

State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021: Executive Summary

Roughly three-quarters of the 97,000 children looked after in the UK are cared for by foster families. Our State of the Nation's Foster Care Survey heard from 3,352 foster carers and 99 fostering services across the UK. Foster carer respondents were caring for approximately 5,669 children, around 9 per cent of all children living in foster care in the UK.

Foster carers told us they foster in order to make a difference to the lives of children. Foster carers and fostering services said that the status of foster carers must be improved so they are able to do just that and so the children in their care can thrive.

Focus on the child

Matching helps to find children the right foster family; something which makes a huge difference to their stability and future outcomes. However, only **53 per cent** of foster carer respondents involved in the matching process felt they received sufficient information about the child and only **42 per cent** reported that children were able to visit before moving in.

There are many different types of foster care. Long-term foster care is unique in that it provides children with permanence while remaining in the care system. **72 per cent** of foster carers were caring for a child that they expected to remain with them on a long-term basis, yet **12 per cent** of foster carers who expected a child to stay with them on a long-term basis were not confident that stability would be maintained.

Too many looked after children are experiencing multiple moves, impacting on their attachments and development. **50 per cent** of foster carers had experienced one or more children leave their care in the past two years and **over a third** of foster carers stated that the last planned move for a child they cared for was not preceded by a care planning review.

The building of warm and positive relationships is at the heart of good fostering and children and young people who move within and out of the care system should be supported to maintain relationships with their former foster families. **40 per cent** of foster carers felt they were not supported at all to keep in touch with children they have previously fostered, with the main reason being that they were not allowed or able to.

In each country of the UK, there are valuable schemes in place that enable young people to remain living with their former foster carers until they are 21 (or older in certain circumstances). **74 per cent** of foster carer respondents said they experienced a drop in income as a result of offering a post-18 arrangement. Young people in these arrangements are no longer considered looked after which can mean that foster carers have their approval status removed. These are key barriers to more young people entering post-18 arrangements and may explain why up-take has not increased across the UK since our last survey in 2018.

Focus on foster carers

Foster carers provide care to children every day and hold a unique and valuable skillset. Improving foster carers' terms and conditions would help to demonstrate the value of their role as part of the team around the child and ensure the best possible outcomes for the children they care for.

There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering, the allowance and the fee. The allowance is designed to cover the full costs of looking after a child, yet **over a third** of foster carers said their allowance does not cover those costs, leaving them out of pocket. There are national minimum allowances in England, Northern Ireland and Wales but there is currently no recommended national minimum allowance for foster carers in Scotland.

The second component to foster carers' income from fostering is a fee, which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. **63 per cent** of foster carers who responded stated that they receive a fee payment. This has risen by 6 per cent since our 2016 survey. There is no statutory requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services. Just **nine per cent** of foster carers reported receiving more than the National Living Wage per calendar month. This remains the same as when we last surveyed in 2018.

When foster carers do not receive a fee, retainer payments can be made to ensure that fostering households are not financially worse off in between having children stay with them. **70 per cent** of foster carers stated that they do not receive any retainer payments in between fostering and **nearly half** of fostering services said they do not pay retainer payments.

Foster carers provide children with 24/7 care within their own homes. It is an immensely rewarding role but it can often be challenging and complex, so foster carers need support, for example assistance and advice; mental health support; short breaks or peer support.

To meet the needs of children in their care, foster carers should also have access to ongoing learning and development. **65 per cent** of foster carers have an agreed learning and development plan for the next 12 months. This figure has been steadily rising since our 2016 survey. Yet, apart from in Wales, there are no national learning and development frameworks for foster carers.

Focus on the fostering system

Recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of committed, competent foster carers, with the skills, capacity, motivation, resilience and support to provide children with what they need to thrive remains a continual and growing challenge for local authorities, trusts and independent fostering services. Fostering services said sufficiency planning could be improved by: improving the data available; improving multi-agency/stakeholder working; more placement availability and better recruitment strategies.

The pressures within the system, and the lack of availability of foster families, results in poorer outcomes for children with some children living a long way from family, friends and school or being separated from their siblings. **All but six** services reported having a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their local population. The highest areas of need were for teenagers, large sibling groups, children with disabilities and parent and child placements.

Retaining enough high-quality foster carers is equally as important as recruiting the right foster families. Recruitment and retention link closely to the issue of status, covered in the foster carer section of the report, and services and foster carers agreed that improving status is key to addressing sufficiency.

The coronavirus pandemic

The pandemic has impacted on all parts of society, including foster care. **44 per cent** of foster carers reported a deterioration in the mental health and wellbeing of at least one child in their care as a result of the pandemic, and **nearly half (46 per cent)** of foster carer respondents stated their own mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated slightly or significantly.

Recommendations

Recommendations for governments

- Governments should introduce information sharing standards for children's placing authorities, to ensure appropriate information is shared with foster carers to support positive matching.
- Governments should consult with foster carers about what level of information they feel is appropriate to enable them to care for children.
- The matching process for long-term foster care should be reviewed and clarified.
- 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.
- Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered 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.
- Practice guidance should be produced to support children and young people to remain in contact with their former foster families, when in their best interest, and to support foster families to maintain relationships with the children they have previously looked after as they move on.
- Governments should carry out a full cross-departmental review of how post-18 arrangements have been implemented. This should involve young people and all key stakeholders and include:
 - how the schemes have been funded
 - clarity of responsibility
 - the status of arrangements
 - the training provided to foster carers and staff
 - what policies are currently in place and
 - when the schemes are discussed in the care planning process.
- National minimum allowances should be introduced across the UK for these arrangements, with such an allowance being sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person. Former foster carers should receive a fee payment when in these arrangements to recognise their skills and expertise. This will enable young people to have the best start to their adult lives.
- Governments across the UK should undertake a comprehensive review of the minimum levels of fostering allowances set in their respective countries using up to date evidence to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
- 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.
- Governments should fund, implement and evaluate new models of delivering foster care that better support children and young people and those who care for them.
- A learning and development framework for foster carers, such as that in Wales, should be implemented in all four countries of the UK covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval learning and development.
- Key government departments should play a greater role in sufficiency planning in terms of providing the tools, guidance and training for children's placing authorities to create meaningful and live statements that drive commissioning and recruitment planning.

- Statutory guidance on the sufficiency duty of children's placing authorities should be introduced in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and updated in England. This should include good practice examples and a national toolkit for commissioning foster care provision in the independent sector.
- Governments should play a role in national foster carer workforce planning and development.
- Governments should introduce a national register of foster carers which, amongst other things, would improve the portability of the workforce, provide a standardisation of pre- and post-approval training and drive up standards.
- 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.

Recommendations for Scottish Government

- The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a national minimum allowance for foster carers.

Recommendations for appropriate regulatory bodies

- Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered 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.

Recommendations for national and regional decision makers

- We urge all governments and decision makers to build on the partnerships and new models of practice which have developed since March 2020, to re-evaluate how we support our most vulnerable and to invest in innovative practices which ensure the very best outcomes for children in care.

Recommendations for children's placing authorities

- Foster carers must always be given all the appropriate information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them, and those around them, safe. Information sharing is a prerequisite of good fostering practice.
- Children should be placed with a foster family that they have, at the very least, had the opportunity to meet before moving in.
- When a child moves on from a placement, the former foster carer should have the opportunity to contribute to the referral information to support a smooth transition for the child.
- Foster carers should be empowered and confident to have an ongoing dialogue with social workers about the stability of placements. They should also be confident that action will be taken to avoid placement breakdown following any concerns raised.
- Information from reviews about why children moved care arrangements must be gathered 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.
- Placing authorities must work with all fostering providers to conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform recruitment strategies.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Fostering services should ensure foster carers maintain their approval during a post-18 arrangement if their plan is to return to fostering.
- Fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.

- Foster carers should receive regular fee payments which recognise their time, skills and expertise and the role they agree to undertake as a foster carer.
- Until the introduction of regular fee payments for foster carers, all foster carers should receive retainer payments in between caring for children, to support good matching, maintain a skilled foster care workforce and ensure that foster carers feel valued for the work they do.
- Fostering services should have a clear policy around what retainer payments are available and for how long the support will be provided.
- Support for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- All services should have a mental health and well-being support offer for foster carers, the foster carers' family and the children they look after.
- All foster carers should have an agreed annual learning and development plan that addresses both the standard and specialised learning and development required to meet the needs of the children they care for or might care for in the future.
- Foster carers should be empowered to request further and specialist learning and development they feel they require to encourage children in their care to thrive, and be able to access funds to fulfil their learning and development needs.
- Fostering services should consider tailored and collaborative recruitment strategies to recruit specifically to meet the needs of children locally; including providing homes for as long as children need and where they are able to maintain relationships with their siblings and wider friends and family where appropriate.
- All fostering services should actively engage with, consult and listen to their foster carers to ensure continuous service improvements and the retention of high quality and experienced foster carers.
- Fostering services should engage with their foster carers to understand what they need to support their mental health and how these needs are going to be met. Learning can be taken from other sectors such as the support offered to adult social care workers following the pandemic.

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