

The logo for The Fostering Network, consisting of an orange square with the text "The Fostering Network" in white. The background of the entire page is a light gray grid of small plus signs.

The  
Fostering  
Network

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State of the  
Nation's Foster Care  
2019 summary report

## About the State of the Nation's Foster Care

Three-quarters of looked after children in the UK are being cared for by foster families. This means that improving the outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care. Foster carers are best placed to tell us about how foster care is working for the children they look after and highlighting the areas that need to be improved. The Fostering Network regularly conducts an in-depth survey of foster carers throughout the UK and we publish our State of the Nation report based on the survey findings.

In 2018 our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as placement stability, training and support for carers, and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 4,037 responses, which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers across the UK. We would like to thank all those foster carers who took the time to complete the survey to share their views and experiences of fostering.

The Fostering Network will use the survey findings to influence the foster care agenda and create change through bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers. We will work with key stakeholders to advocate for the report's recommendations to be implemented in all four countries of the UK, with the ultimate aim of ensuring all fostered children are given the best possible care.

To read the full report, please visit [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn](https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn)

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Over the past few years, our State of the Nation report has become recognised as the most comprehensive insight into foster carers' views of fostering in the UK. We hope that the publication of this latest report will be of use to policy makers in creating positive change, fostering services in benchmarking your own activity, and foster carers in understanding how your own experiences compare with others. And yet as you read the very clear messages from foster carers about the lack of support, training, respect and remuneration they receive – many of which are repeated from our last survey – you might join me in feeling a sense of frustration that little seems to have moved on over the last two years.

We have openly expressed our disappointment in the lack of vision demonstrated in the reviews that have taken place across the UK over the last couple of years and we believe that these reviews have too often failed to tackle the primary challenges facing fostering – systemic issues, support for children and young people, and the treatment of foster carers. In particular, we feel that the voices of foster carers have largely been ignored.

We are increasingly frustrated by the inertia of decision makers across the UK. We – everyone involved in fostering – need this to be a year of action. This report, and the lessons it draws from the 4,000 foster carers who took our survey, particularly reinforces the need for urgent changes to the support, terms and conditions for foster carers.

We will, of course, be working with and urging governments and other policy makers across all four countries to implement the recommendations in this report. We believe these recommendations are important steps towards ensuring that foster carers and the children and young people they are caring for are supported by a fostering system that is fit for purpose. //

**Kevin Williams**  
**Chief Executive, The Fostering Network**  
**February 2019**

## Foster carer profile

A total of **4,037** foster carers from across the UK responded to our 2018 State of the Nation survey.

The **typical foster carer in the UK** based on survey findings:

- is aged between 45 and 54
- is female
- is fostering with their partner
- currently has one or two children in placement
- has no birth children currently at home.

### Key findings

- Since 2016 there has been an increase, from 40 to 42%, of foster carers aged between 55 and 74, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of carers aged below 54. This continues a trend from our 2014 survey indicating that the foster carer workforce is getting older.
- More than half (54%) of foster carers said that they would like to offer a home to more children but were unable to do so. Of those who said yes to this, more than a third (35%) said that it was due to a lack of housing capacity.

#### About the respondents:

England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	Elsewhere
<b>74%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>1%</b>

Male	Female	Nine out of 10 foster carers who responded are <b>between the ages of 35 and 64</b>	The most <b>common age range being 45-54</b>
<b>17%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>40%</b>

<b>70%</b>	<b>30%</b>
of respondents foster for a <b>local authority or trust</b>	for an <b>independent fostering provider (IFP) or independent voluntary provider (IVP)</b>

	The number of <b>fostered children currently in placement:</b>				
	None	One	Two	Three	Four or more
<b>57%</b> of foster carers have <b>no birth children living in the family home</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>3%</b>

## Status and authority

A foster carer is a key member of the team around the child and often, as the person who lives with and looks after the child on a day-to-day basis, the one who knows and understands them best.

Despite this, foster carers often have the least authority out of all those in the team supporting the child. Placing authorities<sup>1</sup>, which are the corporate parent, do not always recognise the role of foster carers and therefore do not delegate day-to-day responsibility and decision making accordingly.

In the last two years fostering has enjoyed extra attention, both in the media and from decision makers in legislatures across the UK. Significantly, the Westminster Government has recently made a concerted attempt to replace the term 'foster carer' with 'foster parent'. This is a backwards step that serves only to undermine the complex role of foster carers and risks further marginalisation of the workforce. Therefore, we felt it was important in this year's State of the Nation survey to have some focus on the realities and challenges facing foster carers in their day-to-day work, and how they may differ from those facing parents.

It is important to be clear about three things: by looking at these challenges we are not making light of the role of parents in our society, nor are we implying that foster care is not also about parenting. Nor – most importantly – are we intending in any way to demonise looked after children. However it is naïve to ignore the fact that the trauma experienced by many children before they came into foster care may impact upon their mental health, wellbeing or behaviour. Furthermore, it must be recognised that those tasked with looking after these children in a family setting, helping them to recover and thrive, require specific and enhanced skills, support, and training – above and beyond that of a parent – in order to do their job to the best of their ability and with the most successful outcomes.

It is also important to emphasise that while foster carer is the appropriate job title it does not preclude individual fostered children calling their foster carers by whatever term or name that they like, as each will build their own personal relationships.

“ I feel we are only classed as “professionals” when we are agreeing with everyone else, but if we are not in agreement then we are ignored – especially by children’s social workers. ”

<sup>1</sup> Placing authority refers to the authority with the corporate parent responsibility for placing and supporting children in a foster home. In England, Wales and Scotland this will be the local authority or children's trust, and in Northern Ireland it will be the Health and Social Care Trust.

## Key findings

- Just under half (48%) of carers say they are supporting a child with mental health needs who is not accessing specialised support.
- When asked about the issues and challenges faced in the past 24 months, 50% of respondents said they had looked after a fostered child who has either:
  - caused violence in their home
  - self-harmed
  - gone missing from the home; or
  - been involved with the police.
- Just over a quarter of foster carers (26%) say it is not clear what day-to-day decisions they have the authority to make.
- When foster carers were asked if they felt able to make the decisions delegated to them they answered:
  - Short-term foster carers: always/usually 65%
  - Long-term foster carers: always/usually 79%
- It is shocking that a significant number of long-term foster carers still feel unable to make day-to-day decisions that have been delegated to them.
- When foster carers were asked when authority is not delegated, does the children's social worker respond in a timely manner?
  - Always/usually 49%
  - Sometimes/rarely/never 51%
- These figures indicate a clear delay in the system at a local level which ultimately results in fostered children being prevented from fully participating in normal family, school and social activities.

In the past 24 months...

**50%**

of foster carers have looked after a child who has either: had involvement with [the police](#), [self-harmed](#), caused [violence](#) in their home, or [run away](#)



**48%**

of foster carers are supporting a child with [mental health needs](#) who is not accessing specialised support



**26%** of respondents say it is not clear what [day-to-day decisions](#) they have the authority to make

- While it is encouraging that 79% of foster carers feel that they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team by their supervising social worker (this has held steady since 2016), it is concerning that 17% do not. Moreover, when it came to the child's social worker, the number of respondents who feel they are treated as an equal member of the team dropped to a worrying 58%.

### Recommendation for governments and the wider sector

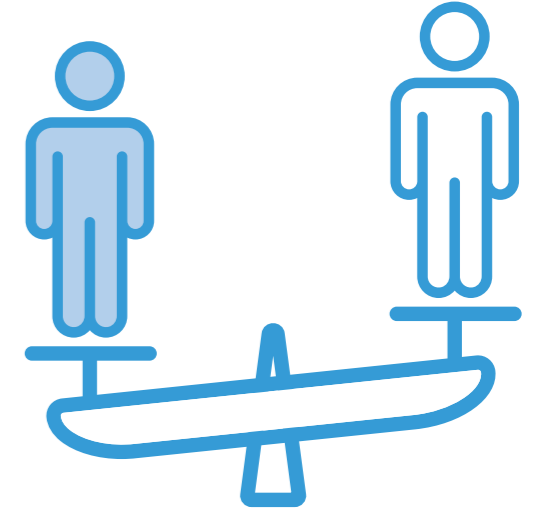
- The foster carer role should be recognised by all those involved in the children's sector as a key member of the team around the child. Language is key to reflecting status, and therefore we recommend that the term foster carer is universally acknowledged and used as the correct title that reflects this role.

In general, do you feel treated as an [equal and valued member of the team](#) around the child by the following?

Supervising social workers **79%** said yes

Health professionals **81%** said yes

Children's social workers **58%** said yes



### Recommendations for placing authorities and fostering services<sup>2</sup>

- Foster carers should be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views should always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers should be enabled to make everyday decisions that mean that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family.
- It should be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers should deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'fostering service' refers to both local authority or trust and independent fostering providers (England, Northern Ireland and Wales) or independent voluntary providers (Scotland).

## Training

Foster carers tell us that the children and young people they foster have a highly complex set of needs due to the trauma experienced prior to coming into care.

There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers to meet these needs, and yet there is no defined learning and development framework for foster carers that could help address this. This means the provision and take up of learning and development by foster carers is varied across the UK.

The training gaps highlighted below are a clear indication of the specialised role of foster carers.

### Key findings

- There has been a marked increase since 2016, from 46% to 59%, in the proportion of carers reporting that they have an agreed training plan in place for the next 12 months.
- There is a slight improvement since 2016 of carers feeling the training provided helped with their fostering from 82% to 86%.
- The top five training gaps identified by carers are therapeutic parenting, behaviour management, mental health, specialised first aid and attachment.



of foster carers have an agreed annual training plan in place

### Recommendation for governments

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.

### Recommendation for fostering services

- All foster carers should have an agreed annual training plan that addresses both the standard and specialised training required to meet the needs of the children they are caring for.

## Support

Fostering is an immensely rewarding role but it can often be challenging. Therefore, the formal support foster carers receive at an organisational level and the informal support from their family, friends and peers is crucial and can make a difference to the stability and success of placements.

### Key findings

- The two lowest performing categories for support were out of hours and short break/respice. Only 44% of foster carers felt that their out of hours support was excellent or good and only 37% of carers felt they received excellent or good short break/respice support.
- Foster carers have a more positive perception of formal support at an individual level from their supervising social worker (70% saying excellent or good) than the support from their fostering service (53% saying excellent or good).
- Only 39% of foster carers rated support from the child's placing authority as excellent or good. This finding supports the often reported disconnect between foster carers and children's social workers which can reduce the effectiveness of the placement.

### Recommendations for fostering services

- 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 provide a dedicated out of hours fostering support service for carers and ensure access to short break/respice provision as required.



of foster carers feel that out of hours support is excellent or good



of foster carers feel they receive excellent or good short break/respice support

The percentage of foster carers who rate support as good or excellent from:

their supervising social worker **70%**

their child's placing authority **39%**

their fostering service in general **53%**

## Stability

Stability means ensuring that every child in care is found the right placement as soon as possible and that the placing authority supports the placement to ensure that it lasts for as long as the child needs it.

Where this is with a foster family, this means that both the child and foster family should be offered all the support and help they need to make the relationship successful. Although some placement moves may be in the best interests of a child, we believe that too many looked after children are experiencing multiple moves and placement instability.

We are concerned that some of the decisions to end a placement are not in the best interests of the child and that independent scrutiny over placement decisions is not being routinely applied. There are regulations in place in England and Wales which state a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and the views of all concerned have been taken into account. However, we believe these are not being routinely adhered to. Such regulations are not in place at all in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Research suggests a child's psychological and emotional wellbeing can be compromised every time they have an unplanned move, and placement instability often contributes to a range of poor achievements, including poorer educational outcomes, breakdown of relationships with trusted adults and the inability to make and maintain such vital relationships in the future.



Of those foster carers who had an unplanned placement end...

**only 21%** say it was preceded by a **review**

### Key findings

- Over the past three years one-third of foster carers said they have experienced an unplanned placement ending when they felt it was not in the child's best interests.
- Of those carers who have experienced an unplanned placement ending that they felt was not in the child's best interest, only 21% could say for sure that it was preceded by a review. This is a drop from 30% in 2016 which could indicate the start of a worrying trend.
- Over two-thirds (68%) of foster carers were not given the opportunity to feed referral information into the next placement.

### Recommendation for governments

- A framework should be in place in all four countries to independently scrutinise end of placement decisions to ensure they are in the best interests of the child.

### Recommendations for placing authorities

- Independent scrutiny of placement decisions and endings should increase.
- Foster carers should always be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition.
- Guidance should be introduced to ensure that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them.

**“ Foster carers are gardeners: we will always protect and nurture, so that we can try to give good solid roots for those who have gone through difficult times. ”**

## Finances

There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering. The **allowance** is designed to cover the costs of caring for a child. All foster carers in the UK receive an allowance. The other component is a **fee** which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. Not all foster carers receive a fee.

National minimum allowances are established in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. We have long campaigned for placing authorities and independent fostering/voluntary providers to ensure they meet these national minimum levels. We have been successful in this area as only a very small minority of these fostering services now provide less than the national minimum, and we continue to push those that fall below this level to increase their allowances. Despite years of campaigning, however, there is still no recommended minimum allowance for foster carers in Scotland, although the Scottish Government is currently considering its introduction.

In contrast to allowances there is no minimum recommended fee for foster carers in any country of the UK, nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services. Due to the lack of a framework around fee payments the amount received across the UK varies widely.

### Key findings

- 59% of foster carers feel the fostering allowance and the expenses they can claim do not meet the full costs of looking after their fostered children. This is a slight increase on the 58% from 2016, and we therefore have continued concern that allowances are still not meeting the full costs of foster care.
- 90% of foster carers agree that carers should be paid a fee for their fostering work. 60% of foster carers say that they receive a fee, a slight increase from 2016 when this was 57%.
- Only 9% of foster carers are paid at or above the equivalent of the national living wage for a 40-hour week.

### Recommendations for governments

- Governments across the UK should review the minimum levels of fostering allowances and related expenses to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
- The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance.
- Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills.

### Recommendations for fostering services

- Fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.
- Foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and expertise, preferably via a tiered payment scheme, and carers should receive retainer fees between placements.
- The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about the allowances and fees they are receiving.
- Allowance and fee levels should be publicly available.



59%

of foster carers say that their **fostering allowance** and expenses they can claim do not meet the full costs of looking after their fostered child



60%

of respondents **receive a fee**



**Only 9%** of foster carers receive a fee at or above **the equivalent of the National Living Wage** for a 40-hour week

## Transferring fostering service

While foster carers are self-employed for taxation purposes, they can only foster for one fostering service at a time (except in Scotland, where they can foster for more than one in certain circumstances).

Moving to another fostering service usually requires foster carers to fully repeat the same approval and assessment process again, which severely reduces their portability. Transfer protocols guide the way in which fostering services should manage the movement of foster carers between fostering services. There are currently transfer protocols in place in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland but we believe they are not routinely followed and applied in practice.

### Key findings

- 11% of foster carers wanted to move fostering service recently but did not do so. The top two reasons given for not moving were:
  - too much time and effort to go through the assessment and approval process again
  - their long-term placement would have to leave.
- 92% of the 318 carers who did move had to redo the whole approval process when they transferred, which took on average six months to complete.

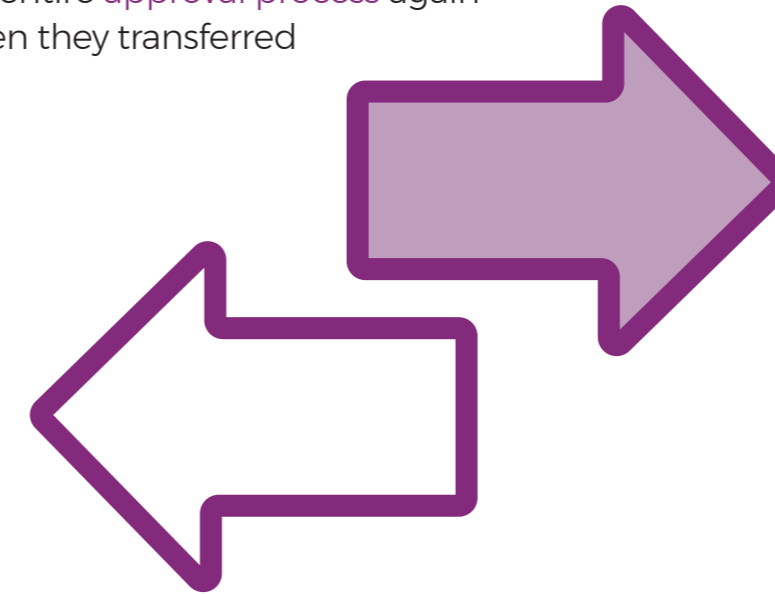
### Recommendation for governments

- A central register of foster carers should be introduced in each country, which would greatly enhance portability of the foster care workforce by providing a licensing approach. When a foster carer decided to move to another fostering service, the new fostering service would be able to carry out a simple check of the central register to confirm their approval status and then would only need to carry out local checks and interviews.

### Recommendation for placing authorities

- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.

**92%** of foster carers who have moved service had to go through the entire **approval process** again when they transferred



**“**  
 We had to redo everything! References from family and friends, they looked at our bank accounts, they asked intimate questions about our marriage and family relationships... they went through the whole invasive process again from scratch. **”**



## Approval range

Foster carers will usually be given terms of approval which set out the number and age of children and any other information about the type of foster care that they are approved to provide.

Over time the foster carer may request a change in their approval range or the fostering service may suggest a change. This and previous surveys highlight a trend of foster carers being pressured to take children from outside their approval range and then not being given additional support and training.

The high percentage of foster carers being asked to take children from outside their approval range could be an indication that placing authorities are struggling to recruit and retain the right pool of foster carers to meet the needs of the current care population.

### Key findings

- Just over half of foster carers (51%) have been asked to take children outside their age approval range.
- Around a third (30%) of foster carers have been asked to take children from outside their approved type of fostering.
- More than three-quarters of foster carers (78%) were not given additional support or training if taking a child outside of their approval range.

### Recommendation for governments

- Regulatory and inspection frameworks should be designed and implemented which require placing authorities to carry out a needs analysis of their local looked after children population to inform targeted recruitment and commissioning.

### Recommendation for placing authorities

- Each placing authority should conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform a targeted recruitment and commissioning strategy for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population.

### Recommendations for fostering services

- Foster carers should be advised in writing of their terms of approval. This will make clear the type of fostering placement they will provide, and this clarity should also be in their foster carer agreement.
- Where foster carers agree to a change of approval, they should receive additional training and support as required.

More than

3/4

of foster carers are not given any additional support or training if taking a child outside of their [approval range](#)

“

It often felt like they were just rushing to make a placement and not necessarily looking at the best set up possible – the sticky plaster effect.”

## Allegations

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 acted towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. The majority of allegations will be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

Once an allegation is made, carers are not treated as other professionals; they are too often left not knowing timescales, not being given access to independent support and having financial support removed. In contrast, their social work colleagues would be afforded HR, legal and emotional support should an allegation be made against them.

### Key findings

- Only 58% of foster carers have received allegations training. This represents a slight improvement on the 56% in 2016 but is still disappointing.
- More than a third (35%) of fostering households have experienced one or more allegation, up 2% from 2016.
- Following their allegation, two-thirds (67%) did not receive independent support. This is unchanged from 2016.



**67%** of respondents did not receive **independent support** following an allegation

### Recommendations for fostering services

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales. Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.
- Foster carers should be given access to independent support throughout the allegation process.

”

It was very traumatising for me and my children. I was not aware of where to go and get advice or support. They removed the young person from my home and told me that they were going to investigate and that I may end up in court.

For two weeks we did not hear anything from the local authority. Then they phoned and told me that they found that the young person had made a false allegation... so they were now not taking any further action. ”

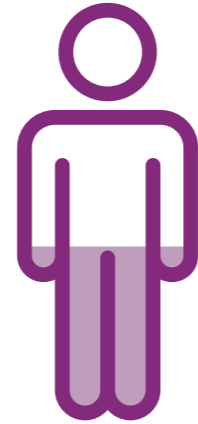
## Views and attitudes on fostering

In this report we have summarised how foster care is a complex and sometimes challenging job. It is important also to understand what motivates people to do this work, whether they would recommend it to other people, and how they think fostering can be improved.

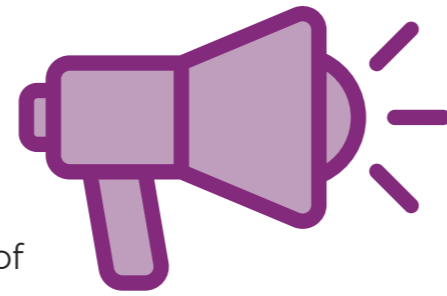
### Key findings

- *What makes you continue to foster?* We gave a list of 11 reasons, from which foster carers could choose as many or as few as they liked. The top three reasons chosen were the same as 2016:
  - I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care 89%.
  - I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family 72%.
  - I really enjoy working with the children 70%.
- Would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?
  - 55% said yes.
- When do you think you will stop fostering?
  - 41% said they will continue for 'as long as I am able'.
- What one thing would you change to make foster care better? This was an open answer question, and the top three themes that emerged were:
  - improve pay
  - be treated more as a professional
  - receive better support.

These three themes remain unchanged from 2016 and are clearly reflective of the issues we have highlighted in this report. The word cloud to the right made from the text of the thousands of answers to this question clearly shows that children are at forefront of foster carers' minds because, ultimately, better foster care will result in better outcomes for children, something to which we all aspire.



**41%** of foster carers say they will continue for 'as long as I am able'



**55%** of foster carers would recommend fostering to others who may be considering it



## Appendix: methodology

The State of the Nation Foster Care survey was launched in July 2018 and ran for two months. The survey was conducted online and promoted to foster carers via our website and magazine and through social media. In total 4,037 foster carers from across the UK took part in the survey, representing just over 4% of the estimated number of individual foster carers (approximately 91,100). This was a significant increase over the 2,500 respondents we received in the 2016 survey.

This summary report focuses on the key UK findings; see the main report ([thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sotn)) for a full analysis of all the data, including respondent rates and key trends from previous survey findings, and a comparison by country and type of fostering provider.

When 'placing authorities' are referenced in the report, the term refers to the authority with the corporate parent responsibility for placing and supporting children in a foster home. In England, Wales and Scotland this will be the local authority or children's trust, and in Northern Ireland it will be the Health and Social Care Trust. The term 'fostering service' refers to both local authorities/trusts and independent and voluntary fostering providers.

The Fostering Network repeats the survey every two years in order to track progress or changes in foster carers' attitudes to, and experiences of, the various issues they face.

## 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 fostered children. 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.

[thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

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