

The logo for The Fostering Network, consisting of the text "The Fostering Network" in white, stacked vertically, inside an orange square.

The  
Fostering  
Network

# State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021

Thematic report 2:  
Allegations

# About the survey

Children may enter the care system for a number of reasons, for example: because of family disruption caused by illness or a bereavement, abuse, neglect, because they are seeking asylum, or they have highly complex health and care needs.

Roughly three-quarters of the 97,000 children and young people looked after in the UK away from home are being cared for by foster families. Foster families provide children in care with the opportunity to thrive in a family setting and offer them a loving and stable environment, often into adulthood. This means that improving outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care.

Every three years we conduct the State of the Nation's Foster Care survey to produce a reliable insight into fostering in the UK; to identify areas of good practice and understand where improvements are needed. This is the fourth time we have conducted this survey, and, for the first time, we also surveyed our fostering service members.

As the largest independent survey of foster carers, we were pleased to receive responses from 3,352 foster carers, representing six per cent of fostering households in England, four per cent in Northern Ireland, eight per cent in Scotland and seven per cent in Wales. At the time of the survey, the foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children. This represents around nine per cent of all children living in foster care in the UK. We also received 99 fostering service responses, which represents around 19 per cent of the total fostering service providers in the UK. By surveying our fostering service members we have further enriched our evidence base, offering a perspective from those who provide services and enabling us to gain a deeper insight into the challenges within the system and how they impact on the overall service.

Our 2021 surveys included questions on how well foster carers and fostering services believe children's needs are currently being met by the system, as well as key practice and workforce issues such as support, recruitment and capacity in the sector. The Fostering Network will use the findings of these surveys to influence the foster care agenda and create change by bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers. Read our other State of the Nation 2021 reports [here](#).

## How this report is structured

We have grouped our findings into three main areas of focus, represented in the following graphic. Each section will be labelled to show which area we are focusing on.



**Children and young people**

**Foster carers**

**The fostering system**

# Introduction

## What is an allegation?

An allegation within foster care is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or other member of the fostering household has, or may have, behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child, or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. An allegation is not a standard of care concern or a complaint (definitions are available on the next page).

## The child's welfare is paramount

It is vital that we have a fair and robust system for investigating allegations in order to safeguard children and young people in foster care and to promote their welfare. It is well documented that the voices of children in care are often not heard or that children feel they don't have a sense of power or autonomy over their own lives. The fostering system must ensure therefore that children's voices are heard at all levels.

## The impact on foster carers and the wider family must be better understood

This report focuses on foster carers' experiences of being the subject of an allegation investigation using evidence gathered through our State of the Nation 2021 survey. 471 foster carer respondents had been the subject of an allegation in the past two years. These respondents told us that once an allegation has been made it can be devastating, not just for the foster carer and their immediate family, but also for any children in their care.

Any foster carer can be the subject of an allegation. Allegations are the second most common reason why foster carers call our helplines asking for advice around fostering. We therefore wanted to explore this topic in more detail to better understand foster carers' experiences and make recommendations for positive change.

## Outcomes of allegation investigations

Allegations can be made by anyone, birth families, other professionals, members of the public, or children. There are specific safeguarding procedures which must be followed when an allegation is made, these differ slightly in each country of the UK. After an allegation has been investigated an 'outcome' must be agreed and this should be provided in writing. Outcomes recognised across the UK include:

- **unfounded**, if there is sufficient evidence to disprove the allegation or if there is no evidence or proper basis to support that the allegation exists
- **unsubstantiated**, if there is insufficient evidence to determine whether or not the event occurred
- **substantiated**, if there is evidence that determines the event occurred
- **deliberately invented or malicious**, if there is clear evidence to prove there has been a deliberate act to deceive and the allegation is entirely false.

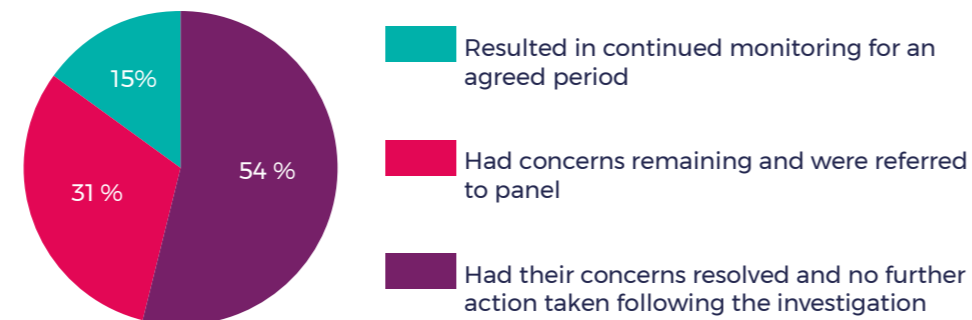
## Time to tackle this issue

Improving the allegation process in foster care is a huge issue within the fostering sector and beyond and we need to work together to unpick what improvement would look like.

Many agencies can be involved in the allegation process including the police, health professionals, teachers, as well as social workers and other members of staff from the child's placing authority. This report presents only the foster carers' view of being the subject of an allegation in foster care and is limited to the questions asked in our State of the Nation 2021 survey which also included questions on many other topics.

We believe this report should represent the starting point of a process of change to tackle head-on the longstanding but under-investigated issue of allegations in foster care, which have a significant impact on children, foster carers, their families and the sector as a whole.

### Most allegations are deemed to be unfounded or unsubstantiated<sup>1</sup>



## The difference between an allegation, a standard of care concern and a complaint

### Allegation

An allegation is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or other member of the fostering household may have:

- behaved in a way that has, or may have, harmed a child;
- possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child; or
- behaved towards a child in a way that indicates that they are unsuitable to work with children.

Allegations are more serious than general complaints against foster carers, as allegations must be investigated under the local safeguarding procedure. Allegations should be treated differently from concerns about poor standards of care.

The public authority (the local authority or health and social care trust) in which the foster carer lives, the fostering service they work for, the authority responsible for any children in foster care and the police will all be involved in deciding exactly how a particular allegation is investigated.

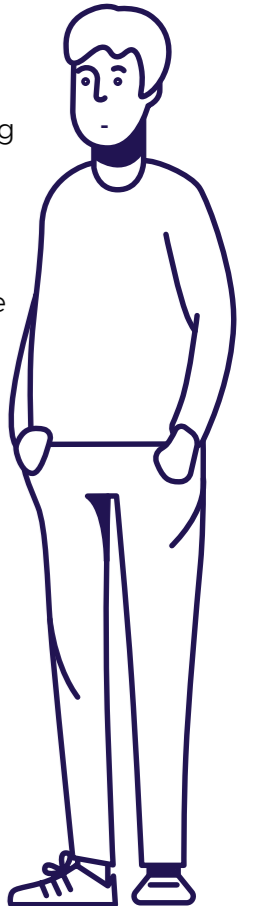
To find out more about the guidance on allegations in each country of the UK, visit [our website](#).

### Standard of concern

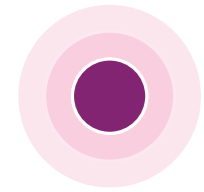
A standard of care concern refers to inadequate practice by a foster carer which is unacceptable, but not causing significant harm to a child. Examples of unacceptable standards of care may involve issues of sanctioning a child in foster care (for example grounding them over a minor issue), not caring for them properly (for example saying there is no need to brush their teeth), or not co-operating with contact arrangements/family time. Standards of care concerns are dealt with by the fostering service initially, as an internal matter.

### Complaint

A complaint may be made by a child, a parent or anyone with a legitimate interest in the child. For example, a child complaining that they are not allowed to participate in a favourite leisure activity, or a parent complaining that the child's culture or religion is being ignored. Children's social care services and fostering services are required to have procedures in place for dealing with complaints, and these always involve feedback to the person who made the complaint.



<sup>1</sup> Ofsted [Fostering in England 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021](#). Data on the outcomes of allegations in foster care is unavailable elsewhere in the UK.



## Focus on children and young people

Allegation investigations can result in the immediate removal of children in foster care from their homes causing further disruption to their lives and compromising their recovery, attachments and development. For different reasons, too many looked after children are experiencing **multiple moves**<sup>2</sup> which can result in them changing school and moving away from family and friends. Children who experience multiple moves while in care experience **poorer outcomes**<sup>3</sup> in their education, mental health and ability to make and maintain trusted adult relationships. The consequences of removing a child must be considered alongside their safety and placement stability should be maintained when this is safely possible.

Allegation investigations impact the whole fostering household which can include other children not in foster care. Each child's experience, views and presentation should be a central consideration when undergoing an investigation.

A truly child-centred approach to social work practice should ensure that children in care have different outlets through which they can express themselves and be listened to; for example, all children with a social worker in Wales are entitled to advocacy.<sup>4</sup> Children should be encouraged to voice any concerns, be heard and appropriate action should be taken. Current practice around allegation investigations shared by foster carers suggests this is not currently happening.

A child-centred approach should also ensure that minor family difficulties (which may nevertheless be extremely important to a child) are dealt with, but not escalated to the detriment of the stability of the placement. It is not clear from the survey whether foster carers were differentiating in their responses between complaints, standard of care concerns or allegations.

### Key findings:

- Of the foster carer respondents who had experienced an allegation in the past two years, **30 per cent** had other children not in foster care living in their household including:
  - birth children
  - adopted children
  - children under a special guardianship order
  - nieces, nephews and grandchildren not in foster care.

<sup>2</sup> Children's Commissioner's Office. [Stability Index 2020](#)

<sup>3</sup> Baginsky, M. 2017 [The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review for the Department of Education](#)

<sup>4</sup> Read more about statutory advocacy for all children with a social worker in Wales [here](#)

## Children's experiences

Some foster carer respondents told us about the huge distress caused to children in foster care during an allegation investigation.

- 'Seeing what happens when an allegation is made scared the living daylights out of the child'
- 'Children interviewed by the police'
- 'Life was thrown out of balance again'

## The impact on children's stability

Depending on the nature of the allegation, it may be deemed appropriate to remove children from the fostering household when an investigation takes place. We are concerned that children are being moved without proper risk assessment. Our survey findings show that where children were removed during an investigation, over half of allegations were deemed unsubstantiated, which raises concerns that current practice is causing unnecessary instability for children. As with other aspects of foster care, we need to ensure a balance is struck between managing safeguarding and ensuring that children are not subject to further changes.

Many carers worried that, due to the allegation, other children who had been living with them in long-term foster care might be negatively impacted and that their placements might also be disrupted.

- 'I felt paranoid and frightened they would take my long-term children away.'
- 'Other foster children had a negative experience.'

- 'Child who made the allegation was removed, but so was 16-year-old who was settled, without consultation.'

In those instances where children who made allegations were removed from the foster home, this not only affected the foster carers, but also significantly impacted other children in the household.

- 'Both children experienced the trauma of an immediate removal.'

### Key findings:

- Of the 3,352 foster carers who completed the survey, 471 (**14 per cent**) said they had experienced at least one allegation in the past two years. For those who had experienced more than one allegation in the past two years, we asked them to reflect on their most recent one.
- **22 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the past two years experienced the removal of children in foster care during the investigation, **63 per cent** reported that the children in foster care were not removed and the remaining **15 per cent** responded that this was not applicable to them, they preferred not to say or skipped the question.
- In the instances where the children in foster care were removed, **53 per cent** of the investigations were deemed unfounded and **25 per cent** unsubstantiated.
- Fewer than **one per cent** of foster carer respondents experienced the removal of other children not in foster care from their home during the investigation.



## Focus on foster carers

Guidance and national minimum standards across the UK (a list can be accessed [here](#)) specify best practice that should be adhered to during allegation investigations; however, our survey findings show that there is a big gap between policy and practice.

All foster carers and the team that foster carers work with to support children (the team around the child) should have a good understanding of the allegation process to limit distress experienced by foster families (including the carers, their immediate family, children in foster care and anyone else living in the household) and have guidance available which outlines how best to support all members of the fostering household and wider family. This would help prevent foster carers leaving the workforce and limit the impact on other children in the household.

When a foster carer is the subject of an allegation, they should be informed about what to expect in terms of timescales, level of communication from their designated point of contact and support, both during and after the investigation. Foster carers should also be offered support independent of their fostering service and this should be easily accessible. It is important that there is a clear agency procedure in relation to how allegations are managed, and this should include guidance relating to investigation processes, information sharing, available supports and post-investigation review and panel processes.

### Outcome of most recent allegation

It is important to note that the State of the Nation 2021 survey represents the views of approved foster carers only. This means that those foster carers who have experienced an allegation and have subsequently had their approval removed or have decided to leave fostering are not represented.

Of the 3,352 foster carers who completed the survey, 14 per cent said they had experienced at least one allegation in the last two years. This figure is much higher than the Ofsted figure of three per cent of foster carers in England experiencing an allegation each year (data on allegations is not published in the other countries of the UK).<sup>5</sup>

Although our findings are not directly comparable – the State of the Nation survey is UK-wide and includes current foster carers and their experiences, whereas Ofsted's Fostering in England data is about investigations that have been classified as allegations by designated safeguarding leads – it does indicate that there may be some misconceptions around what allegations are, how they differ to standards of care concerns and complaints, and, as a result, what appropriate action should be taken.

It is important that allegations against foster carers are investigated thoroughly and fairly; however, it is also important to ensure damage is not caused to anyone involved in the event of an unfounded or unsubstantiated allegation.

### Key findings:

We asked foster carers what the outcome of their most recent allegation was if they had experienced more than one in the last two years:

- **61 per cent** were unfounded
- **22 per cent** were unsubstantiated
- **three per cent** were substantiated.

### An example of good practice: emotional wellbeing support for foster carers

ThinkWell is a Staffordshire County Council employee offer that has been expanded to all foster carers. It aims to meet the needs of individuals who are struggling with their emotional wellbeing, offering foster carers support and counselling if required.

It is not limited to just those facing an allegation, though it is always offered in these cases. It is also offered to foster carers who are experiencing placement instability to support the reduction of unplanned endings.

### Foster carers' experiences of an allegation

The levels of distress experienced by the foster carers as a result of an allegation investigation came through strongly in the survey. An allegation can bring a foster carer or their family's reputation and integrity into question. Given their home and family is also their place of work and livelihood, it is perhaps not unsurprising to see the huge ramifications of such allegations.

- 'The terrible trauma and shock have left me with long-term bad anxiety/breathing problems. I have to take medication every day for it as the effects have truly taken their toll'
- 'The worst day of my life'
- 'It was a nightmare from start to finish'
- 'A very difficult time which really shook our confidence'

Not only were foster carers impacted, but also other members of their family, including birth children.

- 'The whole process scarred us and our three adult children for life'

The allegations made carers very cautious and damaged their confidence when working with children.

- 'It has left a nasty, unshakeable taste in my mouth. Now use technology to prove [we] don't do anything and always two people there at all times'

Adding to the distress, foster carers felt they were presumed guilty despite there being little or no evidence to support the allegation.

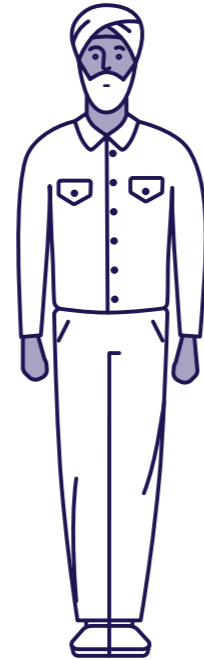
- 'We felt that the manager dealing with it had already believed the person before even speaking to us.'
- 'Felt like I was on trial for murder – not believed, not trusted, not valued in any way.'
- 'We were almost threatened. Was an awful time and we are fed up [with] the system now. It makes you feel unsupported, not valuable and worth nothing.'
- 'The "guilty until proven innocent" attitude towards carers... is really hard to understand and accept – as was the lack of empathy.'
- 'It was clear that in people's opinion I was guilty. Everyone else in this country is innocent until proven guilty but not carers.'

Unlike their social work colleagues, HR, legal or emotional support is not routinely accessible to foster carers when they are the subject of an allegation investigation.<sup>6</sup> Foster carers who have experienced an allegation often feel that they have no rights and no protection. This exacerbates their concerns about not being believed and being considered guilty before an investigation is carried out.

- 'It has made us realise how vulnerable we are as foster carers.'
- 'Still to this day, my voice has never been heard.'

## Allegations

was the second most common learning and development need identified by foster carers.



“  
Still to this day, my voice  
has never been heard.”

Foster carer respondent



## Relationships with other professionals

It has been the experience of many foster carers that social workers can distance themselves from the foster carer under investigation. Due to safeguarding procedures, there may be restrictions upon what information supervising social workers can initially share with carers. However, best practice would be for concerns to be shared as soon as possible (following local safeguarding guidance). Foster carers should continue to receive calls, visits and other support from their supervising social worker during an investigation; the foster family may even require an increase in support, but certainly not a reduction. Supervising social workers should be sufficiently trained and skilled to provide appropriate support without withdrawing from the foster family.

Our findings show that many carers felt unsupported and cast adrift by social workers who should be supporting them, although it was not always clear whether they were referring to the child's social worker or their own supervising social worker. It seemed that once an allegation was made, the foster carers, often despite lengthy and excellent track records, felt that they were assumed to be guilty and, in this sense, felt undervalued and ostracised from the team around the child. Supervising social workers should play a key role in helping foster carers rationalise the allegations process from a safeguarding perspective.

Many carers felt that the system quickly became about 'them and us' when an allegation had been made against them. Foster carers reported feeling unsupported by fostering teams and felt that no one seemed to consider the impact on them.

- 'I felt abandoned and unsupported by anyone from the fostering team.'
- 'I felt like a criminal. I was beaten badly, and no one showed empathy.'

In some circumstances the police were involved and foster carers felt criminalised.

- 'We were advised informally that they didn't believe the allegation, but it was referred to the police anyway... no one talked to us.'
- 'Police make you feel like a criminal and children's services closed ranks.'

This led foster carers to lose trust in the system and, despite still being committed to the children they cared for, found it difficult to continue to work for the same organisation.

- 'I have lost so much trust in the system that whilst I desperately want to help support the children because this is not their fault, I don't know if I can continue to work for an organisation that can treat someone like this.'

Some carers felt sufficiently empowered that they complained about how the investigation was handled and their complaint was successfully upheld.

- 'The local authority literally did nothing to support us or to provide the information that the police would have found useful, such as the many documents around this young lady's behaviours. Their communication to us was so bad we complained, and this was upheld.'

<sup>6</sup> All members of The Fostering Network can get support and advice around allegations from our [helplines](#). They also have access to a legal protection insurance scheme and our [online community](#) where foster carers can share their experiences and get advice from other foster carers.

## Emotional and financial support for foster carers

The findings show a lack of support for foster carers and their children when an allegation is made and an investigation carried out, despite the considerable emotional and (sometimes) financial impacts being the subject of an allegation brings. Current guidance around offering support in relation to allegations in foster care across the UK varies, resulting in a range of experiences.

Many more foster carers reported feeling inadequately supported, than reported feeling supported.

- 'Fostering service shrivels away from offering support.'
- 'You are just left in no man's land no one takes into account how much stress this puts you under.'
- 'We felt really unsupported by everyone.'

Some foster carers did find easily accessible support that was useful:

- 'The Fostering Network gave us a lot of useful information.'
- 'Social services were wonderfully supportive to us throughout the whole process.'

### Key findings:

- Of those foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the past two years, **57 per cent** said they did not receive independent support.
- 152 foster carers (**32 per cent**) said they had received independent support during their most recent allegation, and of these:
  - **76 per cent** found it easily accessible
  - **77 per cent** found it helpful.
- **20 per cent** of foster carers said they were financially supported by their fostering service during their most recent allegation in the last two years. **42 per cent** said they were not.
- **15 per cent** said that support was offered to children living in the household following an allegation being made and **36 per cent** said there was no support offered to children living in the household.
- **35 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation said that they did not receive specialist support when they returned to fostering, **22 per cent** said they received support which was adequate and **14 per cent** said they received support which was inadequate.

## Independent support

During an allegation investigation it is considered best practice for fostering services to make support available, which is independent of the fostering service, to the person subject to the allegation and, where this is a foster carer, to their household, in order to provide:

- information and advice about the process;
- emotional support; and,
- if needed, mediation between the foster carer and the fostering service and/or advocacy (including attendance at meetings and panel hearings).<sup>7</sup>

In England and Wales, The Fostering Network offers an [independent support service](#) to foster carers which can be commissioned via a permanent contract or a number of hours of support can be 'spot purchased' (when there is an immediate requirement and a purchase must be made 'on the spot') by fostering services. Independent Support Workers are made available for foster carers to contact directly when subject to an allegation, cause for concern or complaint to offer independent support, advice and mediation. Support is provided from the initial investigation and throughout the process. The worker can have contact with the fostering service and support the carer with any dispute resolution process.

<sup>7</sup> HM Government [The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services](#) p25

<sup>8</sup> The Fostering Network [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report](#).

Many foster carers only receive financial support when they are looking after a child in foster care. Allegations can therefore cause disruptions to foster carers' income if the child is removed from the household. In addition, our main report based on the State of the Nation 2021 findings revealed that 61 per cent of foster carers do not combine fostering with any other work.<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear from the survey how many foster carers were financially disadvantaged due to an allegation, or how many foster carers would have been eligible for or in need of financial support. However, several foster carers told us that they experienced financial difficulties.

- 'Had no income for five months and accrued a lot of debt'
- 'Left with months in hardship'

Where financial support was provided one foster carer said:

- 'We had to press for financial help even though it was promised'



"

**You are just left in no man's land no one takes into account how much stress this puts you under.**

Foster carer respondent

"

## Information sharing and timescales

To ensure effective safeguarding procedures, there may be restrictions upon what information can initially be shared with foster carers. This ensures that a full and thorough investigation can be undertaken, however it is not always explained to foster carers and can exacerbate the feeling of being left in the dark. What information can be shared, when and by who should be decided at a strategy meeting early on in the investigation and best practice would be for concerns to be shared as soon as possible (following local safeguarding guidance). If there are certain details of the investigation that a foster carer should not know then this should also be communicated to them. The full details of an investigation can be disclosed after conclusion providing that no further safeguarding risks exist. If details can be shared, they should be explored openly with foster carers and children such that learning can take place.

### Key findings:

- Only **25 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation felt as though they were communicated with sufficiently during the investigation whereas **59 per cent** of foster carers felt that they were not communicated with sufficiently.
- **55 per cent** of foster carers said the timescales were not made clear to them.
- **35 per cent** of foster carers said that specified timescales were not adhered to.

Foster carers in our survey reported feeling not sufficiently communicated with during the investigation.

- '[They] couldn't give me any information except to say an allegation had been made and that they would be investigating.'

Often foster carers reported that there was no clear information given to them about the processes and timescales involved in an investigation.

- '...never sure what was going on or happening next...'

A lack of information combined with a lack of contact from the fostering service added to foster carers feeling unsupported and not respected.

- 'It was like a "wall" came up and no one talked to us.'

Even when investigations were dealt with quickly and efficiently, information was often still not shared.

- 'It was all over within 48 hours, however I was not really kept informed.'

Sometimes, even after investigations were complete, foster carers still felt uncertain about what decisions were made and why, as well as what information remains on their files.

- 'We still do not know the details of it, no discussions have been had to tell us what the concern is.'



**It was like a "wall" came up and no one talked to us.**

Foster carer respondent



Due to the many agencies that can be involved, allegations investigations can take a long time to be completed. Foster carers reported that during the allegation process suggested timescales were not kept to, leaving foster carers waiting for months (sometimes years) to be told the outcome of their allegation investigation. These elongated timescales increased levels of stress experienced by foster carers.

- 'It's been 19-months and still has not gone to panel.'
- '[The allegation] was totally untrue but it took a total of six months for everything to be confirmed even though the police dismissed the allegation straight away.'
- 'The local authority and the police dragged this out for nearly three years.'
- 'Was initially told they thought it would be dealt with in a few weeks. It took 5-6 months.'
- 'Review rearranged five times.'



**We still do not know the details of it, no discussions have been had to tell us what the concern is.**

Foster carer respondent



**[The allegation] was totally untrue but it took a total of six months for everything to be confirmed even though the police dismissed the allegation straight away.**

Foster carer respondent



### Suggested timescales are not being consistently adhered to

Ofsted data from the years covered by the survey (2019-2021) reports that, for allegation investigations in England:

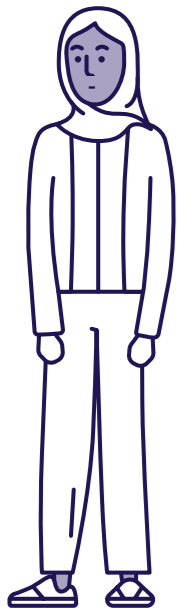
- **50 per cent** were completed in less than four weeks
- **12 per cent** in four to six weeks
- **12 per cent** in six to ten weeks
- **26 per cent** in more than 10 weeks.

Yet, guidance in England states: 'It is expected that **80 per cent** of cases should be resolved within one month, **90 per cent** within three months, and all but the most exceptional cases should be completed within 12 months' (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, para 3.80).



## Focus on the fostering system

We are now faced with a fostering system under immense pressure. The number of children in need of a foster family is increasing at a rate that cannot be met by the existing capacity. The key to successful foster care lies in recruiting, training, supporting and retaining good foster carers. Supporting foster carers, respecting their role and working in partnership with all those involved in the team around the child will ensure children have a strong support network in place to enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes.



**Two thirds**  
of foster carers considered resigning from fostering during their most recent allegation investigation.

### Impact on foster carer retention

Continuing to foster or returning to fostering after an allegation has been made is likely to be a difficult decision for any foster carer. Some foster carers decide to leave fostering as a result of an allegation.

Although some foster carers will leave immediately, many foster carers retained a commitment to the children in their care and would continue to foster, but only for as long as those particular children needed.

- 'We will not take any other children and will retire from fostering once our current child leaves.'
- 'As carers we will not be continuing when our long-term children have reached adulthood... we don't feel we can continue to be foster carers however because of how we have been treated.'
- 'Although we were cleared by the police and went back to panel to be reinstated, we did this only to get our eldest child back. As soon as she is 18 we will resign.'
- 'We continued to foster as we had a child in long-term foster care who is still with us.'

These quotes suggest that poor allegation processes can continue to negatively impact foster carer retention for some time after the investigation. It can result in people's capacity as foster carers being reduced and shorten their fostering careers.

It can also decrease the likelihood that people will recommend fostering to others who are considering it.

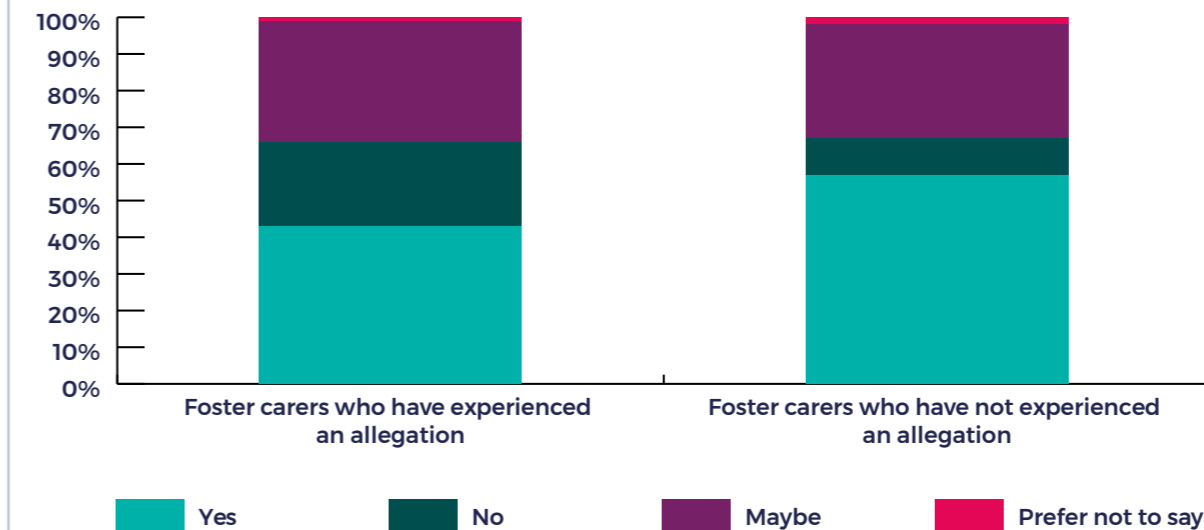
- 'Now I wouldn't recommend being a carer.'

This is concerning given the shortage of foster carers and further contributes to the destabilisation of the workforce.

### Key findings:

- **66 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the past two years stated that they considered resigning from fostering during the investigation.
- Only **43 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation investigation in the past two years would recommend fostering to those who are considering it, compared to **57 per cent** of those who had not experienced an allegation in the past two years.
- **22 per cent** of foster carers who had experienced an allegation investigation in the past two years would not recommend fostering to others considering it.
- The remaining respondents stated that they would 'maybe' recommend fostering or they preferred not to say.

Foster carers who would recommend fostering to others considering it



**“ [We would not recommend fostering] owing to our recent experience of an allegation. The support and treatment by the local authority was so very appalling we could not in all conscience suggest anyone else put themselves at that level of risk. ”**

Foster carer respondent



# Case study: good practice example

## Tammy and Briony's story

It was a Monday morning when we received the phone call from an unknown number. We met Debby (our supervising social worker) and Sonia (the fostering team manager) at our home 30 minutes later. We had never met Sonia before.

In our kitchen Sonia started explaining that our youngest, little Sammy, aged 23 months was going to go with his social worker for a special medical examination. She said that something had happened and at the point that she used the word 'allegation', I started to cry, I just couldn't stop it. Debby was brilliant, she comforted me and Bri.

Deb stayed with us for the rest of the day, Sonia left and she took all of our foster carer recordings with her. Neither of them could tell us any real details, it didn't stop us from asking, but they changed the subject and tried to keep our minds busy. I was cross at first when Sonia asked for my recordings file, she explained that our recordings might be helpful to resolve the situation quickly.

About an hour after Sonia left with our recordings Debby had a call and she went into the garden to talk. Debby told us that we needed to plan for who was going to collect the children from school, we had three children with us, Sammy and his two big sisters aged six and nine. She also asked if we could explore somewhere for Briony to go and stay for a few days until the investigation was over.

Briony just crumbled next to me. She phoned her mam and within an hour she was on her way. Debby explained that we didn't have to do this but if we did it would enable the children to all come home to me. Bri and I agreed that there was no way we would make the kids go somewhere else. Debby then asked me to agree not to see Briony for the time being. I felt awful for her having to leave and I felt totally alone.

Debby recommended that one of our babysitters should come over to keep me company and be supportive. Our neighbours had been approved as babysitters at our last annual review but I felt too embarrassed to ask them. I felt like we had done something wrong, even though I was certain that we hadn't. I called my brother, he was at work but he finished early and came straight over.

Debby visited or called me most days and she visited Briony too. Debby arranged an independent support worker for us. We said no at first but then it got so hard seeing Debby but not finding out any real information or answers to our questions. The independent worker, Micaela, had a different perspective and helped us to find the right words and ask the right questions. The children's social worker helped me to settle on an agreed story to explain why Briony was living with her mam for a little while.

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## Only one third

**of foster carers received independent support during their most recent allegation.**

The strategy meeting took place towards the end of the week and we received a letter from the chair of the strategy meeting on the Saturday morning. The letter confirmed that Briony was subject to an allegation and the safeguarding process was being followed to investigate. I remember feeling really low, I called Briony. I read the letter to her and then said 'shall we just jack in it'. Even though we still had no idea what we were accused of Briony was able to stay strong.

We found out the following Monday what the allegation was. We were both called into the social services offices to be interviewed, we were also told that the children were being visited in school by their social worker. They had endless questions and they asked me and Briony separately.

We were both asked if we had ever used anything to hit the children, I lost my breath when they asked this question. I had heard the term speechless many times in my life but I'd never actually experienced this in the way that I did on this day. Micaela came over to the house and listened to me ranting about how we were being treated and the terrible things they were accusing us of, she helped me to keep it in perspective and gave me the strength to keep going. When the children came home from school they were unsettled, it was so difficult to know if they wanted to tell me about what they had been asked by the social worker or not.

It was another three days before Debby called us to say that the outcome strategy meeting had been held and Briony could come home. We were so relieved, we went together to collect the children from school and they squeezed Briony so tightly when they came running out to the yard.

In the days that followed our questions were finally answered. We had another letter from the chair of the strategy meeting stating that the outcome of the investigation was 'unfounded' and there would be no further action. Micaela and Debby visited to help us to understand what unfounded meant and what would happen next. We also found out that the allegation had been made by our youngest one's dad during his contact session at his grandparents. Sammy had fallen onto his back in the park the day before really hurting himself. We'd written it up in our recordings on the Sunday and on the Monday we had sent a picture of the bruise on his back to Debby and his social worker. We'd also told his grandparents when we dropped him off to visit his dad.

## Two in ten

**foster carers who experienced an allegation would not recommend fostering.**

We thought we'd done all the right things and followed our training and all the advice that we'd been given and Debby confirmed that we did absolutely everything that we should have done.

We still have some uncertainty about who reported us and alleged the allegation against us because that's how safeguarding works. We know that the investigation disproved the allegation, our recordings, our interviews, the children's information, it all matched a version of events which were true and the allegation was not. Both of the girls had seen the fall onto the step and they drew pictures for their social worker, they still draw these pictures to this day.

In the months that followed Debby arranged for us to have counselling through the local authority. She helped us to write down our story for others to learn from and now we even run a session for new carers as part of their induction process as newly approved foster carers. Our service set up a peer support register too, so when someone is subject to an allegation they can have the number for other foster carers who have been through the process.

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**We used to be fearful of it and dread it happening to us but now that it has (and now that its over!) we can't stress enough how much talking about it can help to normalise and prepare you when it does.**

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After going through an allegation ourselves the main thing which we've taken away as learning is to talk about these situations more. The process is there for a reason and we have to have it to safeguard children. We used to be fearful of it and dread it happening to us but now that it has (and now that its over!) we can't stress enough how much talking about it can help to normalise and prepare you when it does. We believe that every service should have peer support, independent support, counselling, an induction from foster carers with lived in experience and talk openly about allegations in foster care.



## Concluding comments

Children must feel safe and nurtured (both physically and emotionally) to ensure their wellbeing and healthy development. The intention of current guidance covering allegations in foster care across the UK is to enable this healthy development, while also minimising stress when concerns are raised about the welfare and safety of a child, by ensuring foster carers are supported and informed as much as possible.

The data from our State of the Nation 2021 survey suggests that current practice is far from achieving this intention. Instead, we see placement instability and a lack of voice for children. In fact, we know little about the views of children and young people on the allegation process itself.

We see a lack of information, protracted timescales and a lack of emotional support for foster carers, leaving them feeling abandoned and "guilty until proven innocent" with many leaving the workforce. This is particularly challenging considering the national shortage of placement choice for children in care, and the majority of services across the UK failing to meet their recruitment targets.<sup>9</sup>

This gap between policy and practice must be closed and, in some cases, policy must go further to ensure we retain safe and loving homes for children in foster care. The right information and support must be in place for foster carers so those safe and loving homes are robust enough to withstand the allegation process should they have to face it.

<sup>9</sup> The Fostering Network *State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report*.

Foster carers have a unique skill set and play a vital role in caring for looked after children. It cannot be right that they are neither treated with the same respect, nor offered the same support as others in the team around the child when experiencing a complaint, standard of care concern or allegation. The terms and conditions that foster carers agree to must reflect the value that foster carers provide as essential members of the team around the child, and this should include holistic support throughout and following an allegation. This should also be made available to their wider family and other children in placement, as appropriate.

We want this report to mark the starting point to a process of much needed change. The Fostering Network is committed to better support our members and the wider fostering sector to make improvements to ensure better outcomes for children in care and fostering families. We will work with and influence other organisations and bodies to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and for the foster carers who support them.



### Recommendations that will see improvements across the board in foster care:

Recommendations that will see improvements across the board in foster care:	Impact of the recommendation on the allegation process:
<p>1. Governments should introduce a <a href="#">national register of foster carers</a> which, among other things, would improve the portability of the workforce, provide a standardisation of pre- and post-approval learning and development, and drive-up standards.</p>	<p>Foster carers' approval statuses would be held by a body independent to their fostering service meaning that they could more easily appeal any decisions to remove their approval following an unfounded or unsubstantiated allegation investigation, improving retention.</p> <p>All foster carers would receive standardised training on allegations including what support they can expect to receive to ensure they are equipped if they should experience an allegation.</p>
<p>2. Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers, at the very least, receive regular fee payments in line with the national living wage for a 40-hour week, which recognises their time, skills and expertise regardless of whether they are currently caring for a child. The amount foster carers should receive needs to be reviewed in conversation with foster carers.</p>	<p>All foster carers would have a stable income and not experience financial instability as a result of an allegation investigation. It would also help ensure that outcomes for allegations were reached swiftly so foster carers could return to fostering as soon as possible.</p>
<p>3. Governments should review their focus on fostering and ensure they have structures in place at a national, regional and local level to provide leadership, collaboration and a shared strategy to address issues such as sufficiency and drive improvements in performance of the fostering sector.</p>	<p>In England and Northern Ireland, national, regional and local level leadership and a greater focus on fostering would help drive improvements around allegations in foster care.</p> <p>In Scotland, Scottish Government should continue their work to keep The Promise and provide the best support to foster carers. This will drive improvements around allegations in foster care to ensure that practice is truly child-centred .</p> <p>In Wales, Foster Wales exists to provide the infrastructure to drive improvements in foster care, including allegations, to ensure that practice is truly child-centred.</p>

<p>4. All fostering services should introduce, embed and regularly review a foster carers' charter. <a href="#">The Fostering Network's Foster Carers' Charter</a> is a robust example and should be used as a template to develop local charters.</p>	<p>The roles and responsibilities of the foster carer, fostering service and corporate parent in caring for children would be clear and understood by all parties such that foster carers are provided with the sufficient level of support and information throughout and following an allegation investigation.</p>
<p>5. The Northern Ireland Assembly should introduce a clear regulatory framework for foster care in Northern Ireland which will trigger the development of Northern Ireland standards for all aspects of foster care, such standards should include managing allegations.</p>	<p>Fostering services standards would include best practice guidance on managing allegations against foster carers and approved kinship carers. This would provide a transparent, clear pathway for those impacted by allegations.</p>
<p>6. Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered by appropriate regulatory bodies and children's placing authorities and shared to ensure lessons can be learnt and fed into individual and wider practice learning. Governments should explore options for capturing data on why children moved care arrangements.</p>	<p>This will allow the level of placement disruption for children in foster care caused by allegation investigations to be monitored and scrutinised.</p>
<p>7. Governments should review the approach and processes involved in long-term foster care to ensure children in these types of placements are afforded similar protections and stability to other forms of permanence.</p>	<p>For those children in long-term foster care (where it is the plan that the child will remain living with a specific foster family until reaching adulthood or leaving care), their placement stability will be protected by a court order including if a member of the foster family was the subject of an allegation investigation.</p>
<p>8. Fostering services should work with foster carers and others (including young people) to co-design the planning and improvement of fostering services to ensure continuous improvement and the retention of high-quality foster carers.</p>	<p>Allegation policies and procedures would be informed by foster carers and young people.</p>

## Further recommendations

The following recommendations are in addition to the above and specific to improving allegation processes and practice in foster care.

### Recommendations for fostering services:

9. Fostering services should ensure there are outlets for children in care to have their say and be listened to. Children should be encouraged to speak out about their experiences and appropriate action should be taken to let children know their concerns have been heard. Fostering services should support foster carers to understand the importance of listening to children to help create a fostering environment where everyone listens and respects one another.
10. All fostering services should review and monitor their compliance with their respective country's safeguarding legislation and guidance. Fostering services should ensure that their allegation policies and processes comply with national guidance leading to best practice. Such policies should protect the stability of placements for children as paramount, be clear, easily accessible and developed in consultation with foster carers and young people. Guidance should be for all professionals in the team around the child and include:
  - o providing all foster carers with information and training about allegation procedures as part of their induction to ensure that they are equipped should they experience an allegation themselves
  - o providing foster carers with access to an independent support/mediation worker who ensures that the foster carers' rights are upheld throughout an investigation, they understand the investigative process, are listened to, have their voices heard and are supported and protected
  - o providing appropriate support including HR, legal and emotional support (equivalent to what their social work colleagues would get if in a similar situation) as well as independent therapeutic support for the foster carer and any affected children, as appropriate
  - o processes through which information will be shared with the foster carer throughout an investigation, who will be sharing this information, when they can expect to receive it and how often the foster carer will be updated. This should include what information foster carers are entitled to know and why some details may not be shared due to confidentiality. All information should be in a written format at each stage
  - o a clear explanation of the investigative process including details of who will be involved, expected timescales and next steps, who to contact regarding the progress of the investigation, and where/who to go to for support
  - o a commitment to formally write to the foster carer after an investigation has taken place to explain the course of action taken, the outcome and what information is recorded on their file.

### Recommendations for fostering services continued:

11. Foster carers should have access to confidential mental health support when experiencing an allegation, alongside what would be afforded their social work colleagues if in a similar situation.
12. Foster carers should be sufficiently financially maintained throughout an allegation investigation to cover ongoing costs such as insurance, utility bills and rent or mortgage payments.
13. Fostering services should offer foster carers support when returning to fostering following an allegation investigation.
14. Emotional support should be made available to the wider family of the foster carer who is the subject of an allegation.

### Recommendations for relevant government departments:

15. Departments responsible for fostering policy should conduct a 'deep dive' into allegation investigations in foster care similar to that completed by the [Department for Education in England into allegations against teachers](#). The research should include analysis of current policies and processes, how they are working in practice and barriers to implementation of national guidance. It should also include the police and other agencies involved in allegation investigations to help develop a deeper understanding. Relevant government departments could look at influencing inspection bodies to complete this work.
16. Governments of the UK should fund independent support services for foster carers experiencing an allegation.

### Recommendations for regulatory bodies:

18. All bodies responsible for regulating fostering services across the UK should record information about allegations against foster carers to measure impact, practice and processes, similar to that done by Ofsted in England.
19. Regulatory bodies should collect and report data around the relationship between allegations and foster carers leaving fostering to monitor impact.

### Recommendations for local authorities, trusts and fostering services:

20. All social workers working with children in foster care and foster carers should receive training on allegations in foster care. This should:
  - o include how to support children in foster care, foster carers and their wider families;
  - o include knowledge of the regulations around allegations in foster care and how it differs from child protection allegations; and
  - o be trauma informed.

### Recommendations for The Fostering Network:

21. The Fostering Network will undertake a programme of work including the creation of resources and influencing activity to provide better support for the fostering sector in relation to allegations.

### Recommendations for researchers:

22. It would be helpful to conduct a literature review of current research around allegations in foster care to identify gaps in the evidence base to determine what further research should be taken forward. This could include investigating the impact of allegations on children and the long-term impact allegations have on the retention and capacity of the foster carer workforce.



## About the data

The State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 survey was open for nearly 10 weeks from 5 May until 11 July 2021 and was hosted online via Smart Survey. The survey was promoted via our website, magazine and through social media and emails. A total of 3,352 foster carers from across the UK responded to our 2021 State of the Nation survey, maintaining it as the largest UK-wide survey of foster carers.

### Differences by demographic:

The survey responses suggest possible differences in the demographics of foster carers who are the subject of allegations.

Foster carers with a disability were more likely to report having experienced an allegation.

Male foster carers were also much more likely to report having experienced an allegation.

A foster carers' reported sexuality seemed to have no difference on their likelihood of experiencing an allegation.

Due to the small numbers in many ethnic categories it was not possible to compare numbers of allegations by ethnicity.

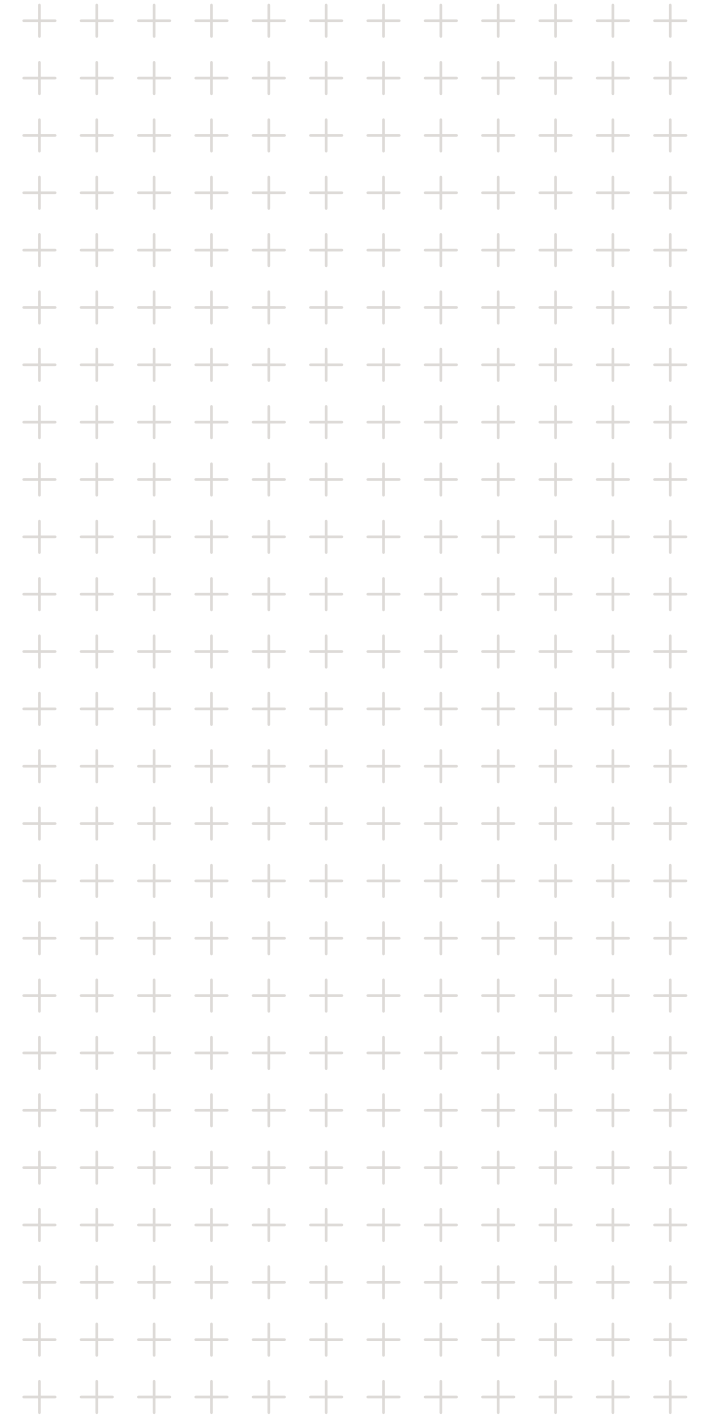
Further research could be revealing about how gender, sexual identity, disability and other demographics impact the likelihood of foster carers being the subject of an allegation.

### About the foster carers who responded:

471 foster carer respondents (representing **14 per cent** of all respondents) had experienced one or more allegations in the past two years. Of these:

- **82 per cent** fostered in England, **four per cent** in Northern Ireland, **seven per cent** in Scotland and **seven per cent** in Wales.
- **70 per cent** fostered for local authorities and **30 per cent** for independent providers.
- **73 per cent** were female, **21 per cent** were male and the remaining **6 per cent** were non-binary or preferred not to say.
- **84 per cent** were heterosexual, **three per cent** gay or lesbian, **three per cent** bisexual and **nine per cent** preferred not to say.
- **10 per cent** reported that they had a disability.

**This report was co-created with Dr Alyson Rees, Louisa Roberts and Sophie Wood from CASCADE (Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre) at Cardiff University.**




### About The Fostering Network

As the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation, we are the essential network for fostering and we bring together everyone who is involved in the lives of children in foster care. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people 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.

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