foster carers attended, rather than the lived experiences of foster carers and joining in with their lives in their day-to-day activities. This contrasted with the 'usual life' ethnographic research as foster carers joined me in an environment I had created, rather than me joining theirs. However, it allowed me to journey alongside foster carers as they began to consider spirituality as beneficial to their wellbeing and a different way to view the world. It also allowed me to observe the group's perception of reality, their understanding, and what meaning they attached to the different areas that could be explored. I joined in with the activities, where appropriate, and gave space for pondering and quiet investigation (ibid., p. 84).

Ethnography allows researchers to explore a context and compare it with other groupings within a society, to notice what connects and what is different. This stage of the research was to begin to recognise the similarities between the foster carers themselves, before comparing with another group, to identify whether chaplaincy would be beneficial for foster carers. The next stage of The Cocoon Experiment could be to contrast foster carers with adopters or kinship carers.

The challenges for a fostering family are not always recognised by those within the wider community. There is, perhaps, a sense that now the child is in a safe and stable environment, the challenges are reduced. The wider community are unaware of the complexities and trauma for the children looked after, or the foster carers themselves. However, between foster carers there is a shared language that is understood; ‘code words’ are used that convey a deeper meaning. This was illustrated during The Cocoon Experiment when foster carers made comments such as, ‘it was tricky’, which an outsider would have understood more simplistically. A foster carer knows the depths of feeling behind the phrase. Ethnography also identifies shared customs and practices within the group, such as when they write up their daily diary, what they do when a child moves or, what they do to make a child feel welcome when they first arrive. This led me to focus on individuals within the group with an element of ‘personal ethnography’, to consider the layers that make up their life, why they chose to become, and remain, foster carers, what influenced them and their ‘feelings, views and perspectives’ (ibid., pp. 85–86).

My goal in using ethnography was to build on my own experience as a foster carer and identify whether my experience resonated with other foster carers and whether chaplaincy would benefit foster carers as a wider group. Ethnography recognises that the conclusions reached may not be objective due to the researcher’s involvement in the community. I recognise that I approached this research project and experiment with my own bias due to my experience as a foster carer and involvement within the fostering community since 2005. I, therefore, have my own experiences and understanding to draw on from being part of the fostering culture. My lens is not neutral. This, I believe, has been an advantage as I had an insight into the context I was researching and gave me shared experiences with new foster carers I met, making it easier to bond quickly.

Alongside ethnography, I used action research to review each session of The Cocoon Experiment. Participants were asked to complete an evaluation of the session they attended. This allowed me to make adaptations to the experiment before the next session. It also helped me to identify whether foster carers would find resources, such as The Cocoon Experiment, a helpful addition to their fostering journey. Action research allows practitioners to develop and improve their practice. The Cocoon Experiment will continue to be an evolving resource. I will continue to reflect and consider how it could be improved and adapted after each use and how it could be developed further. This ongoing practical work

will provide the basis for considering how the challenge of supporting foster carers spiritually, and their spirituality, could be addressed and developed (Thomas, 2010, p. 112).

Action research complemented my natural style of theological reflection in using Green's reflective spiral of assessing an event, exploring and reflecting theologically on it, responding through developing a new plan and repeating and evaluating new outcomes (Thompson, Pattison and Thompson, 2008, pp. 58–59). Action research focuses on a 'commitment to change' and to act on the discoveries that have been made. It advocates an everchanging development of planning, reflecting and then adapting and replanning. Action research prompts the practitioner to consider new ways of thinking, working and talking about the issues and aims to change practice for the better (Thomas, 2010, pp. 4, 112–113).

6.1 The Cocoon Experiment

The Cocoon Experiment took place over three dates. It was developed by contemplating what was revealed through the literature review, my fostering experiences and previous studies. It, therefore, considered different learning styles; those who learn through doing (activists), through observation and thinking about what has happened (reflectors), through being aware of a theory to back up what is being shared, a structured setting (theorists) and through seeing a link between knowledge and experience with a seen advantage to a technique shown (pragmatists), and different approaches to spirituality (Rosewell, 2005). It included activities to relate to varying spiritual approaches such as, naturalists, sensates, ascetics and contemplatives such as sights and smells, objects from creation, solitude and contemplation and resources to respond through. It included reading and writing responses, physically creating through clay and paint, opportunities to draw or colour, spaces to relax and rest, nourishment through cake refreshments, a story to engage with, a labyrinth to walk with a variety of objects to look at or hold, spaces to reflect with objects and wondering prompts. It used PACE concepts, along with mindfulness and spirituality, with activities being playful, accepting, curious and empathetic. Some activities were physical, such as walking the labyrinth. Some were for inward reflection, considering our place in the world. Others involved listening and watching, such as the story, with space to converse and share stories. There was an opportunity to rest and relax, look at a book or swing in a hammock. The activities provided space to be alone or to share in conversation ([Appendix G\(i\) – video tour of The Cocoon Experiment](#)).

The **Clay** and **Painted Fingerprint String Labyrinth** embraced the inner child, recapturing the joy of moulding clay and glue being stuck on your fingers. Both activities required concentration and gave a distraction, allowing participants to communicate if they wished or remain in pondering silence. They were both activities that could be replicated at home with children ([Appendix H and I](#)).

The **story** was from 'OutoftheBox' and was a space to share a story and wonder together, noticing areas of the story that were familiar and areas we liked or did not like (*OutoftheBox Stories*). This area also included a selection of children and adult books to complement the themes of welcome, well-being, fostering and spirituality ([Appendix J- video of the story](#)).

Three **gazebos** formed an intuitive reflection area beginning with an emotions gauge and 'Blob Tree' to consider where they felt themselves to be in the world (*What Are The Blobs? A Feelosophy, 2024*). This was followed by considering who we are and how we view the world, aided by pairs of spectacles and wondering prompts and poems. The final gazebo had a selection of pebbles, stones and shells to prompt thinking about journeys and what shapes us to be who we are. There were wondering prompts and poems to reflect on ([Appendix L, M and N](#)).

A giant **Butterfly Net** formed a prayer space for participants to reflect on whether they were a leaf, caterpillar, cocoon, or moth. There was an option to write a prayer, or a response to the day, and peg it onto the net ([Appendix O](#)).

A **hammock** and weighted blanket provided an area to rest ([Appendix P](#)).

The **refreshments** were an important inclusion. I wanted the foster carers who attended to feel welcomed and valued, so homemade cake felt appropriate. The session ended with a blessing poem ([Appendix R](#)).

Following each session I consulted the evaluation forms, reflected on the conversations that had taken place and considered the observations I had made. I then determined what might need changing to make the next session better. Following session one, I realised that the story activity needed to be moved from being the first activity to being the second. The story required the listeners and watchers to respond to wondering questions. It was apparent that the first group found this to be an unusual expectation and were very much out of their comfort zone. For session two I began with the painting activity as I observed in session one that the participants were much more at ease and conversational in this activity. This

change meant that the next group were more comfortable with each other as they had already voluntarily shared stories amongst themselves. I kept this change for session three and again the participants were more relaxed with one another following the painting activity.

I adapted the gazebo reflection areas a little after each session to make them more intuitive. In session one, the gazebos followed the story and I observed that the carers gathered in one gazebo and began talking about their experiences as foster carers, rather than engaging with the activities. This again prompted the rearrangement of how the session ran. The participants valued being able to converse with others who understood their journey and to share experiences in a relaxed environment. Session two then became painting, story, gazebo's rather than story, gazebo's, painting, which gave the participants time to settle in before engaging with their personal thoughts. Following refreshments together, participants could join a clay shaping activity, walk the labyrinth and another pondering activity with the butterfly net. There was also an option to rest in the hammock and a selection of books to engage with. For sessions two and three, I added a pom-pom-making craft activity alongside the books, following feedback for more craft.

Following session one and session two I changed my introduction to the sessions. At the very start of session three, over a cup of tea, I introduced the concept of chaplaincy. Then during the painting session, I talked about how spirituality and mindful activities could be beneficial to foster carers and shared some of the research around this. This again made the session feel more natural and there was understanding behind the activities.

I did not explain the labyrinth and allowed the participants to experience the mystery for themselves. In previous uses, I had explained the concept to those who used it and it was suggested that as an experience it did not need a full explanation. However, next time, I would provide more of an explanation to enable fuller engagement, as the body language of participants suggested confusion.

Ethnography and Action Research, as my methodology, began the building of a relationship between myself, as a chaplain, with other foster carers to begin developing chaplaincy for their community.



7 What The Cocoon Experiment Revealed

This section will first show the questionnaire responses and then continue with the reactions to the resource of The Cocoon Experiment.

Before designing The Cocoon Experiment, I asked other foster carers about their experiences through a questionnaire. The results helped me to establish the type of resource to develop.

7.1 Research from Questionnaires

My questionnaires were completed by foster carers who were self-selected. They responded to either; social media posts in foster carer groups, my own social media accounts, emails via Social Services or friends sharing with other carers.

Of the thirty requests for questionnaires, twenty-five were completed and returned, representing a range of foster care experience (Figure 1). There was a broad mixture of short-term and long-

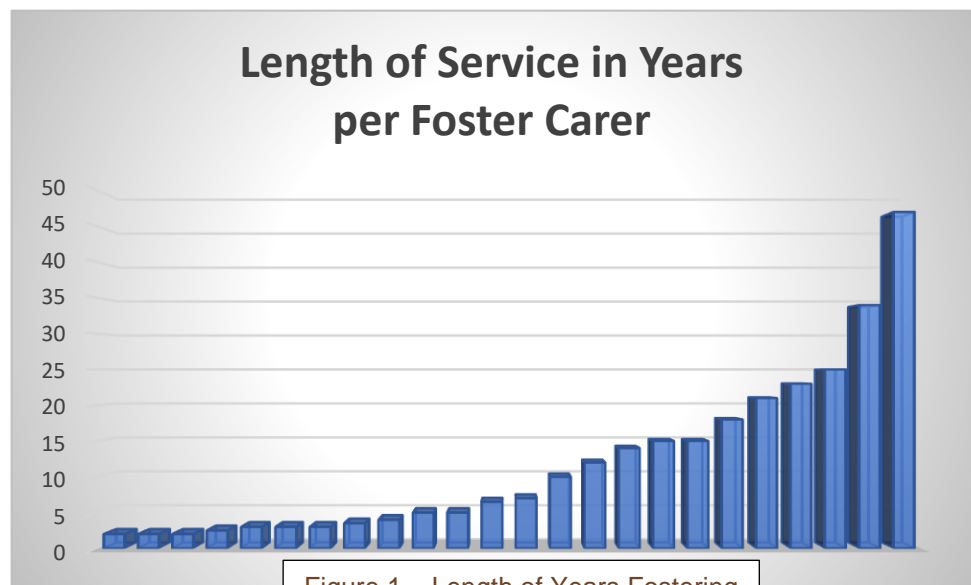


Figure 1 – Length of Years Fostering

term carers along with specialist-type placements (Figure 2). All participants were either foster carers or still involved in fostering.



Figure 2 – Range of Placement Styles

Ninety-two per cent of foster carers were registered with their local authority (Figure 3).
 Forty-four per cent were involved with paid or voluntary work alongside fostering (Figure 4).

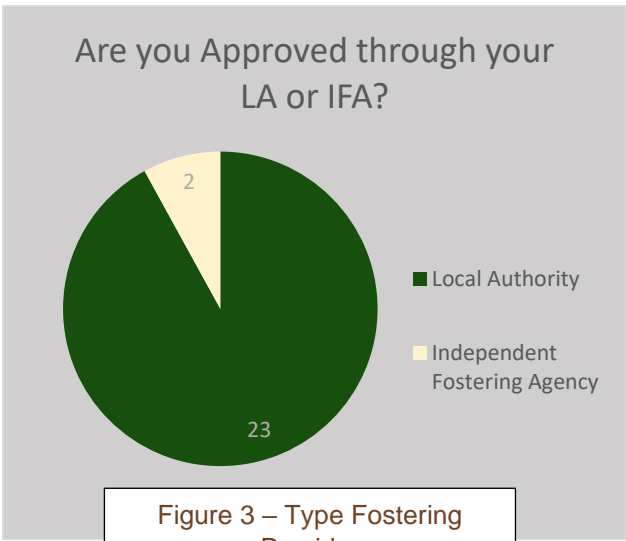


Figure 3 – Type Fostering Provider

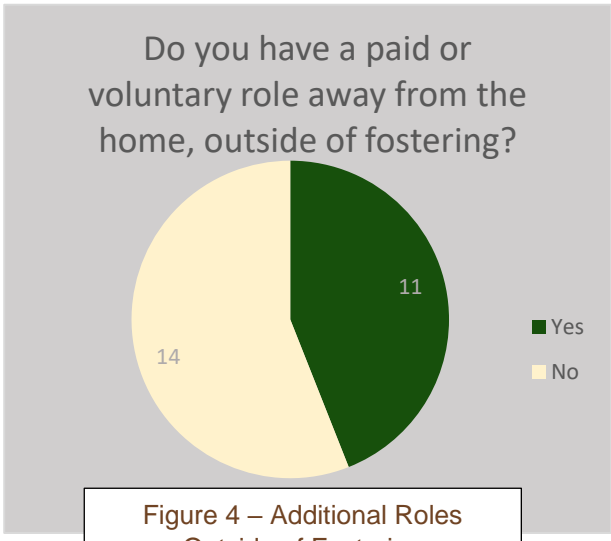
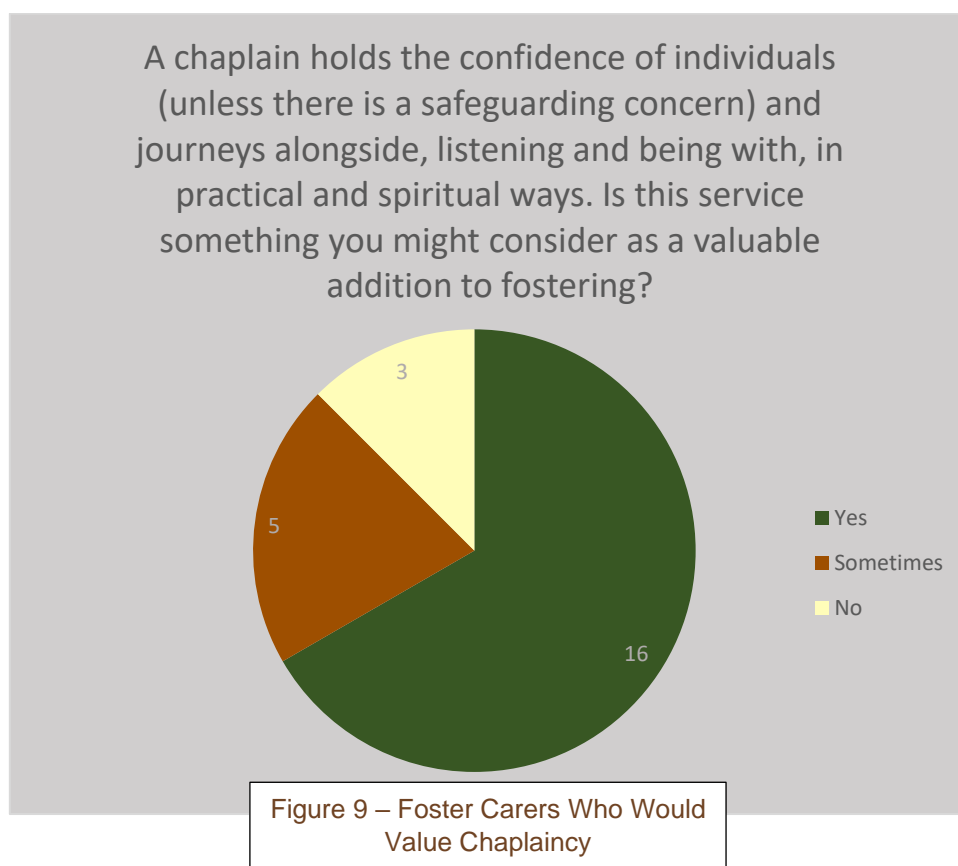


Figure 4 – Additional Roles Outside of Fostering

A high number, twenty-one out of twenty-five, believed they had experienced secondary trauma due to their fostering role (Figure 5).

clarified their response, with one saying they were concerned by recent safeguarding issues within the church and therefore would not trust a chaplain and another saying they do not believe in any religion. This is a reminder that we are accountable for how we behave and react in all areas of our lives. Being in ministry in the public arena is a responsibility; we are not there to reflect ourselves; we are called to reflect Jesus through our actions, revealing more of God to those around us.



7.2 The Cocoon Experiment

The Cocoon Experiment was developed by reflecting on my own experience and prior reading, the data collected from the questionnaires and what was discerned through my literature review. It was indicated that foster carers would benefit from additional support that was mindful in practice. They would also benefit from being with other foster carers and having time away from the children they cared for. They would value someone outside of the fostering provider as an independent source of support. My literature research also indicated that spiritual support for foster carers has not been widely advocated or implemented.

The Cocoon Experiment provided space for self-selected foster carers to attend one of three, free-of-charge, advertised sessions. Of the nine who booked tickets, six attended. Each session lasted for three hours with a range of activities as already discussed, with time available to go over three hours if required. Following the session, participants completed an evaluation form to highlight areas for improvement, what they liked and so on.

Of the six who attended one had participated in a retreat-style event before. Three were from a Christian background, with a faith, and three did not consider themselves to have a faith or spirituality. The participants did not have any clear expectations for the time together. This was reflected in their assessment of their emotions and feelings at the start which included words such as 'curious', 'anxious' and 'expectant'. 'Calm' and 'happy' were used by the participant who had previously attended a retreat (Figure 10).

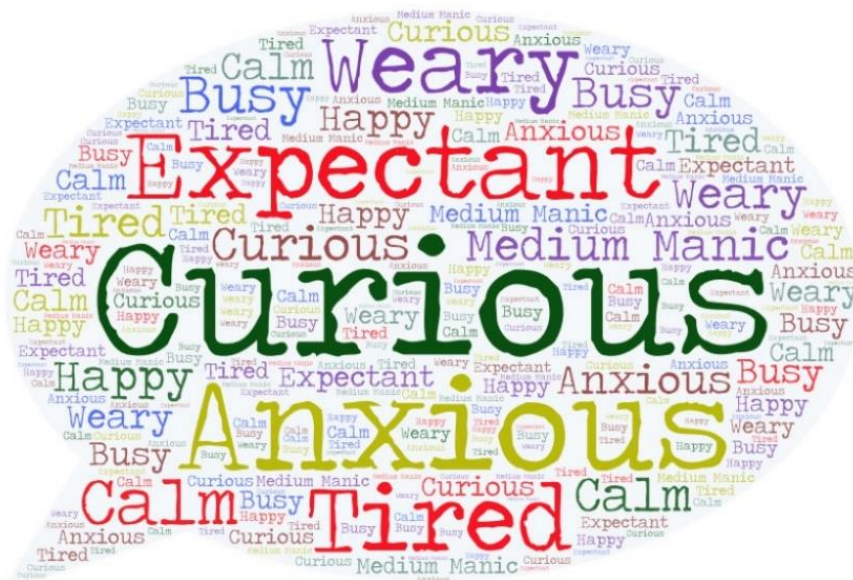


Figure 10 – Feelings of Participants Before the Cocoon Experiment

Participants were aware that they were taking part in a prototype event. Between focused activities, I shared my own experiences as a foster carer and my motivation for The Cocoon Experiment. At different points throughout the session, I explained the role of a chaplain and a little about spirituality, referencing the experience of children through their school education and the evidence suggesting the positive impact spiritual and mindful practices have on well-being, especially for foster carers.

As discussed in the methodology section, the format evolved a little following each event to make it more intuitive and to allow participants to feel more relaxed. It will continue to be developed, so it remains relevant and fresh for foster carers.

There were two chaplain-led art activities. These activities allowed participants to either fully focus on the activity and enjoy the peacefulness of the space or engage in conversation. The painting activity was a highlight for participants. This was a messy activity involving a level of concentration but no skill. This meant participants were focused on creating their pattern and endeavouring to get the string and glue to stick but could also listen to anything being said and converse if they wished. I found that this activity was where participants began to talk more freely. There was an acknowledgement that it was the type of activity they would not think of doing as an adult, however, they were all fully engaged and proud of what they accomplished ([Appendix I](#)).

The clay activity was enjoyed by five of the participants with one not wishing to take part in another messy activity. I considered asking the participants to squash their clay after they had finished making their piece and return it to the bag of clay, but they were so proud of their work and wondering what their children would say about it when they got home, that I did not have the heart to! Like the painting, this activity allowed participants to engage with the clay and talk about their journey ([Appendix H](#)).

The evaluations showed the art activities to be preferred, with the suggestion of additional crafts being added. One participant observed that their foster child would enjoy and benefit from similar activities.

The gazebo zones were designed to prompt deeper thoughts and reflections beyond the here and now. This area was the most challenging for the participants. During the first session, participants gathered in the gazebos and began a conversation together rather than engaging with the materials. This prompted me to start the second session with the painting activity rather than the story and gazebos, to allow time for conversation before wondering. This appeared to provide a more fluid feel to the session. Although the first group used the space for conversation, it was interesting to hear one of the foster carers observe that they take the children they care for on unexpected adventures to make them feel part of their family unit. One of these adventures is to wake the children up very early in the morning and drive to a beach to watch the sunrise. The children then run around on the

deserted beach before enjoying a hot chocolate together and going back home. They gave the children, and themselves, a spiritual moment ([Appendix L, M and N](#)).

The OutoftheBox story, Catching Up, was well received despite it being a story method they were unfamiliar with. I shared the story and then allowed space to wonder. Although the participants were a little wary to begin with, when they did start to share, more reflections became apparent. One participant, referring to the helper having a rest, said, 'I wish I was brave enough to do that'. Another observed that they thought they would be bored by the story as it was not fast-paced but found themselves drawn in, wondering what would happen and enjoying it ([Appendix J and K - story and responses](#)).

All the participants rose concerns about financial arrangements. They referenced issues they had experienced with payments and the payment schemes in place.

Participants explained the training scheme and had mixed views on the provision of all online training compared to in-person training. Positives were the convenience of online, negatives were the lack of personal connection and discussion. There was recognition of the difficulty of forming relationships with other foster carers through online training, however, each foster carer is part of a support group implemented by their fostering provider.

Participants talked about their support system of 'Hives'. The benefits included being part of a group of other foster carers to connect with and pre-organised social events with others who understand fostering. The disadvantages highlighted were a lack of foster carers attending events and the occasional disorganisation of the hive leader responsible for planning and managing the group.

It became clear through observing the participants that they valued time with other adults in a space away from their usual responsibilities, sharing with others of the same vocation. The creative activities with paint and clay were especially valuable for allowing them to feel at ease and for conversation to naturally flow. The completed evaluation forms echoed my observations with participants highlighting being with other adults and the art activities as their favourite part of the day, along with the cake!

Following the session, the evaluation asked participants how they felt after taking part in The Cocoon Experiment, with four words being used between them to describe their emotional state (Figure 10).



Figure 11 – Feelings of Participants Before the Cocoon Experiment

Participants all agreed that it would have been better with more foster carers, but also referenced the unpredictability of foster carers and attending events that we had discussed together over the session. They felt it needed to be promoted by social workers during supervision sessions to encourage additional participants in the future. This echoed the recommendations of Miko (Miko, Berger and Krishnamoorthy, 2023, p. 343). Participants suggested that social workers might find The Cocoon Experiment a beneficial support, with a recognition of the challenges they face in their role. I was greatly encouraged by the response from the participants.

It was also noticeable that the participants were appreciative of the care that had been taken over the development of The Cocoon Experiment, they received it as the gift it was offered as and felt valued and affirmed in their role as a result. There was a level of surprise that someone, who did not know them, would create a space for foster carers.

The results of the questionnaires, combined with The Cocoon Experiment in-person event, identified that foster carers have access to a wider range of support that is continuing to be developed. Support is dependent on the service provider and locality. The Mockingbird Programme has been utilised by fostering agencies through a central hub for a group of localised foster carers, offering support through respite care, meet-ups and social activities. It has been designed to imitate the support found in a wider family network with a positive effect on fostering families being reported ('Fostering_Network_Mockingbird.pdf', accessed

May 2024). Similar hub support is found in 'Hives', with a foster carer organising social activities for their cohort of foster carers (*Hampshire Hive*, accessed May 2024).



8 Discussion

This section will discuss the findings of the Cocoon Experiment for chaplaincy and fostering. The aims of this research project, as well as holding The Cocoon Experiment event, were:

- To identify what support foster carers have access to.
- To identify how foster carers could be supported through chaplaincy.
- To discover whether foster carers could benefit from chaplaincy.
- To raise the awareness of spirituality within foster care.

I will first discuss support and areas of challenge for foster carers. I will then discuss how chaplaincy, and spiritual awareness, could provide a distinct support, identifying how chaplaincy does this and the benefits to foster carers.

8.1 Available Support for Foster Carers

My questionnaires and practical event found that foster carers had a wide range of support available to them. This included formal support through their fostering provider and informal support such as family and friends.

Groups: There is a growing awareness of the need for well-being activities to support foster carers in their role which has been implemented through schemes such as 'The Mockingbird Programme' and 'Hives'. Foster carers reported that these groups were beneficial with activities ranging from coffee mornings to days out. Foster carers additionally benefited from forming positive relationships with other foster carers and being with a group of people who understood the stresses and strains of foster caring.

My locality has good support networks in place for foster carers in the form of 'Hives'. The county has been divided into smaller zones and foster carers become part of a hive in their local area. Each hive has a leader who is responsible for organising social events for fostering families, coffee mornings and so on. This was very encouraging. However, it was also mentioned that these events are not always very well attended, with some events resulting in no attendees. Foster carers also provide ad-hoc respite care for each other.

Supervision: Foster carers should all have a Supervising Social Worker. However, foster carers often experience changes in social workers which results in building new relationships and a lack of consistency. As in all relationships, some people 'click' and can easily form a good working relationship, and others are more challenging. Changes of social worker should always be planned, where possible, and communicated in advance, in person.

Formal Training support: Foster carers are expected to attend training as part of their continuing professional development. Pre-Covid, training would have been in-person, allowing foster carers and other professionals to build relationships, and gain knowledge to develop a deeper understanding for their role. When I attended training, I enjoyed meeting with other professionals and foster carers. At the time, some of my fostering peers felt they could not talk freely with social workers present. Foster carers who attended The Cocoon Experiment had mixed views on the training they received. Their training has not been well attended and has remained online since COVID-19. This was beneficial to some carers as they did not need to organise child cover or travel to a training point, however, they did recognise that discussions in the online break-out rooms were not as helpful as when they had attended training in person. One of the foster carers commented that they preferred online training as they did not need to make as much time to attend as when it was in person. Another carer disagreed as they felt online was too impersonal and they did not feel as free to talk as they did in face-to-face training. I was surprised that online had continued to be the fostering provider's preferred method of training due to the benefits of social interaction for foster carers. I acknowledge online is more cost-effective, but this is not the best approach for maintaining foster carer's well-being.

Financial support: Foster carers are supported financially for their role. Finances can be a concern for foster carers and this was raised during The Cocoon Experiment and from the questionnaires. Different authorities and providers have different finance structures in place. In this locality, foster carers do not receive payment for their role until they gain Level Two status, other than a payment towards the cost of caring for the child they are looking after. Other authorities provide a payment for the child's needs, such as clothing and food, along with a payment recognising their skills and experience. Those in a higher bracket might be asked to care for children who are displaying their needs in a more challenging way. Foster carers complete relevant training and courses to develop their skill set to proceed through

the different levels. Foster carers do not take on their role for financial gain, but being paid appropriately and on time helps foster carers feel valued.

Foster carers would benefit from paid, consistent, respite care, especially when there is a risk of secondary trauma (Gowan *et al.*, 2023, pp. 205–206). Respite, however, has its challenges, both in finding respite care and the consequences of using respite care. There is a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of children coming into the care system. This results in children being placed with foster carers who are either not experienced enough or are not a good match, or being placed out of the county, or in a residential setting. Respite care is equally challenging to source. Respite was advised to me for one of our children and took over a year to arrange. It was unsuccessful and resulted in the ending of the arrangement, with the respite carer withdrawing from any other fostering arrangements. There is a nuance with fostering in that you care for children as if they are your birth children, yet, the enormity of the role means that respite is needed. The Mockingbird Programme seeks to address this, as mentioned, it mimics a wider family set-up, enabling a cohort of fostering families to build closer relationships with each other and provide 'sleepovers' that are more spontaneous and 'usual' to family life.

The support offered by fostering providers through supervision, training, financial reimbursement, fostering associations and support groups provides good support for foster carers. This support is invaluable and provides a structural support system, offering social activities and ensuring foster carers are up-to-date with training and equipped for their role. These all help a foster carer to feel valued in their role. The fostering provider may benefit from the chaplain as a critical friend in supporting foster carers' well-being (Roberts and Nash, 2022, p. 20).

Foster carers were found to prioritise their well-being through engaging in enjoyable activities or meeting up with other foster carers, family and friends. Those with a faith background find additional well-being through prayerful activities and gathering with their worshipping community. However, there is the likelihood that they will forgo their activities if a child's need arises.

My research shows that foster carers would benefit from additional well-being support despite generally having well-being practices in place. The foster carers who completed questionnaires and attended the Cocoon Experiment had different levels of experience, ranging from one to forty-seven years and offering a range of placement styles. Their

positive response to the idea of chaplaincy and The Cocoon Experiment indicates the need foster carers are aware they have.

Chaplaincy offers a different support to the fostering provider and the foster carers personal support network, providing spiritual and practical care for those who choose it. It is offered as a gift with no obligation (ibid., pp. 11–12).

Table 1 – Chaplaincy Support Relating to Foster Carers Needs

Chaplain Characteristic	Foster Carers Need	Action
Active Listener	Someone to listen. Someone to care when a child moves on, to grieve with.	Chaplain listens to the foster carer, the foster carer feels valued, seen and heard. Holds the space for grief from loss.
Advocate Prophetic voice Critical Friend	Advocate To feel valued.	Being an alternative voice to the fostering provider, championing the needs of children looked after and their fostering families. Speak the uncomfortable truths that might need to be heard. 'Speak truth to power'. Affirming the role of the foster carer and who they are.
Spirituality – sacred space	A space to rest	The chaplain provides a space to 'be' and rest. Time with a chaplain can be a rest, a walk, a story, a cup of tea...May develop resources to develop spirituality with foster carers.
Incarnational	To be themselves	Seeing God in all people, supporting foster carers to be fully human and knowing who they are – more than a foster carer. Identity work – made in the image of God.

Neutral Person	Independent Person Fostering providers and organisations have an agenda to place children and for positive statistics to reflect their company.	Someone who is not bound by the structures of the provider, a safe person to talk to, independent, holds confidence (other than safeguarding concerns).
Inclusive Non-judgemental Care	A helping hand, practical support.	The hands and feet of Jesus, responding to practical needs as well as spiritual. Showing love to each person, all faiths and none.
Collaborative		Able to work with the organisation to develop the chaplaincy and care for foster carers. Works within the policies and procedures.
A gift	Adult company	The gift of chaplaincy is offered with no obligation. A practical gift responding to need, pastoral support and a gift of hope and joy.
Knows the Language	Someone who understands	A chaplain who understands the shared language of fostering, empathy, acceptance, understanding.
Spiritual Development Accompaniment Inclusive – for all faiths and none	Soul care, spiritual support. Multi-faith context	A chaplain provides spiritual support and soul care through accompanying. Development of resources.
Presence	Well-being	Time and space, activities and resources, listening, being with, accompanying, presence
Values	Understands the values of fostering	The values of fostering resemble those of chaplaincy – caring for others who start as strangers, treating others as though they are family, respect, confidentiality, guidance where appropriate...

Hope Bearer	Encouragement	A chaplain bears hope when it feels hopeless. Can reveal a different direction.
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(Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt, 2011; Caperon, 2015; Nash and Roberts, 2016; Baker, 2021; Byrne and Hilliard, 2021; Roberts and Nash, 2022).

There is an awareness amongst foster carers that they need a different type of support which has not previously been articulated. Foster carers are asking for soul care, someone to listen, spiritual support, a helping hand; all areas a chaplain encompasses [\(Appendix E\)](#).

The Cocoon Experiment showed how foster carers can be given an extra layer of support, distinct from their fostering agency. Although fostering providers offer support through events and groups, being with others socially does not support in the same way as chaplaincy provision. Van der Kolk says ‘The critical issue is *reciprocity*: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else’s mind and heart’ (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 92). It goes beyond just being with other people. Chaplains provide a space of listening and being with, taking the interaction further than merely being social (Wells, 2018, pp. 10–15). The suggestion of foster carers benefiting from a neutral independent person echoes that need of being seen and heard (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017, pp. 121–122). A chaplain would be that neutral person, holding the confidence and being a non-judgemental safe space to freely communicate with, without fear. ‘Safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives’ with well-being and good mental health being aided through feeling safe with someone else and having a safe connection (Van der Kolk, 2015, p. 92). The Cocoon Experiment offers a way of building new connections and developing an awareness of a spiritual life, offering the support that Miller has found to be beneficial to mental health. This approach means that foster carers can engage with the resources at face value or begin to explore in a way that prompts a spiritual response. Being alongside, as a chaplain, provides a listening space for those who require it.

The provision of a story for foster carers was a valuable inclusion and prompted interesting insights from the foster carers who engaged in deeper thought, making connections with the story. This time of peaceful listening to both the story and inner thoughts was surprising to foster carers. The story made foster carers aware of their need to rest and to take the time to slow down. It highlighted their feelings of being unable to stop or take control of their situations. Their responsibility to the children they care for and to the fostering provider

prevents them from taking these steps. They saw that their life was busy but did not see a way to pause and take the rest they needed and did not think they were brave enough to do so. Although, they had made time to attend The Cocoon Experiment, so perhaps they are braver than they think! This reiterates the value of initiatives such as The Cocoon Experiment as there is permission to pause and reset. Previous reports recommend that fostering providers promote well-being activities for their foster carers and engage with them themselves (Miko, Berger and Krishnamoorthy, 2023, pp. 350–351). This was echoed by foster carers who felt they should be encouraged by fostering providers and supervising social workers to attend The Cocoon Experiment.

Foster carers benefit from activities alongside each other as it allows for more natural conversation, with awkward silences reduced, due to the activity needing attention. Nash recommends using creative activities alongside talking, as activities that hold the attention mean uncomfortable eye contact is not continually required (Nash, 2020, p. 134). I used to find, as a foster carer, that big conversations often took place when I was preparing a meal or driving the car. There was no pressure to maintain eye contact and topics that could be challenging were more approachable.

I found it interesting that the foster carers were instinctively drawn more to the making and doing activities. I had anticipated that the story would have appealed more than the art activities due to the importance placed on life stories and narratives for children. I reflected that perhaps the nature of foster carers is to be doing and to be active, keeping busy rather than pausing to be still. It would be interesting to replicate these activities with a different demographic of individuals to identify if there is a similar or differing response. The foster carers were more comfortable keeping busy. This brought to mind the story of Jesus with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Rather than be with Jesus, Martha kept busy, completing the practical tasks and becoming more agitated by the lack of help from Mary. There is empathy to be had for both Mary and Martha, meals and errands are not completed by themselves but opportunities to sit and be are also unexpected gifts to be received. Although the art activities did provide an environment for reflecting and sharing stories, there was a sense of the foster carers wanting to be engaged in something practical that held their focus. Did they miss out by not engaging more in the reflective zones, or were they unfamiliar with such activities and unsure how to engage? I intend to continue to include reflective zones so that those who attend become more used to these types of wondering questions and, over time, become more responsive in these zones. I reflected

on my own experiences and acknowledged that when I was a foster carer, I would have been reluctant to engage in pondering activities that provided space to think deeply. I was fearful that if I spent time reflecting, it would be too painful.

The responses from the participants of The Cocoon Experiment suggested that support through chaplaincy would be valued, with them all recommending it to others. The results from the questionnaires were positive towards the concept of chaplaincy, with a minority holding suspicions of motivation. The Cocoon Experiment could extend its reach through foster carers sharing their experience with other carers, initiating curiosity to find out more. This was my experience as a chaplain in school, there was some initial suspicion from staff members. This slowly eased as they began to see and understand my role and began to speak with me about their life situations and ask me to pray for them. Similarly, foster carers will see the motivation for their well-being and support, to be alongside them when they need someone to explore the questions of life with.

Foster carers recognise the system responsible for children is inadequate and have a strong sense of justice being needed. They want a better system for the children they care for. This sense of justice echoes scripture; foster carers are following God's law to care for the vulnerable, whether they are aware of this, or not, and want a more just world for the children they care for (Psalm 33:4-5, Isaiah 1:17, James 1:27). Although a chaplain cannot independently change or create the resources for a more just system, they can listen to the frustration of foster carers. They can provide the space to explore the emotions that result from the inequality and injustice of structures and systems.

8.2 Recommendations

8.2.1 For Fostering Providers

Foster carers of all placement types, levels of experience and years of service are indicating that they are experiencing secondary trauma. Chaplaincy provision offers additional well-being support through practical and spiritual support.

Foster carers valued having adult company and being away from their responsibilities, in a space created for them. This suggests that a wider cohort of foster carers would also find The Cocoon Experiment, or a similar resource, a beneficial and peaceful place. It is recommended that fostering providers encourage foster carers to consider engaging with

activities, such as The Cocoon Experiment, that provide time and space to pause, rest and reflect. Fostering providers need to positively promote well-being and advocate participation in well-being events. Other reports suggest the benefits of an independent person to share frustrations and worries with, outside of professionals foster carers work with. Chaplains hold the responsibility of confidentiality and safeguarding as part of their role and are experienced listeners, making them suitable candidates for this. It is recommended that fostering providers welcome chaplains into their organisation, ensuring their safeguarding training and other essential training is in place for their organisation. Fostering providers would need an introduction to chaplaincy to understand what a chaplain offers as it is a new relationship. Ashton describes a similar issue in healthcare chaplaincy and provides training to inform staff about spirituality. This is done sensitively and identifies the spiritual care the staff perhaps unknowingly provide through their care. This education equips staff to direct to the chaplain when there is a need and not just those with a religious requirement (Threlfall-Holmes and Newitt, 2011, p. 40).

8.2.2 Church

Churches need to be a welcoming, creative place of inclusive hospitality and fun, where relationships can be built, individuals are valued and where fostering families will feel supported. Churches should consider how their services are structured and if they are accessible to fostering families (Nash, 2020, pp. 131–132). There should be ‘an attitude of hospitality’ that offers space for transformation (Farrant and Philip, 2023, p. 49).

Safeguarding training and understanding should be regularly updated and enforced.

As foster carers were unsure whether anyone regularly prayed for them, church leadership and Christian friends should be intentional about praying for foster carers and raise awareness of praying for fostering families. This includes those known and not known to the church community.

Those providing spiritual and pastoral support would benefit from training on secondary trauma and the signs to look out for. If a foster carer seems to be acting out of their usual character, it could be from living with the trauma of others.

It is recommended that those with a pastoral role develop their skills to be fully present in their encounter, as their presence has more impact than what they say, or what advice they offer (Nash, 2020, p. 125).

Foster carers sense of loss when a child moves on should be recognised and space provided to feel all of the complex emotions.

Home for Good and Bell (Bell, 2023) offer good advice to churches on supporting foster carers, including practical support through providing meals and a helping hand. They also advise on training resources that equip churches to be more welcoming to fostering families in areas such as PACE.

8.3 Was The Cocoon Experiment Successful?

The Cocoon Experiment was designed to support the well-being of foster carers and demonstrate the practical and spiritual support that chaplaincy can offer. Foster carers of all faiths and none were welcome. Those with a faith could reflect and engage with the divine and those without could consider the possibilities. The feedback from participants suggested The Cocoon Experiment was successful in concept and execution. It has begun the relationship between foster carers and chaplaincy. The journey has advanced through a participant contacting me to ask if I could provide emergency care for their foster baby following receiving difficult health news. They had found The Cocoon Experiment 'beautiful', and having heard some of my story, knew I was experienced with babies and trusted me.

I hope to continue developing The Cocoon Experiment and build a relationship with fostering providers to encourage more foster carers to take part.

8.4 Next Steps

The Cocoon Experiment has begun as a support project for foster carers. The next step will be to develop spiritual resources for the whole foster family. This project will take place over a longer period of eighteen months to two years. Foster carers who choose to be involved will be invited to new Cocoon initiatives with other foster carers and have a time of rest and peace, away from their responsibilities. They will have access to a chaplain and opportunities to meet. In addition, there will be events for the whole fostering family, including outside events that embrace nature and creation. Foster families will be asked to create a 'spiritual zone' in their homes and approximately every month will receive a creative, spiritual activity to engage with over the month. Foster carers will be asked to record their responses and any change in emotions and feelings within the family. This

longer time frame will give a clearer picture of how spirituality and chaplaincy can support the well-being of fostering families and indicate the benefits they notice from taking part.



9 Conclusion

The Cocoon Experiment was successful in what it set out to do. It discovered the support available to foster carers is improving through the wider additions of support groups. Foster carers still have concerns and need a deeper level of support to maintain well-being. The results of the questionnaire and the responses from The Cocoon Experiment suggest chaplaincy would be a positive inclusion for foster carers who choose it. Foster carers valued their time spent at The Cocoon Experiment and felt more at peace and calm as a result. They hoped more would be able to take part in the future.

The Cocoon Experiment, as a resource, supported foster carers and introduced chaplaincy and spirituality. It offered the space to consider life and catch a glimpse of God. It was designed to join people at their stage of the journey, making no assumptions, like Philip joining the Ethiopian eunuch in their carriage and responding to a need that could have been directions to the next town or an explanation of scripture (Acts 8:26-39).

My motivation for the Cocoon Experiment and fostering chaplaincy was to provide for foster carers what was not available for me. A space of trust and restoration, a space to pause and heal, to reflect and celebrate the small wins, as well as grieve the losses.

A cocoon is a place of safety and transformation. Foster carers who might feel as if they are in a time of challenge may well find that a chaplain is their place of safety, the cocoon around them, holding the 'goo' until the metamorphosis is complete. When the moth emerges from the cocoon, they fly towards the light and head to the moon. Their trajectory has changed from an earthly perspective to a heavenly one. Not all moths will make that their journey, some will aim for the depths of a carpet or knitted jumpers and avoid the light. The chaplain joins whatever stage of the journey, through the difficult, uncomfortableness, into the light, or not.

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Appendix A – Certificate of Ethical Approval

CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

How could fostering communities benefit and be supported through chaplaincy and related resources?

Student Number: 2104966

Module: CYM701

This is to certify that this project has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Birmingham Newman University



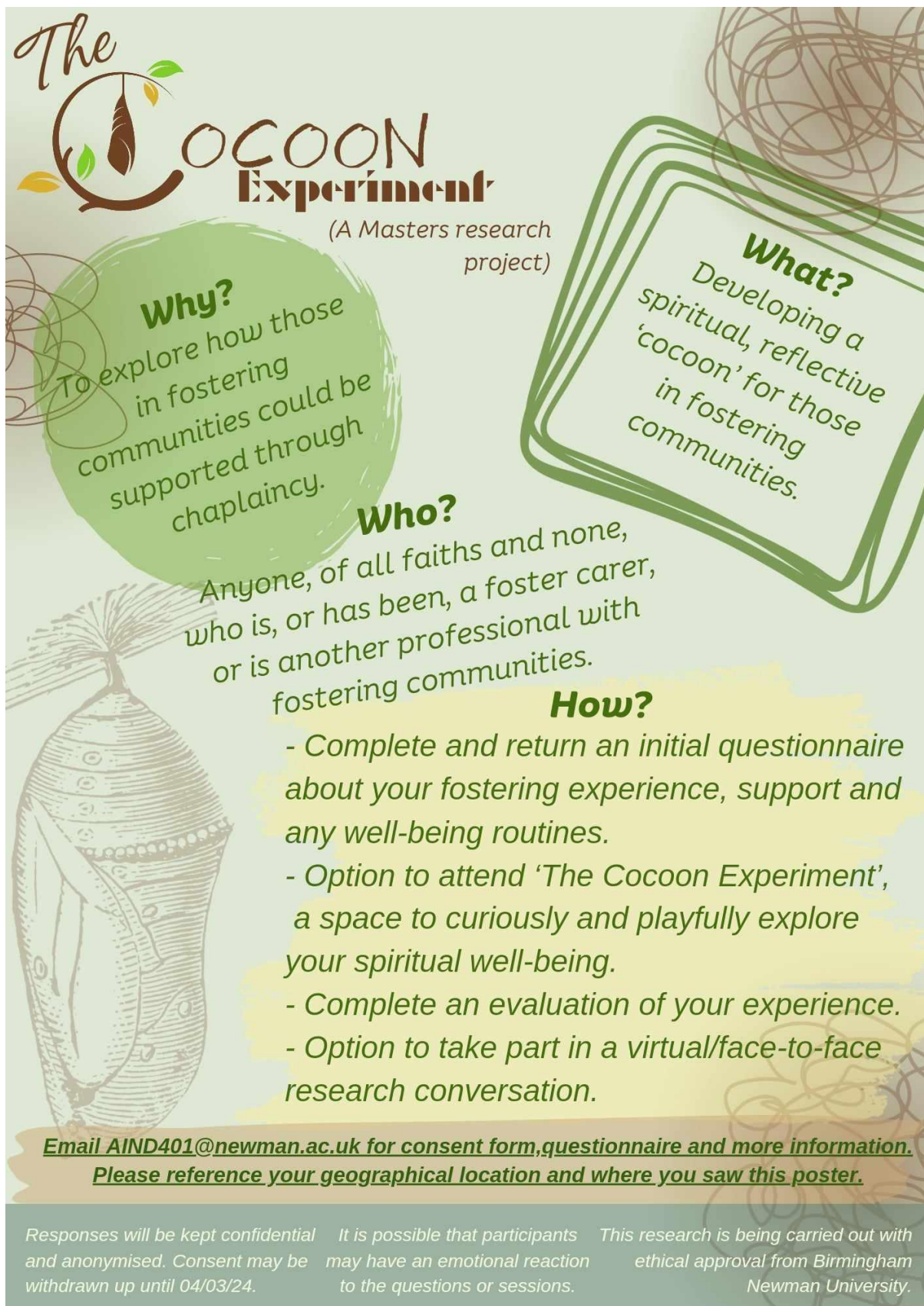
**Birmingham
Newman
University**

L. A. Woodfield

Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

Date: November 23, 2023

Appendix B – Advertising for Questionnaire

The poster features a central title 'The COCOON Experiment' with a stylized cocoon icon. Below the title is the subtitle '(A Masters research project)'. The poster is divided into sections: 'Why?' (exploring fostering support), 'Who?' (target audience), and 'How?' (participation methods). A 'What?' box describes the goal of developing a spiritual 'cocoon'. Contact information and a disclaimer are at the bottom. The background includes a drawing of a cocoon and abstract scribbles.

The COCOON Experiment
(A Masters research project)

Why?
To explore how those in fostering communities could be supported through chaplaincy.

Who?
Anyone, of all faiths and none, who is, or has been, a foster carer, or is another professional with fostering communities.

What?
Developing a spiritual, reflective 'cocoon' for those in fostering communities.

How?

- Complete and return an initial questionnaire about your fostering experience, support and any well-being routines.
- Option to attend 'The Cocoon Experiment', a space to curiously and playfully explore your spiritual well-being.
- Complete an evaluation of your experience.
- Option to take part in a virtual/face-to-face research conversation.

Email AIND401@newman.ac.uk for consent form, questionnaire and more information.
Please reference your geographical location and where you saw this poster.

Responses will be kept confidential and anonymised. Consent may be withdrawn up until 04/03/24.

It is possible that participants may have an emotional reaction to the questions or sessions.

This research is being carried out with ethical approval from Birmingham Newman University.

The COCOON Experiment

(A Masters research project)

Are you a foster carer? Do you know any foster carers? Are you another professional who works with foster carers or looked after children, such as SSW, therapist, education...

Then you might be able to help me! For my Master's dissertation, I am exploring how chaplaincy could support fostering communities.

'The Cocoon Experiment' is an introduction to the support of chaplaincy.

Often in life, we are like the Hungry Caterpillar, happily munching through leaves until we are suddenly faced with apples, plums and then chocolate cake, pickles, ice cream, salami and so on. We find we have tummy ache. The experiences of life we have, the wonderful, good things and the difficult, painful things can cause different thoughts, emotions and questions to arise. We might feel these in our bodies and minds. Sometimes we talk about these 'existential' wonderings and sometimes we might move onto the cupcake or watermelon. Our wondering might make us feel a bit like the goo the caterpillar turns into, not quite ourselves, unclear of the way ahead and how to navigate the path.

A chaplain is a bit like the cocoon around the goo, holding everything in place, a blanket of hope when it might feel dark. A chaplain will not force the cocoon open but will journey with you through your situation. In times of joy they will dance and celebrate with you and in times of pain they will listen. They shine a light towards hope. And out of the cocoon a beautiful moth emerges, heading for the light of the moon, journeying upwards.

I do hope you will consider helping me with this experiment through initially contacting me for a questionnaire, completing it and returning it. This will help me identify whether chaplaincy could provide a valuable support to those connected to fostering, of all faiths and none, and develop 'The Cocoon Experiment'. Please reference where you have seen this request and your geographical location.

If you have any questions please also contact me!

Thank you so much.

Appendix C - Questionnaire

Initial Cocoon Questionnaire

27 Apr 2024

Thank you for taking part in this research. Please answer all the questions you feel comfortable with and are relevant to you.

* Required

Your Details

1. Name *

2. Geographical Location *

3. Are you, or have you been, an approved foster carer? *

- Yes
 No

4. If yes to question 3
Are you approved through your LA or IFA?

- Local Authority
 Independent Fostering Agency

5. If yes to question 3
What type of foster carer are you? e.g. kinship, short term...

6. If yes to question 3
How long have you been a foster carer?

7. If yes to question 3
Do you have a paid or voluntary role away from the home, outside of fostering?

- Yes
 No

8. If yes to question 3
Do your wider family and friendship circle seem to understand your role as a foster carer?

9. If yes to question 3
What kind of support is offered to you through your: fostering agency, friends, family, other works spaces, other?

Section

10. Do you practice any regular activities to support your well-being such as mindfulness activities, journaling, yoga, dance, craft, puzzles, exercise, craft, prayer?

- Yes often
- Yes sometimes
- No never

11. If yes to question 10
How regularly do you commit to this practice and what activity do you do?

12. If yes to question 10
What benefits do you recognise from this practice?

Section

13. Do you consider yourself to be a person of faith or religious belief?

- Yes
- No

14. If yes to question 13
What religion or belief would you consider yourself to follow?

15. If yes to question 13
Does your place of worship support your vocation as a foster carer?

16. If yes to question 13
Do they offer practical support?

17. If yes to question 13
Do they offer spiritual or pastoral support?

18. Are you provided with a 'listening service' through any of your support networks?

Section

19. Do you ever explore your personal beliefs alongside your vocation as a foster carer?

Section

20. Do you have a trusted person you can talk through your emotions, thoughts and feelings with?

Section

21. Do you meet with other foster carers as part of supporting your well-being?

Section

22. Has your role as a foster carer changed your faith expression?

Section

23. Has your role caused you to question your beliefs?

Section

24. Do you view God differently?

Section

25. Has your fostering role changed you as a person?

Section

26. Have you ever felt like you might be experiencing secondary trauma/compassion fatigue as a result of your role?

Section

27. On a scale of 0 -10, with 0 being not at all and 10 being mostly, do you mostly feel at peace within your role?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all					Mostly					

Section

28. If I had a magic wand, what would you ask for that would sustain your well-being and grant you a greater level of peace?

Section

29. A chaplain holds the confidence of individuals (unless there is a safeguarding concern) and journeys alongside, listening and being with, in practical and spiritual ways. Is this service something you might consider as a valuable addition to fostering communities?

Section

30. Would you be willing to take part in a face-to-face/virtual conversation about your experiences?

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.



Link to online form - <https://forms.office.com/e/5ZKapwVdjs>

Appendix D – Additional Selected Data from Questionnaires

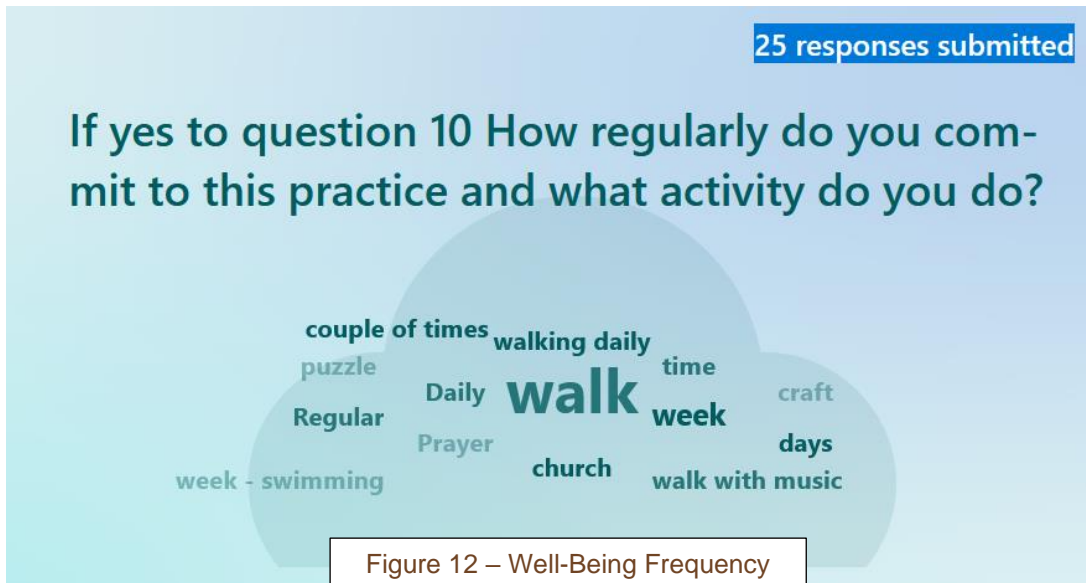


Figure 12 – Well-Being Frequency and Type Activities

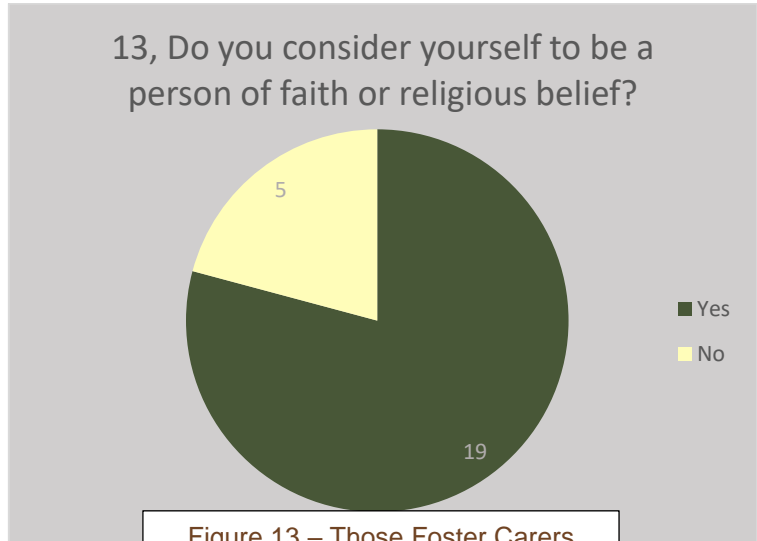


Figure 13 – Those Foster Carers with a Faith Background

25 responses submitted

Are you provided with a 'listening service' through any of your support networks?

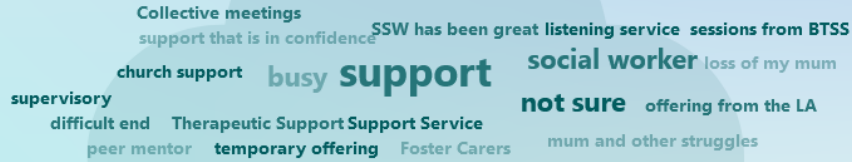


Figure 14 – Listening Service Provision to Foster Carers

25 responses submitted

Do you meet with other foster carers as part of supporting your well-being?



Figure 15 – Foster Carer Support From Other Foster Carers

25 responses submitted

Do you view God differently?

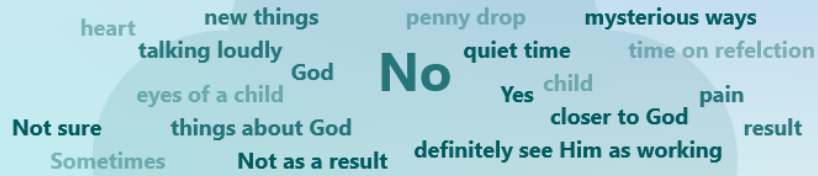


Figure 16 – How Foster Carers Have Changed Their Perception of God Due to Fostering

Appendix E – Magic Wand Response

The COCOON Experiment

If I had a magic wand what you ask for to sustain your well-being and give you more peace?

...an unbroken system that provides the children with the support they need.

Therapy for every child that come into care and regular respite for carers before the placement is at breaking point.

A more humane government, re-shifting of priorities for funding so social welfare is more of a priority. We are under resourced.

Clearer structures and less meetings. Better training and more access to support.

More foster carers, less change of social workers, and being more respected in our role and our opinion heard.

For our foster children to access education regularly.

pocket of money...to enable foster carers to access funds for additional resources...without the stress of being batted from one department to another.

More support from the service and to feel valued.

Responses that involve a more just society

The COCOON Experiment

If I had a magic wand what you ask for to sustain your well-being and give you more peace?

Better support, listening ear, not feeling and treated like you are the enemy by social services.

...having a safer network of people who get it which is apart from and not reportable to professionals (safeguarding aside).

Soul care. We needed/still need soul care. We needed physical, emotional and spiritual rest, support and nurture. We were lonely and tired...

Spiritual support and companionship.

Patience and wisdom - to be able to understand the difficulties faced by our little one and the wisdom to know how best to support him through these.

Someone to help during stressful times.

To be paid more and have a therapy session when things go wrong. We had one child set fire to er hair, our house and try and set fir to us. She was very distressed doing ligatures. It would have been good to have a space to debrief that session properly. We used to have a psychologist for one to ones with foster carers but not anymore.

More deep sleep.

More time for myself.

To have naturally therapeutic parenting styles all the time!

More time with those I love.

Paid breaks from fostering.

Sleep!

Responses that involve support - spiritual and practical

Appendix F – Advertising for the Event



The poster features a central illustration of a cocoon with a small plant growing from the top. The background is a light yellow-green gradient. On the right, there is a circular maze graphic with the words 'Well-being', 'Self-care', and 'Well-being' written around it. The text is arranged in a clear, hierarchical layout, starting with the title and followed by the event details and dates.

The COCOON Experiment

(A Masters research project)
for foster carers

Time and space for soul care through spiritual, creative, reflective activities.
Time for You!

Rest Retreat Restore

This is a free ticketed event.
Tickets are available here 
<https://bit.ly/CocoonExp>

Select your preferred date:
Saturday 23rd March, 2:00 - 5:00pm
Sunday 24th March, 2:30 - 5:30pm
Monday 25th March, 10:00 - 1:00pm

At: The Underhill Centre,
76 St Johns Road, Hedge End,
SO30 4AF

Contact:
Chrissie Aindow
AIND401@newman.ac.uk

A chaplaincy initiative for
all faiths and none

Appendix G (i) – Tour Of The Cocoon Experiment



Link to video: <https://youtu.be/cxwLuy1Jmdw>

(ii) - Short Social Media Advertisement



Link to video: <https://youtube.com/shorts/vZjL-QQnGS4>

Appendix H - Clay

Clay

The clay is for you to mould and shape. A lump of nothingness to turn into something else. You are free to make what you wish. You can leave it behind, or take it with you when you leave. Enjoy the feel of the clay in your hands, allow your brain to guide your hands, work intuitively, take your time. Feel the clay yield to the pressure of your hands as you mould it. Sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we cannot create the shape we wish to form. It's ok. Sometimes we create something beautiful. Sometimes it breaks. Sometimes we want to recreate something from before...but it's not possible. Sometimes we just want to start again. If you want to start again with your clay, re-squish it and mould and shape it into something new.



Appendix I – Fingerprints and Paint

Fingerprints...

Our fingerprints are unique.

I wonder what stories your hands hold?

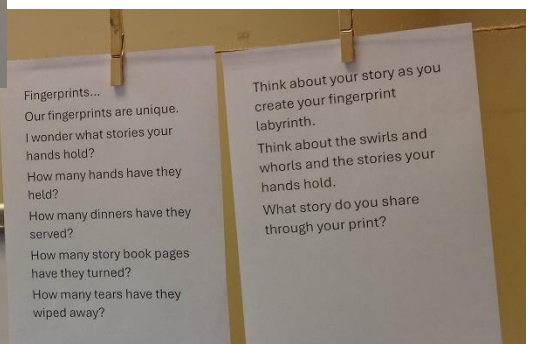
How many hands have they held?

How many dinners have they served?

How many storybook pages have they turned?

How many tears have they wiped away?

Think about your story as you create your fingerprint labyrinth. Think about the swirls and whorls and the stories your hands hold. What story do you share through your print?



Appendix J – OutOfTheBox Story ‘Catching Up’



Link to video: <https://youtu.be/FTtmuevC10A>



Appendix K – ‘Catching Up’ Responses

The COCOON Experiment

‘Catching Up’ Responses

I thought the helper had drowned, so I was relieved they were only splashing in the water.

I recognise myself in the person - not allowing myself to stop an catch up

I recognise me in so many things.

I would like to splash in a river

I don't like the person telling the helper what to do when they aren't help themselves. The helper is having to do everything.

I thought I would be board, I wanted the journey to be quicker...but I found myself drawn in and felt relaxed watching.

I wish I was as brave as the helper and could stop.

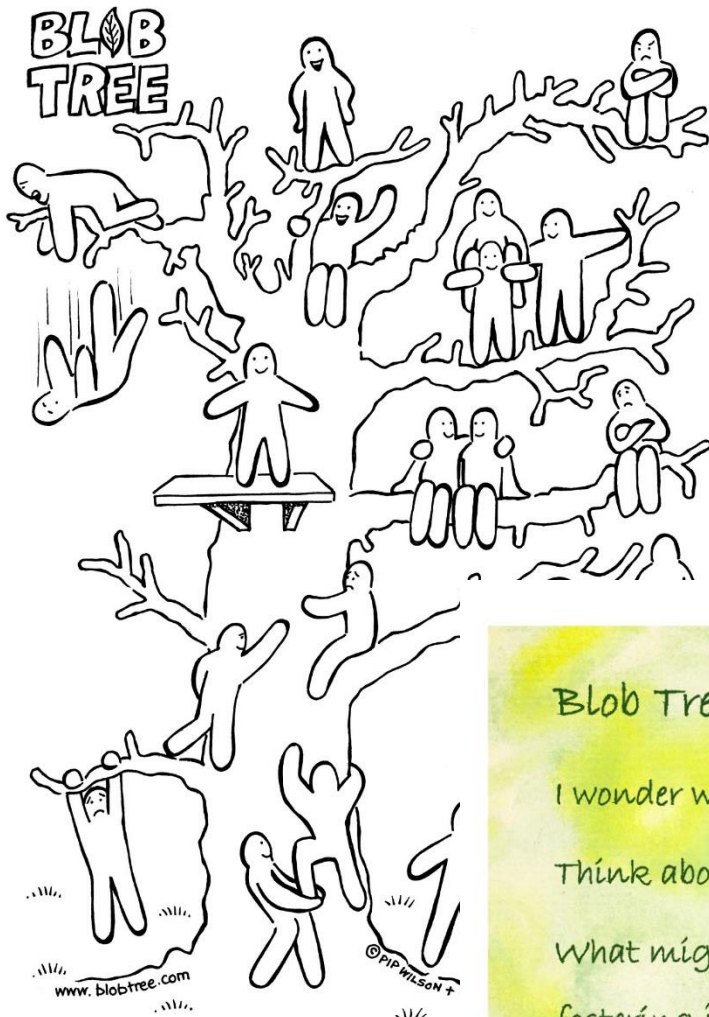
Mountainous areas are risky, you need a helper

I don't like that the helper is darker than the person

The path reveals itself before they get there.

An OutoftheBox Story

Appendix L – Emotions Gauge



Blob Tree

I wonder which 'Blob' you are?

Think about which one you might be.

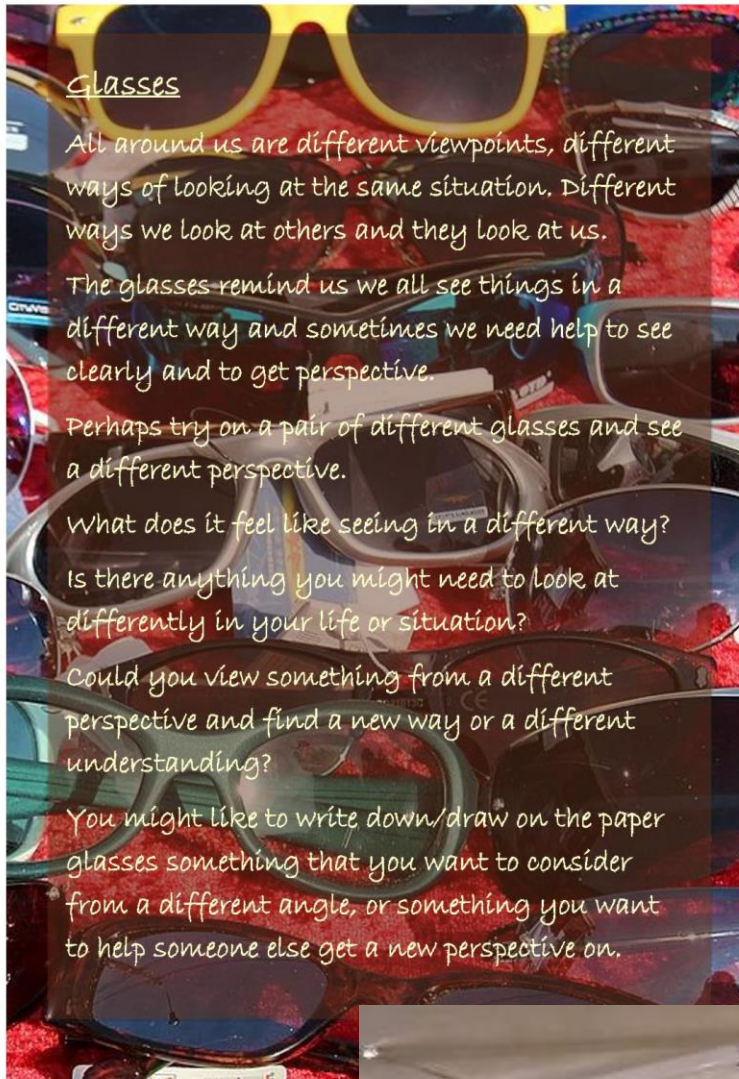
What might you need for your fostering journey?

Do you recognise yourself in any of the other 'Blobs'?

If you feel stuck, how might you move on?



Appendix M - Identity



What do you See?

The glasses represent the different perspectives we all have and the different ways we view the world around us.

Glasses change the way we see things and our life experiences change the way we see things. Sometimes everything is brought into sharp focus and everything seems clear. At other times, everything around us feels hazy, blurred and out of perspective.

Sometimes we lose sight of who we are and our identity feels lost. We forget what we are passionate about and we might become tired and exhausted, overwhelmed by the task ahead.

I wonder what glasses you are wearing? Is everything clear and bright or is the view beginning to blur?

I wonder if it would help to sometimes take the glasses off and remember who you are? To recapture the spark of life within you?

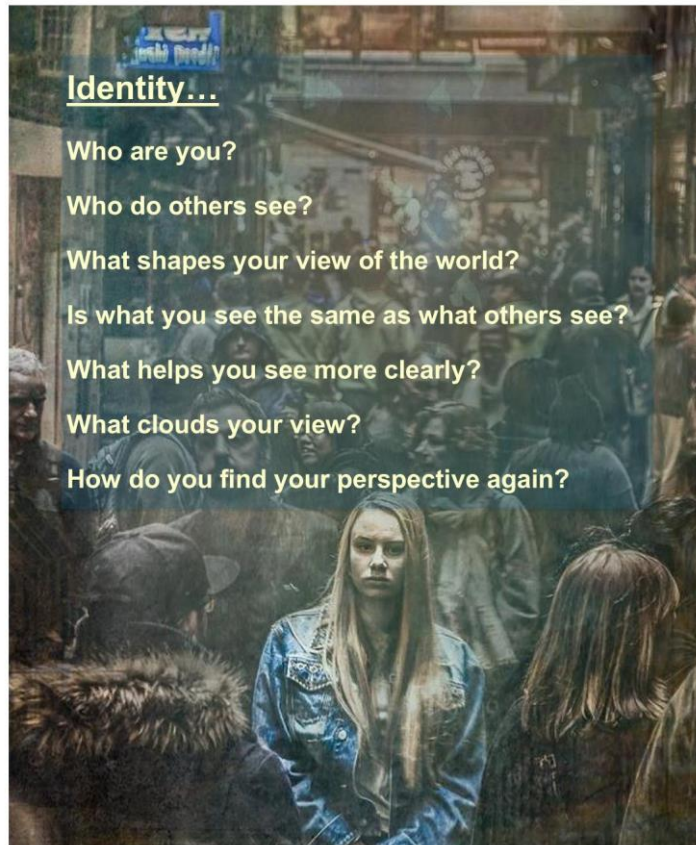
Perhaps, each day, take a bit of time to reconnect with your own self, the world you are in and the universe beyond? Find a special space, in or out of the home, indoors or outdoors, and remember who you are.

Take some deep breathes, listen to the sounds around you, tune in to your inner voice, breathe.

Perhaps listen to a favourite piece of music or song, perhaps do a silly dance and get your endorphins flowing, laugh at a ridiculous joke. Or, if you need to, let out a roar of rage, or cry tears of release...whatever you need...take the time to experience the emotion.

Be fully you.

Make it part of your pattern of life, as long as you need each day, be you.



Identity...

Who are you?

Who do others see?

What shapes your view of the world?

Is what you see the same as what others see?

What helps you see more clearly?

What clouds your view?

How do you find your perspective again?

Who are you?

Who do you see when you look in the mirror?

Who are you?

What makes you, You?

Do you sometimes forget who you are?

What makes you, You?

Is it the ever-changing roles you embody?

Is it the goth* stage you went through at 14?

Is it the style you wear,

The books you read,

The friends you have,

The family who shaped you,

The children you care for?

What makes you, You?

Do you ever stop to think about who you are?

Some say, we are made of stardust,

That makes You a star!

Shining in the dark, illumining the path for
others to walk on.

What shines a light for you?

Some say we are the dust of the earth,

That makes us part of nature on earth,
Nurturing, sustaining, giving life, absorbing
all that lands in our hands.

Some say, we are nothing, a life without
meaning...

But, out of nothing...here we are...something...

Life with meaning

Life with purpose

Life that transforms and is transforming.

What lights the spark within You

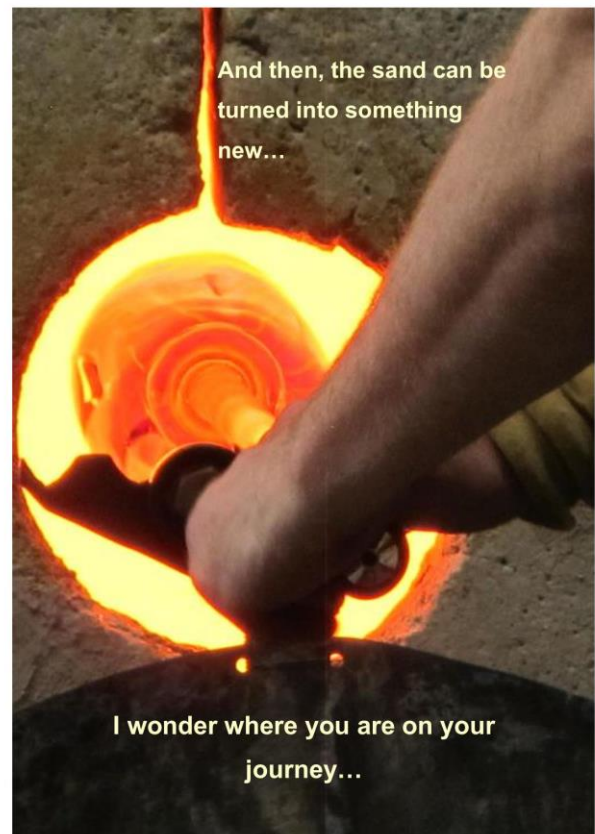
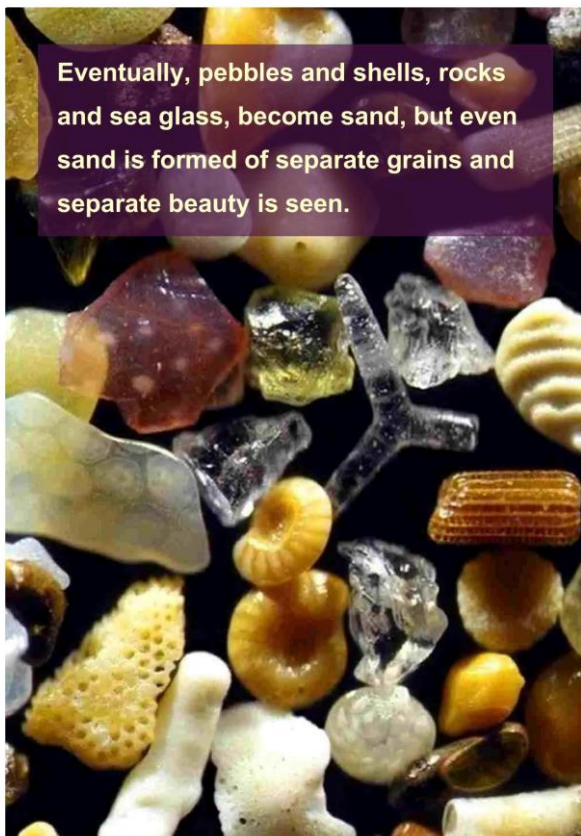
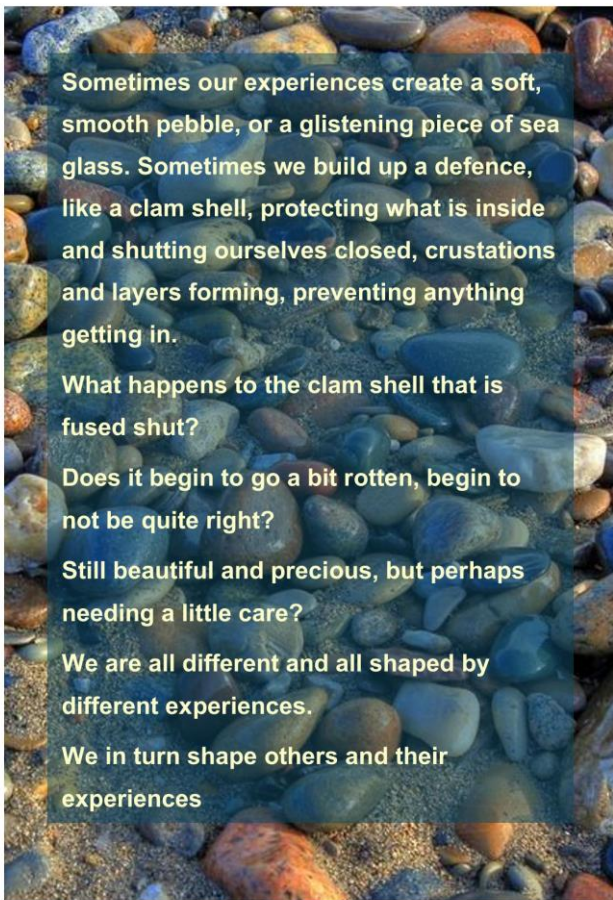
And keeps You shining?

What nourishes and nurtures, You?

What makes you, You?

*Punk, Hippie, Sloane, Rocker...

Appendix N - Pebbles



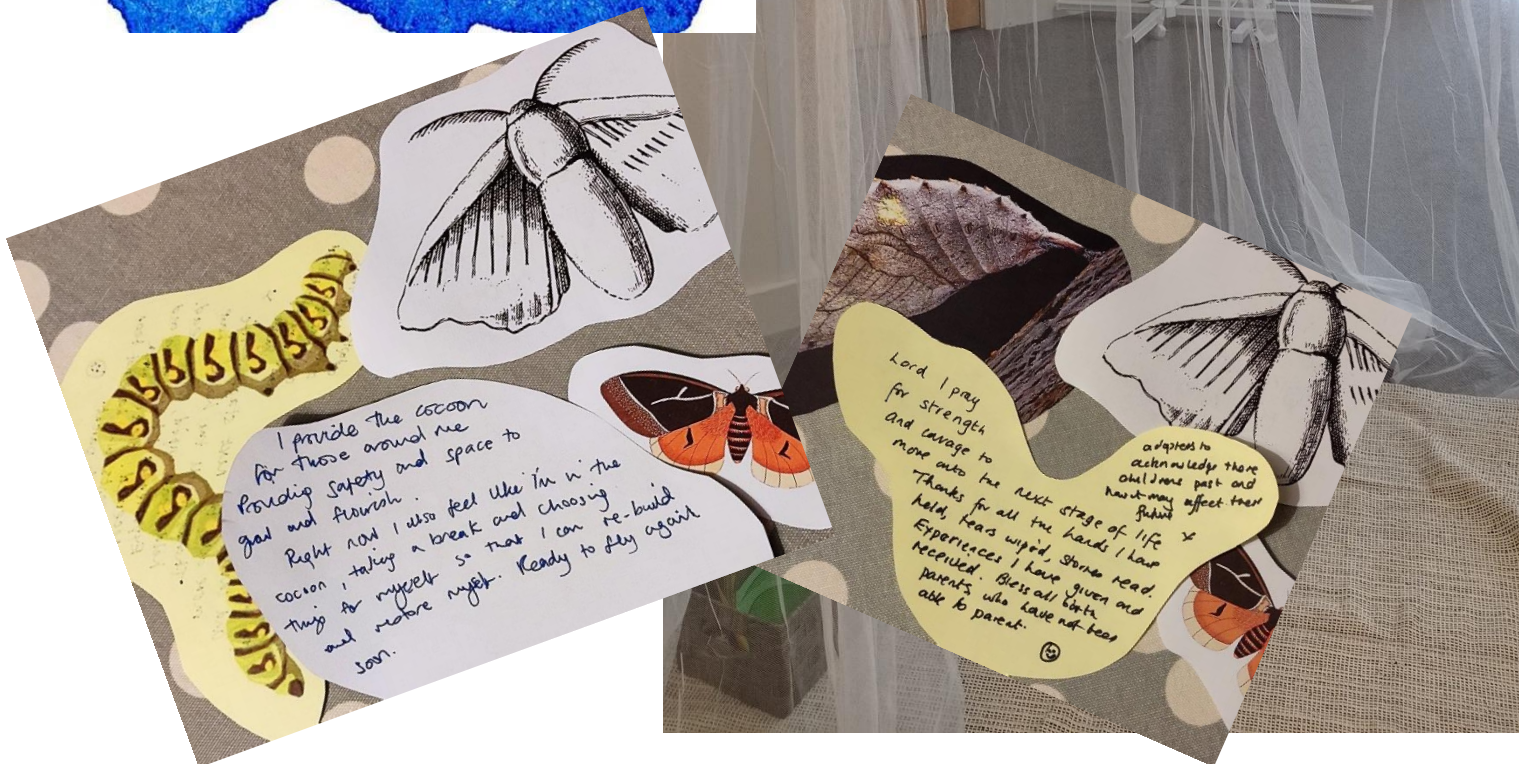
Appendix O – Butterfly Net

I wonder whether you identify more with the caterpillar, the cocoon or the moth?

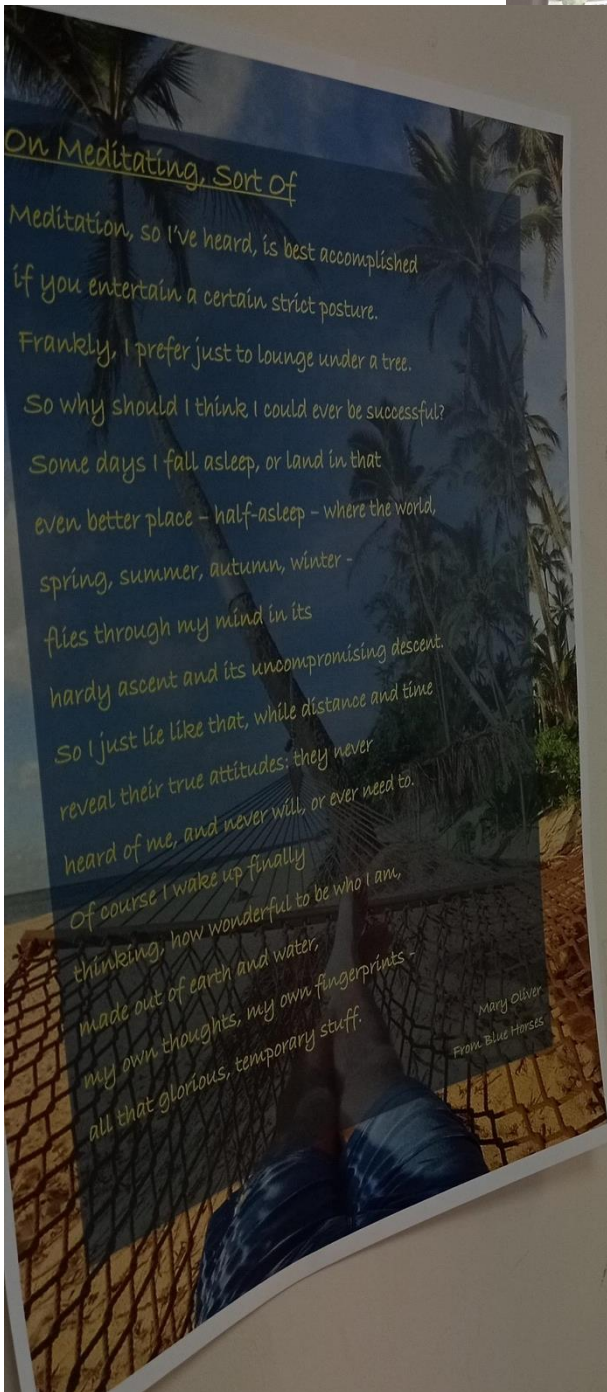
You might like to write some thoughts on a picture and hang it on the prayer dome.

You can write it as a prayer or write it as your thoughts...or a picture.

You might like to think about the stage of life you are in and your fostering journey so far. What do you need to sustain your soul for the journey of fostering?



Appendix P - Rest



Appendix Q - Labyrinth



Teresa of Avila

‘Remember:
if you want to make progress on the
path
and ascend to the places you have
longed for,
the important thing is
not to think much
but to love much,
and to do whatever best awakens you
to love.’

24

Entering the Labyrinth

- Before entering the labyrinth, consider the journey you are about to take and prepare your mind.
- Decide whether to focus on your faith or God, a story (your own or someone else's), a question, a decision, centring words or something else.
- Choose what to take on your journey, if anything (you may put this down on your travels and pick it up again or carry it with you).
- Take some deep breaths to clear your mind of distractions and begin to focus on your journey.
- Ask for God's presence to guide your thoughts and journey.
- As you follow the path towards the centre, think about the steps that you take. Pause on your journey. Spend some time in thought
- You might want to write or draw your reflections.

Entering the Labyrinth

- When you reach the centre, think about the journey so far.
- What has been your prominent thought? What do you need to think more about?
- When you are ready, retrace your steps back out of the labyrinth.
- Leave behind what you no longer need.
- Focus on the direction you are going in.
- Take as long as you need.
- Listen to your inner voice and the voice of God for direction.
- Hold on to what you have learnt.
- Don't rush back into the world.

Appendix R – Refreshments and Final Blessing

For Presence

Awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

John O'Donohue

Benedictus



Appendix S – Evaluation Form

Thank you so much for attending The Cocoon Experiment! Please complete this evaluation form before you leave. Your responses will guide the direction of this experiment.

Evaluation of The Cocoon Experiment

Date:

Are you (tick all that apply): foster carer, former foster carer, care experienced, education, social services, other.

Have you ever attended a rest/retreat/reflection session before?

Do you consider yourself as having a faith or spirituality?

Did you have any expectations of the day?

How would you describe your emotions/feelings/mood at the start of the day?

How would you describe them now?

Is there anything that could have been left out of the session? What should it be?

What could be added?

What would have made the session better?

What did you like best?

What did you like least?

Could this be a beneficial activity for others in fostering communities?

If there is anything else you would like to add, please use this space:

Thank you again for attending The Cocoon Experiment!

If you

would like to talk or sit quietly with someone following this session, this can be arranged.



Appendix T – Social Media Pages & Links



Facebook Page link - <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61556788953630>

Instagram link –

<https://www.instagram.com/the.cocoonexperiment?igsh=MWtvZHptMmhqbDhr>