

The Best of Nest: an evaluation of Mockingbird's Nest Programme

2019 - 2025

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone involved in the lives of children in foster care.

We support foster carers to transform children's lives, we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all children and young people in foster care experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes.

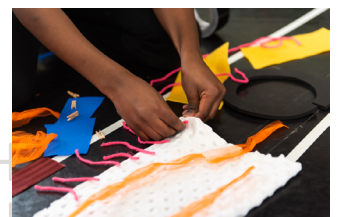
We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be. We have been leading the fostering agenda for 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

About the Mockingbird programme

Mockingbird, a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, delivers sustainable foster care by creating a caring community of satellite families around a central hub home that supports and resources the community.

It is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

To read more about the Mockingbird programme, [visit this link!](#)



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Glossary

Mockingbird, or Mockingbird Family Model - an extended family model with the purpose of improving stability of fostering placements and strengthening the relationships between the carers, children, and young people, fostering service and birth families.

Nest – a creative arts programme for children and young people across the Mockingbird community.

Hub home carer/s - the foster carer/s recruited specifically to provide a 'hub home' supporting 6-10 satellite families under the Mockingbird Family Model.

Satellite carers – the foster/connected carers that join the constellation and receive support from the hub home carers.

Constellation – the community of hub home carer(s), satellite carers, and children and young people in care.

[Watch this video to understand more about Mockingbird](#)

Introduction

As the UK's exclusive delivery partner of the Mockingbird Family Model, The Fostering Network provides a range of training and opportunities for the Mockingbird community across the UK to connect and share learning.

Since 2019, one of these opportunities has been Nest, a creative arts programme for children and young people in Mockingbird constellations. To date, these have been arranged and coordinated by the Mockingbird team at The Fostering Network and delivered by a skilled team of professional artists.

Young people involved in the Nest programme have co-designed and taken part in a wide range of workshops, from animation, jewellery-making, drumming, to cake decorating, mad science and graffiti writing.

Thanks to new investment from the Department for Education's 'Stable Homes Built on Love' strategy, Mockingbird is expanding into many new services across England (see our live list of partners here: [Mockingbird Programme Partners](#)). This expansion brings an opportunity to reflect on the impact of the Nest programme so far and design a sustainable future for a creative, wellbeing focused programme for children and young people in the Mockingbird community.

What is Nest?

Nest began in 2019 as one central creative space for children and young people involved in Mockingbird to share their thoughts and creativity and learn new skills. In 2023 up until the time of this evaluation, Nest had grown to three regional groups based in south England, the southwest and the northeast. Each group met in person and online.

Each group was designed to have a maximum of 16 young people aged 11-18. Individuals who signed up for Nest were asked to commit to attending as many Nest sessions as they could to ensure the group was able to establish its dynamics and young people could form relationships.

This sought to protect the consistency of the group so that they could explore creative and new experiences in a safe space, around people and relationships they were familiar with.

All workshops were delivered by artists external to The Fostering Network, who will also be referred to as Nest facilitators.

Over the years, through Mockingbird Nest children and young people have explored cake decorating, lino printing, graffiti writing, zine making, dance, drumming, photography, pottery and stop motion animation - to name a few!

Gathering feedback

In order to get a range of feedback from individuals who are currently or have previously been involved with Nest, a variety of feedback opportunities were offered:

- **Surveys:** Over the summer in 2024, surveys were sent to current and previous foster carers who have brought children and young people to Nest.
- **Conversations and questionnaires:** At the in person workshops in November 2024 in each region, we gave questionnaires to children and young people to respond to 10 statements and also facilitated conversations with them and the adults present about what they like about Nest and what their favourite thing of all the things they like about Nest are, inspired by Bate and Robert's (2007) Experience Based Co-Design.
- **Interviews:** We also held conversational interviews with five foster carers. Carers were selected due to being involved and established in each of their regional Nest groups.

Minor themes, called codes, were identified in all these responses and these codes were then collated into broader themes.

Through all these different means we gathered feedback from 60 young people and carers who currently or who have previously been involved with Nest.

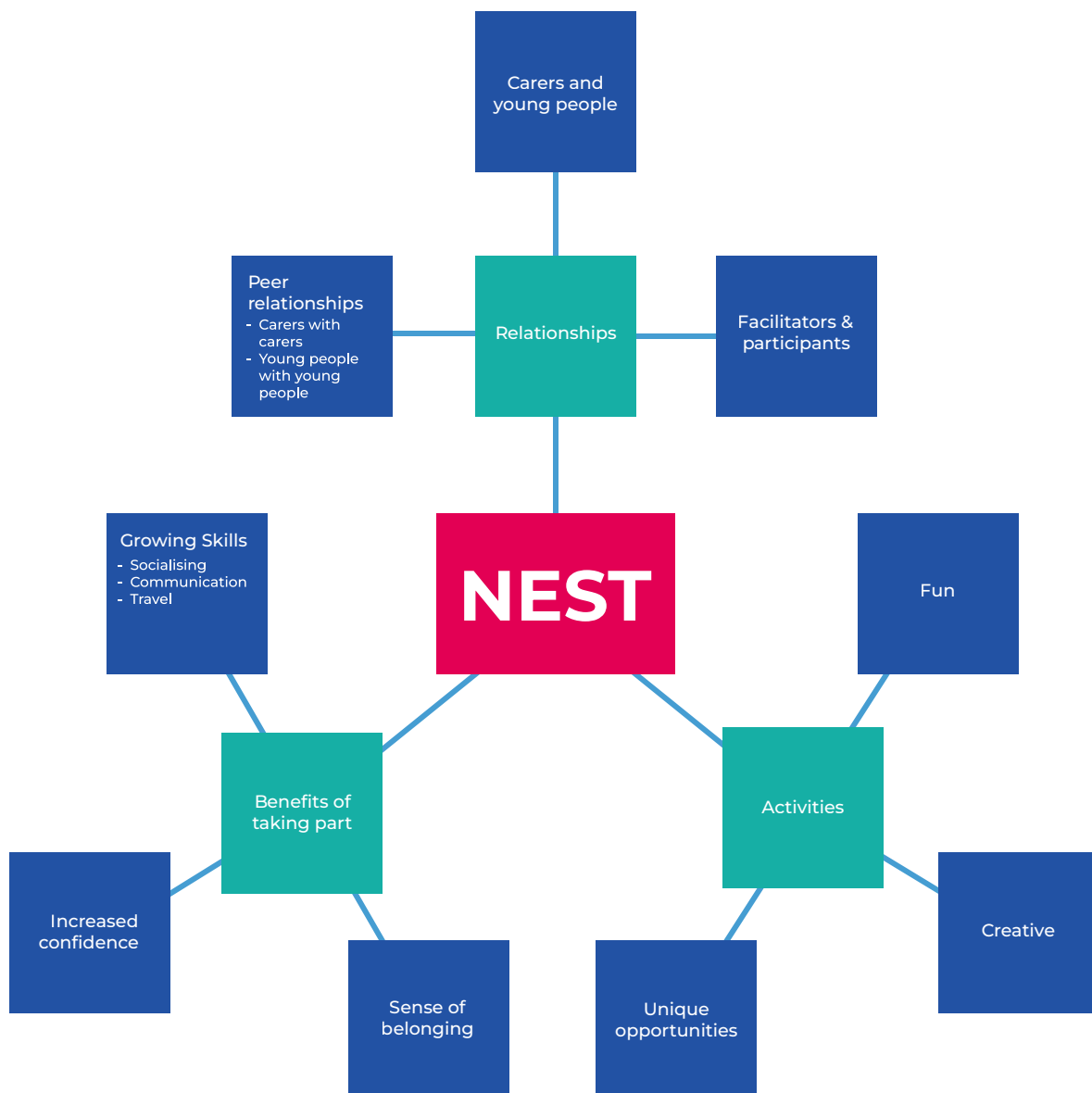
Young People	Adults
4 questionnaire responses	20 online survey form responses (16 current carers, 4 carers who have brought young people to Nest in the past)
16 children and young people took part in conversations at in person sessions	15 adults took part in conversations at in person sessions
	5 conversations with carers took place as online interviews

Due to the way many of these conversations naturally developed, some responses were shared that didn't answer the question of 'What's good about Nest?' and so have been omitted from the main findings of this report but will be used internally by The Fostering Network's Mockingbird team to inform future decisions.

Key findings

The three core themes were identified from all the responses in exploring the question, 'what is good about Nest?':

- **Creativity** - Creativity is central to Nest. Ensuring there is a range of creative activities and professional guest artists accessible through the programme has been a key aspect to date.
- **Connection** - Mockingbird Nest provided an environment for a number of connections to be made and for relationships to develop.
- **Confidence and other benefits of taking part** - Many other benefits were seen to come from young people participating in Nest. A prominent benefit was confidence, and particularly growing confidence in relation to creativity and social skills.



This spider diagram shows the three themes and all the related subthemes. Each of these themes and subthemes will be explored in greater detail in the following pages.

Full findings

Theme 1: Creativity

It was clear in all our feedback that the creativity of the activities themselves are received as fun, engaging, accessible and a good variety.

“I really enjoy all the wonderful opportunities they give us and amazing experiences.” (young person through survey)

“Having fun, good vibes from the adults. Felt like I could be relaxed and it’s a break from gaming.” (young person)

“[My favourite bits of Nest are] marbling, pizza, arts and crafts, printing, manifesto posters.” (young person)

“[I like] arts and crafts, creating new things.” (young person)

“[I like] doing different things to do with art.” (young person)

“I find it fun.” (young person through survey)

Carers echoed these when they reflected on what’s good about Nest.

“The wide variety of activities that young people have been able to do.” (carer)

“Being able to experience new creative activities.” (carer)

“Is doing something on his own and actually as much as a lot of the activities are very broad, he actually has been able to take part in everything. They’ve really made it very inclusive for him. So for us it has been a really, really positive experience.” (carer)

A key subtheme within discussions about the activities was that Nest offered creative opportunities and experiences that the young people may not have experienced had they not been part of Nest.

“Love doing different activities that the children wouldn’t have done.” (carer)

“I think it’s been great because they’ve actually explored things that they wouldn’t normally.” (carer)

“It’s an experience that the young people will not get anywhere else. They really won’t. There won’t be an opportunity for them to get that within a school setting” (carer)

All young people who completed our survey rated that they ‘agree’ to the statement ‘I have tried something at Nest I haven’t tried elsewhere’.

Theme 2: Connection

The second overarching theme from the feedback was that Nest has enabled a whole host of relationships to take place and to grow. These were all discussed as positive connections that contributed to feelings of belonging, growing confidence and developing social skills.

“It became a place that he wanted to be [there] because of the people that were there.” (carer)

“It is quite nice actually to see these kids out and about and doing stuff completely integrated.” (carer)

The following quotes have been organised under headings of each type of relationship Nest enabled.

Young people’s relationships with peers

“It’s a good opportunity to meet new people.” (young person on survey)

“The sense of community. Everyone talking to each other and the friends I have made.” (young person)

“Being able to share our ideas.” (young person)

“All the friends.” (young person)

“Seeing everyone.” (young person)

“Meeting nice people and making friends.” (young person)

“Making new friends.” (young person)

Young people’s and carers’ relationships

Many carers who bring young people to Nest reflect on the opportunity the in person workshops provide to have one-to-one time with the young person, which is a difficult thing to achieve in normal life.

“[The young man I bring to Nest] loves that one-on-one time. We rarely get any time one-to-one. We rarely get any time with any of [the young people in our constellation] one-on-one to be honest... So it is lovely, especially for me to have that time with him specifically... It’s very special. And they’re his friends. And it’s his activity. And it’s his time. Just with me.” (carer)

“Great to spend time individually with the children” (carer)

“Certainly for [one young person], there was a sense of ownership over it. You know, it was his thing. It was his thing that he did with me and that also is has been the case with [the young people I now bring].” (carer)

“Being able to come down and just have the evening together where it’s just us and is really good, particularly like the last seven months, we had another teenager who at times could be very demanding. So it did give us just that time for the two of us. To build on that relationship and do stuff together.” (carer)

“One of the really brilliant things has been the sort of structured excuse for me to have individual time with them.” (carer)

Young people relationships with facilitators

A lot of the feedback commented on the skill and kindness of the facilitators who run the Nest workshops.

“I like Jack’s games.” (young person)

“[A good thing about Nest was] meeting Luca, Alex and Lewis, thank you.” (young person)

“Helpful and knowledgeable staff.” (carer)

“Experts coming in to show new ways of being creative.” (carer)

“The staff have been amazing.” (carer)

“[The young person I bring to Nest] adores Jack and all the banter that they have and learning the new skills.” (carer)

“[The facilitators] have been able to bring that out in him. And he’s always excited to show them what he’s done and things.” (carer)

“I just think you’ve—the people are gold, basically they’re golden people.” (carer)

“It’s really clear that that’s the visitor and then the consistent people and there’s a safety for those young people in meeting this stranger who is an expert in something because they also have trusted, consistent people.” (carer)

“And the three people that run that are there every week and then they get guests, they were absolutely fabulous, the three of them. So caring and so chilled. They could read how the children were feeling.” (carer)

Carers’ relationships with other carers

The final type of relationship Nest enables is carers meeting other carers from across the Mockingbird community.

“Nice to see other carers. And to see oh, well, you’re doing all right... Yeah, we’re all fine. So it’s quite reassuring I think to be around them.” (carer)

"And there are some really good conversations that happen. So I think there's definitely value for the foster carers." (carer)

"Good to chat to others." (carer)

"Bonding, shared enjoyment with hub carers." (Carer)

"All our friends." (carer)

"Meeting other carers from various places." (carer)

Theme 3: Confidence and other benefits of taking part

As well as enjoying the activities and building relationships, a whole host of other benefits were mentioned as outcomes of taking part in Nest including "confidence building" (carer) and self-esteem.

"The children enjoy the personal attention for their self-esteem and wellbeing." (carer).

"Great to see young people showing other people (at home) how to make things using materials that have been sent." (carer)

"Collaborating with more people, increasing children's confidence." (carer)

"Watching [my young person] growing in confidence and meet new people." (carer)

"He's getting a lot from it. He's getting a lot of confidence from it." (carer)

From the three-point likert scale of Agree/Not sure/Disagree on their questionnaires, all the young people rated 'agree' to the statement 'I have learnt a new skill at Nest'.

"I didn't think it would be something that he would want to do. He's not creative and he's not social. But I asked him and he said 'yeah'. So I'm like, okay, yeah, we'll give it a go and he's got so much out of it. I would never ever imagined how much he's got out of it. It's been an absolute pleasure to see him be a part of it, be a part of a group. Be social. He's got a creative side that we didn't know existed." (carer)

"I said to him on his birthday, you know the Nest is on your birthday, what do you want to do? Do you want to go or would you rather do something at home with us? And he says no, I want to go." (carer)

“Definitely the confidence, like he goes into school and he’s keen on showing off the art activities that he’s done. Over the Christmas holiday, he’s had the confidence to do things. They’re doing a history task at school and they were told that, you know, if you want to create something to show off, you can. And he’s made these 3D airplanes. And things like that. And it’s given him the confidence to do that and be able to take that into school and show that off to other people.” (carer)

“He definitely felt he had a voice there, you know, in terms of what he wanted to do and how they made some of that happen.” (carer)

It was also shared by a few different carers that Nest embeds the wider approaches of Mockingbird and actually supports the implementation of the model.

“If we’re looking at social pedagogy type stuff, it’s been a shared experience, shared enjoyment. I think for the children that I’ve taken and the wider children in our hub who like maybe hear about them, chat about it, it’s been like this just very, very bonding experience.” (carer)

“I tie in the sleepovers with the face-to-face Nest workshops and from my hub perspective with my husband and daughter, where the biggest risk factor for me not being able to carry on doing Mockingbird would be the sleepovers and the fact that they have full-on weeks and then if we’ve got children all weekend, there is no rest time for them... So when I’m out for the whole of Saturday [at an in-person Nest workshop], it’s absolutely brilliant. Like it feels like the perfect arrangement. They’ve got something really exciting to look forward to, they’ve got me totally to themselves, and my husband and daughter have got a whole day when it doesn’t feel like they’re doing Mockingbird. So it’s just worked so brilliantly to coordinate the weekend sleepovers with it.” (carer)

“The final unexpected outcome to mention is the opportunity for skills to develop that contribute to a young person’s independence. This has largely occurred through the use of public transport to attend in-person Nest workshops.”

“So we travel up on the train, [and] I get them to try and navigate their way around the tubes and they all have done that.” (carer)

“We have a train ticket and [my young person] has my train. He has my phone with the train tickets on it. He’ll scan it. So as it’s about giving him that independence... He orders his tea, you know, gets his tea, gets on the train, you know, he’ll have his tea on the train.” (carer)



What's next?

We're excited to use the feedback shared with us to help shape the next chapter of our work with children and young people in Mockingbird.

As mentioned, while it hasn't been the main focus of this report, a lot of feedback has been shared with us on what would make Nest even better. Namely:

- 1 Expanding accessibility of the programme by reducing travel times to in person sessions and increasing the number of children and young people who can take part.
- 2 Broaden the activities on offer by increasing the range of activities delivered and provide resources that enable differentiated activities for different ages and stages.
- 3 Promote connections that can last by running groups and workshops that are more local.
- 4 Continue evolving by using ongoing feedback to refine and adapt Nest, ensuring it meets the needs of young people and foster carers in our Mockingbird community.

This chapter of Nest has been an important building block in our work using arts and shared activities to strengthen relationships.

Our next focus for Nest will be to design an approach that captures the magic of what we have learnt to date but expands the offer to support more children and young people, and to boost the resources and confidence of hub home carers or satellite carers to explore creativity with their constellations.

Thank you!

Thank you to everyone who has been part of Nest so far, and the facilitators who have made it happen.

Thank you too to all those who have generously spent their time telling us about their experiences with Nest. Gathering and understanding this feedback and Nest's impact has been an important step in knowing how to move forward with this aspect of the Mockingbird programme.

We'd like to say a special thanks to the Lewis Family Trust for their generous support for Nest over the years.

We'd also like to thank the Department for Education in England who have provided funding to Mockingbird over this period and are enabling the programme to expand and reach even more children, young people and fostering families in the future through their 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' strategy.

To keep up to date with this work you can [visit our Mockingbird page on The Fostering Network's website](#) or email Mockingbird@fostering.net



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