



Children's social care: stable homes, built on love

Response from The Fostering Network, May 2023

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone 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.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and 450 organisational members, both local authorities (LA) and independent fostering providers (IFP), which cover nearly 77 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

We are members of The Alliance for Children in Care and Care Leavers, a coalition of third-sector organisations supporting care-experienced children and young people across England. The Alliance wrote a letter to the previous Children's Minister, setting out eight key areas we believe should be prioritised when the Government begin to implement recommendations from the care review. We support the eight principles laid out in the letter and hope that you consider these, alongside our full response below. You can find the letter [here](#).

The Fostering Network is responding to this consultation with a focus on foster carers. We have laid out this response into three sections: what we support from the strategy, what we think could go further and what our members feel is missing from the response.

What we support

Retention and recruitment

We welcome the £27 million Government investment over the next two years to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers. This is the biggest investment in fostering in decades and the recognition of the importance of retention alongside recruitment is vital.

We currently estimate that a further 6,000 foster carers are needed in England to be able to meet the demand, so are pleased to see the Governmental focus on wraparound support services and targeted media campaigns.

We also welcome the plans to further embed the Mockingbird model in the North East of England, with the intention of wider roll out, to support stability for children and retention of foster carers. Mockingbird is a global, award winning and pioneering programme and the investment demonstrates recognition of the transformational effect Mockingbird has on the lives of children and young people and the foster carers looking after them. We hope the Government will continue their commitment to this programme and make Mockingbird available in every local authority.

Whilst Mockingbird has a significant effect on the retention of foster carers, and stability of loving homes for children, it is not a suitable model of support for every foster family. In addition, improving retention is a much broader challenge (e.g. having sufficient pay, feeling respected and valued) than the Mockingbird programme can solve alone.

Delegated Authority

We are delighted that the Government has listened to our recommendation and that guidance will be updated to set clear expectations that foster carers should have delegated authority by default.

In order for children in care to have the best possible experience, foster carers should be empowered to take appropriate and timely decisions about the children in their care. The updated guidance should follow child-focused policy and practice, similar to that introduced [in Wales](#), whereby decisions foster carers have the authority to make are formally agreed and communicated clearly at the outset of the placement and foster carers are given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care.

Independent Reviewing Officer and independent advocacy

We welcome the decision not to replace the Independent Reviewing Officers and Regulation 44 visitors. The Fostering Network strongly believe that we must strengthen how children's voices can be heard within the care system and ensure that children have trusted adult relationships whom they can turn to, who can offer a constant and supportive relationship, having their best interests at heart.

We support the review of the effectiveness of both roles. It is important the Government look carefully at the statutory functions undertaken by IROs and Section 44 Visitors, as well as the relationships those fulfilling these roles establish with children and how this can be improved to ensure these roles truly preform independently and with a caseload that allows time and resource to be able to provide the role effectively.

What could go further

Staying put

We strongly believe that being able to benefit from living in a family environment post-18 is in a young person's best interest and can improve their successful transition into adulthood. [On average, a](#)

[young person doesn't leave home until the age of 24](#), so an extension of Staying Put to 23 is welcomed and we hope that it can be implemented into legislation as soon as possible.

However, we want to raise the number of issues with the implementation of the Staying Put duties, that have resulted in variability in policy, practice and participation at a local level. There is still a range of financial and logistical obstacles getting in the way of realising the full potential of this policy.

Since the inception of the scheme, all key stakeholders have highlighted that funding is inadequate and that this is the root cause of many of the implementation issues. Foster carers entering onto the scheme experience a loss of income from fostering when entering a Staying Put arrangement. Unlike for foster care, there are no minimum post-18 allowances and levels vary greatly by local authority and our [allowances surveys](#) show many fostering services reduce the allowance given to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that the shortfall is made up from the young person claiming housing benefits.

Other implementation issues include continued approval as a foster carer. There is uncertainty among fostering services to recommend continued 'suitability to foster' for carers who do not have space/capacity to offer fostering placements in addition to post-18 arrangements. Foster carers are often left in a position of having to seek re-approval when the young person leaves the post-18 care arrangement; this is a lengthy process which is both unnecessary and costly and can result in foster carers prematurely leaving the workforce.

As part of the process of extending the Staying Put scheme, the Government should carry out a full cross-departmental review of how Staying Put to remove barriers to successful implementation. The Government should also ensure that Staying Put is properly costed and then fully funded.

Peer support and short breaks

It is vital that foster carers have sufficient support such that they can provide the best possible care to children. Support foster carers receive largely comes in two forms. The first being the formal support foster carers receive at an organisational level, including from social workers and out of hours support services, and the second being informal support they receive from their family, friends and peers. Both are crucial and can make a big difference to the lived experience and outcomes for the children they care for and plays a key role in the stability and success of placements.

Foster carers may need regular breaks to support them in their role, and often it is these breaks which help maintain placements. Such breaks can also help children and young people when they are planned and with someone known to them. We welcome the Government's commitment to Mockingbird in the strategy response, which provides an essential support network for foster carers. However, Mockingbird does not suit every foster carer or the child they are caring for and is not currently available in every local authority. All foster carers should have a support network of known trusted adults who can offer natural short breaks for children and support to foster carers.

Services should set out the expectation of support networks for short breaks/respite at the recruitment stage and include any assessment of these identified support networks as an integral part of the fostering process. Where foster carers do not have a pre-existing support network available, the fostering service should ensure they can access one.

Allowances

We are delighted the Government listened to our 'The Cost of Fostering' campaign and recognised the very real dilemma that many foster carers are facing over whether they could continue to foster as costs were rising. The historic increase of the national minimum allowance by 12.43 per cent is welcomed and will make an immediate difference to children and young people in foster care.

This a positive step in the right direction, however, we are aware that this does not fully cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care and will still leave many foster carers out of pocket.

We are proposing a new fairer funding framework for children and young people in foster care. We have reviewed the levels of foster care allowances using up to date evidence, with support from Pro Bono Economics, to ensure our revised proposed allowances cover the full cost of caring for a child.

	(0-4)	(5-10)	(11-15)	(16+)
The Fostering Network's - Cost of Fostering levels	£215	£258	£324	£324
London 2023/24	£179 - £182	£203	£232	£270
South East 2023/24	£171 - £177	£195	£223	£260
Rest of England 2023/24	£154 - £159	£175	£199	£233

The above Cost of Fostering figures are based on the [Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom](#) which produces budgets for different household types, based on what members of the public think you need for a minimum acceptable standard of living in the UK. This figure is then multiplied by 50 per cent to account for additional costs attributed to caring for a child in care. This multiplier is taken from Nina Oldfield's '[The Adequacy of Foster Care Allowances](#)', which identifies the additional costs of caring for a child in foster care.

The proposed allowance levels provide foster carers with a level of allowance that truly covers the full cost of caring for a child in foster care and ensures foster carers are not out of pocket for the vital role they do providing loving, secure and nurturing family environments where children can thrive.

Although we are delighted foster care allowances have received a significant increase, we will continue to campaign for allowances that cover the full cost of caring for a child in foster care.

Permanence

There has been a legal definition of long-term foster care in England since 2015, which is welcome, but we now need to consider how long-term foster care sits in the broader permanence framework.

Other permanence options, such as special guardianship orders (SGOs) and adoption, are legal orders and can only be granted, or ended, by the courts. All decisions on long-term foster care sit within local authority children's services departments. The implications of this can be placement drift rather than early decisions being made which results in children staying with foster carers for years by accident rather than design.

This lack of legal permanence leads to children in otherwise stable long-term relationships feel less secure and more vulnerable to disruption, in a way that those living in adoptive families or under SGOs do not.

The Care Review found "Permanence" for children means "security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging". This is not connected to legal status, and one route to permanence is not necessarily better than any other. When making a decision about permanency for a child decision makers need to be clear why a child is being placed in long-term foster care as opposed to SGO or adoption. The key difference between long-term foster care and other permanency options is the child remains in the care system which offers a protective and nurturing environment, remains in a family setting, is able to remain in contact with their birth family and is afforded rights to therapeutic services, access to social work support for the child and foster carer and care leaver entitlements.

The Fostering Network wants to see long-term foster care being given equal status and consideration in permanence options, and for long-term fostering relationships to be respected, valued and actually seen as permanent as adoptive and special guardianship placements are.

What's missing from the strategy?

Employment status

When we surveyed our members, employment status was the top thing highlighted as being missed from the Care review. Foster carers in the UK have a unique role within the children's sector; they are the only members who work with children in their own homes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and welcome them into their own families. Some are paid for the work that they do, whilst others are not. All are supervised, work within a tight regulatory framework and are expected to undertake training and ongoing professional development. Yet despite this, they currently have ambiguous employment status. Most are considered self-employed for tax purposes at least, but unlike other self-employed people, they don't enjoy the freedom of being able to work with lots of different organisations, as they can only register with one fostering service at a time.

The Education Committee stated in their [final report on the fostering inquiry](#) in December 2017 that they found it 'unsatisfactory that foster carers are subject to the responsibilities of self-employment status without the benefits,' and their recommendation was that 'the Government must state whether self-employment is the appropriate employment status for foster carers'.

This call for clarity was reiterated by Lord Justice Underhill in the [Court of Appeal ruling on unions for foster carers](#) in 2021 who said, "the Government may wish at least to consider whether it would make sense for it to consider seeking now to introduce bespoke legislative provision for the position of foster carers, which would either preserve the present exclusion or provide for rights appropriate to their very unusual role,"

- **Recommendation: The Government needs to take forward the Education Select Committee's recommendation to look at what is the most appropriate employment status for foster carers.**

Allegations

It is vitally important that all allegations are investigated and that children are listened to, but the uncertainty and lack of support that many foster carers experience during the process can and should be avoided. Allegations are the second most common reason why foster carers call our helplines asking for advice around fostering.

Allegations have been missed throughout the review, despite it being a key issue raised by foster carers during consultation and impacting on foster carer retention. The previous review into fostering, Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers' fostering stocktake report, [Foster Care in England](#), also did not support the suggestion from the fostering community that allegations were a key issue for foster carers and felt the only action that was needed was for local authorities to follow existing guidance and for carers to be reassured that they would be supported through the process.

Instead of the intended outcome the guidance aims for, our [State of the Nation 2021 thematic report](#) found that fostering households are experiencing placement instability, a lack of information, protracted timescales and a lack of emotional support for foster carers. Foster carers are being left feeling abandoned and a number of foster carers are leaving fostering immediately and others reducing their capacity to foster as they do not wish to look after other children. 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.

The intention of current guidance covering allegations in foster care is to enable children to feel safe and ensure their 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.

- **Recommendation: The gap between policy and practice must be closed 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.**

Fee payments

Foster carers provide specialist round-the-clock care, ensuring that children are nurtured and loved, yet not all foster carers receive an income from this role to support themselves (otherwise known as a fee payment).

There is currently no minimum recommended fee for foster carers nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services. Our State of the Nation 2021 survey found that even when foster carers do receive a fee, the majority receive far below the national living wage per calendar month for a 40-hour week, despite many foster carers not combining fostering with other work. Foster carers are the only professional group working with children which is unpaid.

Additionally, most foster carers only receive a fee payment when they have a child in foster care living with them and therefore do not have a stable income from fostering. If all foster carers received regular fee payments, regardless of whether a child was placed with them or not, they would be provided with a stable income. This in turn would play an important role in the recruitment of new

foster carers, the retention of foster carers and be a recognition of how their skills and expertise are of value to their fostering service. Without pay, the demographic pool of foster carers will be inevitably limited to those who can afford to foster without fee payments or minimal fee payments.

If fostering services are able to recruit the number of foster carers they need with the skills that are required to be able to transform children's lives, levels of pay must be set that are comparable with others in the children's workforce.

- **Recommendation: All foster carers should, 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.**

Learning and development framework

Children and young people coming into the care system have an increasingly complex set of needs. This is due to their diverse experiences, for example having experienced child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gang involvement or arriving in the UK as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers to meet these needs, and yet there is no nationally defined learning and development framework for foster carers that could address this.

A standardised and accredited framework for training for foster care would set out the areas in which foster carers must demonstrate or develop knowledge and skills and would provide the framework for services to develop their foster carer training programme. However, standardisation does not need to lead to a lack of flexibility in training. There will always be a need for foster carers to undertake specialised training relating to the demands of their specific situation and the needs of the children they are caring for. Personal development plans should be able to address both the standard and the specialised training.

It is not just about training for foster carers: other professionals should have knowledge of foster care woven into their own training and development processes. This is because foster carers are a key member of the team around the child, often knowing the child best, yet are often not treated in that way. Children's social workers (CSWs) need to understand fostering and foster carers much better, so that they can develop realistic expectations and the skills to support them, as well as being a voice and advocate for the child. Some children's services already do this however our State of the Nation 2021 data suggests improvements are still needed. CSW need to build relationships with foster carers and view them as a tool through which to meet the needs of the child. There is also a need to ensure that all stakeholders in the team around the child understand fostering and the role of foster carers, including education and health professionals, police and commissioners.

- **Recommendation: Implement a standardised and accredited pre-and post-approval training framework for foster carers in England. It should set out the areas in which foster carers must demonstrate or develop knowledge and skills and provide the framework for services to develop their foster carer training programme.**

National register of foster carers

The Fostering Network believe that a national register of foster carers is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions through allowing increased portability of the workforce, creating greater public recognition of the role and increasing public protection by

having a central list of all who meet, and continue to meet, the requirements of being an approved foster carer, as well as those who were deemed unsuitable to foster. Improving foster carers' terms and conditions will also lead to better care and outcomes for children as foster carers will feel more supported, valued and confident in their roles.

To be clear, we are not talking about placement matching or fostering recruitment registers, both of which we believe are local activities and are best carried out by local authorities and fostering services.

There are a number of ways in which a register could be set up and delivered, with a range of activities in or out of its remit. The Fostering Network's preferred model is that of a centrally held list of all approved foster carers, with registration renewed each year by the fostering service. This means that assessment and review of foster carers would still be carried out locally by fostering services according to a set of national criteria and accredited training. Read our full position [here](#).

- **Recommendation: The introduction of a national register of foster carers in England to improve the status of the foster carer in the team around the child, close current safeguarding loopholes and increase portability of the workforce.**

A National leadership board for fostering

The Fostering Network is calling for the creation of a National Leadership Board for Fostering to sit alongside the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB).

- **Recommendation: A leadership board for fostering would provide a strategic oversight mechanism to tackle current issues in the sector, drive performance improvements, identify and mainstream innovative practice and measure the impact and outcomes of fostering. This would also create a more consistent experience for foster carers and remove the postcode lottery they currently face.**

Conclusion

The initial response from across the children's sector has been that the £200 million committed by the Government falls far short of the £2 billion Josh MacAlister called for and that regional pathfinders to test reforms in a particular area before rolling them out more widely across the country, do not go far enough. These criticisms are valid, as set out above, there are many areas that need to go further to improve issues within the sector and more specifically foster care. It is important the Government recognises that the retention of foster carers is a broader issue and Mockingbird cannot fix this on its own. The status of foster carers must be improved, and they need to be treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child, receive allowances that fully cover the cost of caring and a fee that recognises their time, skills and experience.

Overall, we welcome the Government's focus and commitment to improve fostering in its response and there are key improvements which will make an immediate difference to the lives of children and young people in foster care. Even though foster carers provide stable and loving homes for 70 per cent of children in care, foster care has been overlooked and underfunded for too long. We fully support the Government's vision of placing love and stability at the heart of children's social care, but in order to make this a reality and effectively address the issues facing the sector, the Government's pledged investment should be a starting point and the many issues missing from the strategy

addressed. It is vitally important that going forward as the strategy is implemented, the voices of foster carers and children and young people in foster care are at the heart of any decisions made about them.

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