



The plan to deliver the promise: Briefing from The Fostering Network

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people, and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK.

In Scotland, we are proud to have 100 per cent organisational membership of local authorities and independent voluntary fostering providers and 97 per cent of fostering households in membership. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Introduction

The Independent Care Review reports have been welcomed by many in the sector. The reports highlight key issues many children in care are actually experiencing and carefully encapsulates the voices of thousands of care experienced people. The case studies helped to bring to life the current 'care system', making it digestible and understandable to those who may previously have not known the realities many children and young people face.

The overall message to prioritise the protecting of relationships rather than protecting against harm is ambitious and commendable and something that needs to be addressed at every level of the 'care system'. We also commend putting the people who know the children and young people best at the centre of decision making about the child, rather than the person with the most qualifications or highest professional status.

Ensuring that the vision set out in the care promise becomes a reality is essential. It is the forthcoming plan that will determine whether or not the review will fundamentally improve the experience of children and young people and the people caring for them.

In addition to responding to the Engagement Form on The Promise website, the following document details The Fostering Network's views on the key areas of improvement needed to make foster care the best it can be for the children in care and foster carers. Our views are informed by our members through Fosterline Scotland and forums, as well as our latest [State of the Nation 2019](#) report and [State of Scotland's Foster Care](#) report also from 2019.

1. A national register of foster carers

The Promise states that 'Scotland should *consider* a national register for Foster Carers recognising that they care for children within their own home. That must operate in a supportive way that is aligned to the underlying values of how Scotland must care' (emphasis added, p.78).

We think that the plan should do more than consider a register. We believe that a register of foster carers, held by an external body, should be introduced in Scotland and would address three key issues in the fostering system:

1. The need to increase the status of foster carers in the team around the child,
2. The difficulty of foster carers moving from one service to another and,
3. The need for more robust safeguarding measures in the fostering sector.

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.

1.1 Status

Our *State of the Nation* (2019) survey found that less than two thirds (63 per cent) of foster carers in Scotland felt valued in the team around the child by the child's social worker, despite often being the person who knows the child best. These feelings of being undervalued and not treated as a professional were mirrored in *The Promise*, for example it is recommended that: '[d]ecision makers must listen to everyone relevant to children and families. There must be no barrier to people who are close to the child from sharing their views' (p. 33) and that 'Scotland's understanding of the workforce must primarily be about their role in terms of the degree of closeness of relationships they have with children, rather than their status as paid/unpaid or in terms of professional/voluntary' (p.97).

We believe a national register would improve the formal status of foster carers to allow the role to be more recognised and valued within the sector and by the general public. It would bring foster carers in line with other parts of the children's workforce who are registered, regulated and have an accredited pre- and post-approval training framework (this is covered in more detail below under the *Support and training* section). Completion of accredited training pre-approval would be required to get onto the register and ongoing training would have to be carried out to maintain that position.

1.2 Portability

We believe that in addition to improving the status and experience of foster carers, a register would also improve portability between fostering providers.

Our *State of Scotland's Foster Care* (2019) survey found that only 13 per cent of foster carers had moved to another service at the time of the questionnaire. Of those foster carers who had moved or were in the process of moving, the vast majority had to re-do the approval process and on average, across the UK, re-registration took 6 months. Significantly, an additional 13 per cent of respondents had wanted to move but had not moved for a variety of reasons, including concerns about the time and effort required to go through the assessment and approval process again and worries over the status of current long-term placements.

We believe making it easier for foster carers to move services would increase standards in terms of the support, training and respect given to foster carers. 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 national register to confirm their approval status and then would only need to carry out local checks

and interviews. It would place appropriate decisions with the fostering service – deciding if the carer met the needs of their service rather than making decisions on suitability to foster which have already been ascertained through the approval process. It could also aid in retaining good quality foster carers.

1.3 Safeguarding

The third benefit of a register is that it would address current safeguarding loopholes that currently can occur when a foster carer transfers fostering service. A national register would prevent carers who have had their approval removed by one service moving to another service without declaring it in the approval process, or by resigning from the previous service before their approval is removed because they are deemed no longer suitable to foster. Under our suggested model, when a prospective foster carer applies to a new fostering service, the fostering service can do a simple check on the register to see whether they have ever previously fostered.

The registration body would make final decisions on a foster carer's continued suitability to remain on the register. All qualifying determination decisions regarding someone's suitability to continue to be approved would have to be referred to the registration body by fostering service providers and that body would make the final decision. In relation to improving safeguarding within the system, foster carers, therefore, could be removed or refused entry to the register if: the foster carer does not meet the entry requirements; or the registration body makes a decision to deregister based on a referral from a fostering service.

The plan should include:

- Details on how and in what form a register of foster carers is going to be implemented in Scotland.

2. Foster carer pay

All foster carers receive a weekly fostering allowance from their fostering service when they have a child in placement, which is designed to cover the cost of caring for a child in foster care. This includes food, clothes, toiletries, travel and all other expenses incurred and varies depending on the age of the child. Some fostering providers in Scotland do offer supplements to the weekly allowance, for example, money for baby items, school trips and driving lessons, but there is a lack of transparency about these extras and there is no guaranteed minimum amount that foster carers will receive to cover the costs of looking after the children in their care.

The Fostering Network has been campaigning on foster care allowances for over 40 years. The Scottish Government remains the last government in the UK not to have minimum set allowances for foster carer despite one being promised in the 2016 Scottish National Party manifesto, our allowances survey showing that foster care allowances in Scotland vary considerably and the majority are not rising with inflation (*Scotland Foster Care Allowances Survey 2019-20, 2020*), and our *State of the Nation* (2019) survey finding that 60 per cent of foster carers in Scotland felt the allowances they received did not cover the full cost of looking after the child. The large geographical variation in fostering allowances leads to a postcode lottery when it comes to how much money is provided for caring for children in foster care. A national minimum allowance is an essential tool to offer all children in Scotland the basic level of care.

While foster carers in Scotland get a fee for their time, skills and experience, the amount varies considerably. We believe that all 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

and while any investigation is ongoing in relation to an allegation. We believe in this as, like *The Money* report states, the remuneration of care workers is profoundly disconnected from their social value.

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The Promise recognised that meeting all the needs of a child can be challenging. We stress that particularly in relation to the needs of those who have come into contact with the care system who may have experienced trauma and will need extra support. *The Promise* states that '[t]o provide the care that children require, foster carers must be sufficiently financially maintained' (p. 77). We strongly argue that this needs to be addressed more thoroughly in the plan.

The plan should include:

- The introduction of and funding for a national minimum fostering allowance that covers the true cost of looking after a child. A national minimum allowance is an essential tool to guide fostering services in offering a basic level of financial support to cover the cost of caring for children in foster care.
- Appropriate resource to ensure foster carers receive a fee payment for their time, skills and expertise, preferably via a tiered payment scheme.
- The introduction and funding of retainer fees for foster carers between placements and while any investigation is ongoing in relation to an allegation.

3. Relationships

The theme of relationships was clear and pertinent throughout the Independent Care Review and we absolutely agree that supporting caring and positive relationships are key within the 'care system'. The prevailing culture where relationships are not supported needs to be challenged. The relationship and bond that is developed between children in care and their foster carers are key to children's outcomes and to placement stability, a further protective factor to improving children's outcomes (*The Course of Inattention and Hyperactivity/Impulsivity Symptoms After Foster Placement*, 2010; *Disruptions in Foster Care*, 2007).

We lead on the Keep Connected campaign across the UK which calls on everyone - including governments, social work professionals, fostering services, foster carers and adopters - who play a part in enabling children and young people to move within, or out of, the care system to support them to maintain their most important relationships when it is in the child's best interest. (*Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On*, 2016).

The Promise stressed the importance of supporting 'not only sibling relationships... but cousins, step-siblings and a range of other relationships including former carers' (p.63) and that this can be achieved through ensuring that foster carers are aware that 'their primary purpose is to develop nurturing, patient, kind, compassionate, trusting and respectful relationships so that the children in their care feel loved and safe' (p. 77).

We are pleased to see that relationships with former foster carers will be included in the guidance to accompany the Children (Scotland) Bill. This is a vital step towards ensuring children and young

people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and that foster carers are enabled to support children they have previously cared for as they move home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process. The relationships foster carers form with children are essential to the development of the child and have an impact on the ability to form future positive relationships.

The plan should include:

- Additions to the Care Inspectorate inspection process that directly consider how children in care's relationships are being built and supported.
- Local authorities must ensure that contact between children and their former foster carers is encouraged and supported, challenging the prevailing culture where necessary.
- The development of the foster carer's role to maintain contact after a child moves on, and support for foster carers to carry this out.
- The adoption of the Keep Connected Principles¹ by all relevant parties and the embedding of them in their policies and practice accordingly.

4. Support and training

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. Additionally, foster carers tell us that the children and young people they foster require increasingly additional support, and children need carers who have an understanding of the impact of early trauma and are aware of the needs for the children they care for. There is a corresponding increased demand for foster carers who are trained to meet these needs.

4.1 Support

The State of Scotland's Foster Care consistently highlights support to foster carers as something that needs improving. Only 44 per cent of foster carers in Scotland rated support from the child's local 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. *The Promise* recognises that reflection, supervision and support must be recognised as an essential part of practice for anyone working with children (p.100). For foster carers, this needs to come from their fostering service and the child's placing authority and include short break provision and out of hours support.

Peer support should also be encouraged and facilitated. The Independent Care Review echoed this and stated that there should be 'places in every community for parents of young children to go for support and advice, to meet other local parents and to stay and play with their children' (p.49). Models like this exist and should be promoted throughout Scotland. The Mockingbird family model² is one example. Relationships are held central to the programme and the hub home builds strong connections with all those in the constellation, empowering families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate or lead to placement breakdown and increasing protective factors around children.

¹ The Fostering Network's Keep Connected Principles, available [here](#).

² Read more about [the Mockingbird family model](#).

4.2 Training

The Promise states that there must be a rethinking of learning and training in Scotland to create a well-supported workforce that can operate across disciplines. The Scotland learning and development standard for foster care was written in 2017. Its implementation, however, has been on hold pending the outcome of the care review. Now the review is published, we would encourage the implementation of this framework across Scotland. In addition, it is essential that knowledge of fostering is included in training for social workers to enable them to work more effectively with the primary carers of three-quarters of children looked after away from home and family in Scotland.

We are repeatedly told by foster carers that the support they receive needs to be improved. Through our *State of the Nation* (2019) survey, foster carers in Scotland reported that therapeutic parenting, behaviour management, mental health, specialised first aid and attachment were the top five training gaps that needed to be identified. This is echoed in *The Promise* that states that carers should have a clear understanding of trauma, and how to respond to and love children who have experienced deeply disturbing and distressing things (p.73). It is essential that foster carers feel properly supported and confident to perform their increasingly specialised role. The plan must identify further training gaps across the sector, including training on foster care to other professionals (including education, health and social work professionals), and implement training on these topics.

The plan should include:

- The introduction of tailored support for foster carers that takes into consideration the individual needs of the child they are caring for as well as the developmental stages of the child.
- Recommendations such that all services should provide clarity on the availability of short break provision and a dedicated, responsive out of hours fostering support service for carers. This support should be delivered as agreed.
- Peer support opportunities to be enabled and promoted at a local level.
- Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown, such as the Mockingbird Family Model and Fostering Community Champions³ should be further explored and invested in.
- A learning and development framework for foster carers to be implemented at a national level covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.
- Knowledge of fostering to be included in training for social workers to enable them to work more effectively with foster carers.
- The promotion of joint training opportunities for social workers and foster carers.

5. Recruitment and retention

Poor foster carer retention is often linked to foster carers feeling unsupported, receiving inadequate short break provision and having low levels of wellbeing (*State of the Nation*, 2019). A number of studies have identified feeling respected by supervising social workers, the child's social worker, and fostering agency are important factors for foster carers when deciding whether to continue to foster ('*No-one told us it was going to be like this*', 2016). Increasing the support, training, confidence and

³ [Fostering Community Champions](#) was run by The Fostering Network and funded by Big Lottery in Scotland from 2014 to 2018.

portability for foster carers therefore, will no doubt have a positive effect on the retention of foster carers and could even encourage more people to consider taking up the role.

We believe that fostering services should work together to make best use of the existing foster carer workforce, and to recruit only where there is a need. We would like to see the increased use of regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment, to increase effectiveness and reduce duplication. Communicating with foster carers about why they have vacancies is also crucial.

It is important that placing authorities make best use of the existing foster carer workforce and ensure they are recruiting the right foster families to meet the needs of the children in and entering care. This is important not only to accommodate sibling groups, but the increased complex needs of children and young people entering the 'care system'.

The Promise states that 'Foster carers must always be recruited on the basis of their values' (p.77). We believe that this needs more explanation in the plan, particularly around how values are assessed. Foster carers should be recruited for their compassion, attitudes, skills, abilities and belief that all children have the right to be loved and cared for.

The plan should include:

- More aspirational standards, above just minimum standards, to be introduced for fostering.
- Children's experiences and outcomes to be at the heart of commissioning.
- Best practice guidelines stating that each local authority must conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required.
- Recommendations such that all recruitment of new foster carers should be targeted to meet the needs of the current care population, based on local authorities' needs assessments, and that all fostering services must publish a detailed annual statement of vacancies and usage, including for example, vacancies for sibling groups, within current fostering households, as well as need going forward.

6. Continuing Care

It is recognised in *The Promise* that the opportunity to stay within their setting of care until a young person is ready to leave is protective and that they should be encouraged to remain. The latest round of statistics published by the Scottish Government reported that only 116 children entered into Continuing Care arrangements in 2018, this represents eight per cent of care leavers aged 16 or above and therefore eligible for the scheme (*Children's Social Work Statistics 2017-2018, 2019*). A huge proportion of children leaving care aged 16 and above in Scotland are therefore missing out on the vitally important chance to remain supported in a foster family. Young people leaving care should be encouraged to stay with their foster families. Although this may not be the best decision for every young care leaver, many are missing out because of poor legislation, lack of planning and little support for foster carers in these arrangements.

Our *State of the Nation* (2019) survey found that only 16 per cent of foster carer respondents had taken on a Continuing Care arrangement. Of these, nearly one in four received no extra training or support. We additionally asked fosters carers if they were ever asked to enter a Continuing Care arrangement, why it did not go ahead. The top reasons for a foster carer not being able to continue to support a young person through Continuing Care was the fostering service or placing authority saying

the child could not remain in the placement, the fostering service not being registered as an adult service provider and the foster carer not being able to afford the drop in income.

We absolutely agree that parenting does not stop at 18 and that throughout the plan, 'Scotland must continue to consider how to create greater equity and opportunity for care experienced young adults. That consideration must include how to increase opportunity for care experienced people to access employment, training, stable housing and support' (p.93).

To help improve the outcomes of young care leavers the plan should include, but not be limited to:

- Better provision, planning and policies for Continuing Care. No young person should not be able to 'stay put' in their foster home because of a lack of resource and support.
- The improvement of central data collection to collect more information about Continuing Care arrangements in Scotland.

Conclusion

The above areas of improvement identified by The Promise have for many years, been echoed through our own State of the Nation's Foster Care surveys. As roughly three-quarters of children in Scotland looked after away from home and family, live with foster families, it is imperative that change starts with foster care.

We are looking forward to working with The Promise Team and Scottish Government officials to implement the recommendations and create meaningful change for thousands of children in care and their carers.

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