

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus / Public Accounts Committee
Ymchwiliad i blant a phobl ifanc sydd wedi bod mewn gofal / Inquiry into care
experienced children and young people
PAC(5) CECYP - 07
Ymateb gan Y Rhwydwaith Maethu / Evidence from 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. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75% of foster carers in the UK. 21 of the 22 local authorities in Wales are members of The Fostering Network. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Response to the Public Accounts Committee of the National Assembly to inform their enquiry into care experienced children and young people.

The Fostering Network welcomes the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into care experienced children and young people (who are, or have been, 'looked after' by a local authority under the Children Act 1989 and the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014).

Over the last few years the political and policy focus has rightly been on promoting and improving well-being outcomes for all looked after children. The Fostering Network now welcomes this opportunity to contribute to this consultation by specifically referencing a number of pertinent points and issues in respect of those children and young people who are looked after within foster care. Whilst our response does not address the specific points as listed in the committee's terms of reference, we hope you will find our contribution helpful to the enquiry.

As over three quarters of children in the care system are cared for by foster carers. Improving the outcomes of most children in care therefore starts with improving foster care, and it is right that it receives focus within the committee's inquiry. We know that good foster care is a protective factor for fostered children's education and wellbeing, despite the trauma of coming into care and the difficult starts these children have often had in life.

Our written response here highlights what we believe to be key issues in respect of fostering and makes recommendations for change, based on our extensive experience and research, most notably the findings of our State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016¹ which was published earlier this year. Our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as matching, placement stability, training and support of carers and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 2,530 (UK Wide) responses which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers across the UK. We would be happy to expand on any of the points highlighted in our response.

Fostering, while rooted in providing families for children, is not a single entity. Some foster carers offer occasional short break care, others emergency or short-term placements, while some provide children with a home for their whole childhoods and transition into adulthood. Many foster carers do a mix of these forms of fostering. Some foster carers are approved to provide care specifically to members of their extended family; these "kinship" or "family and friends" foster carers may have different needs and expectations from some of their "mainstream" colleagues. Our recommendations throughout this submission principally relate to mainstream foster carers. It is important that these differences are recognised in any recommendations made by the committee.

Throughout the text, where we refer to local authorities, this includes fostering services with statutory responsibility for children in care. Independent fostering providers refers to both non-profit and profit-making fostering services and includes charitable fostering agencies.

Introductory Points

We know that good foster care is a protective factor for fostered children's education and wellbeing, despite the trauma of coming into care and the difficult starts these children have often had in life. Foster carers provide children with stability, security, attachment, and often their first positive experience of family life. As well as providing this family environment, foster carers are also the primary advocates and first educators for the children they look after. Foster carers make a difference which is recognised by schools, by local government, by CSSIW, Social Care Wales, and by many others in wider society.

Various research by Sinclair, Schofield² and others also shows the positive impact of the care system on many vulnerable young people. We also know that there are many challenges within the care system that make it more difficult for foster carers and others working with fostered children to do their jobs properly and successfully, and that these challenges contribute to poor experiences and outcomes for some fostered children. These challenges include foster carers' "terms and conditions" as well as systemic issues around the way foster care is structured and delivered. We are clear that while some issues in fostering may best be addressed by legislative and regulatory change, many are actually problems to do with practice and the prevailing culture, both of which need challenging where they are causing problems or preventing an improvement in outcomes for children and young people.

Currently it is unclear how we measure outcomes for children and young people in care and who has the national and local oversight for outcomes. The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the ongoing work programme of the National Fostering Framework will undoubtedly address some of these issues. However, challenges around collecting a comprehensive and consistent set of data and measuring the impact of fostering (or any other form of care) in terms of children's outcomes remains problematic as is a general lack of understanding of what contributes towards the cost of care.

The legislative framework, policies and structure of local service delivery teams creates a barrier to providing a smooth continuum of care for young people up to age of 21 years. Policies and services focus on 0–18 years and then the young person becomes a 'care leaver'. If legislation, policies and support structures were more child/young person focused and saw this as one journey from child to adulthood it would overcome many of the problems that currently exist for care experienced young people.

The issues currently being experienced in foster care are complex and require detailed investigation. However, foster care needs also to be seen in the wider context of the children in care system and the links and dependencies it has on other forms of permanence and care options and of course returning children to live with their birth families.

The approach over the last decade has generally been to review parts of the care system in a piecemeal fashion rather than looking at the children's social care system in its entirety and starting from the child or young person's perspective. These reviews have mirrored the complexities of a system that focuses on placement type and legal status rather than the young person at the centre, and as such have been unable to develop a clear picture of the system as a whole and then deliver potentially radical solutions which focus entirely on the needs of children.

Submission layout

We have structured our response into four interlinked areas:

- the **foster care system**, which includes the way in which fostering is commissioned, delivered, regulated and inspected;
- the **foster care workforce**, to include the status, role and function of foster carers;
- **outcomes for children and young people** in foster care; and
- **'When I'm Ready'** implementation issues.

In each of these areas we have highlighted the key issues in fostering, both those which require legislative or regulatory consideration or those which require practice or culture change. We have also put forward possible solutions. Many of these issues are complex and solutions will need to be debated and tested as part of the committee process.

Part one: Foster care system

The increased demand for children in care services coupled with the drastic cuts to local authority budgets due to austerity measures has placed a growing pressure on the care system in Wales. The number of looked after children in Wales is now at its highest as is the demand for foster placements.

In Wales, the vast majority of children and young people in care are living with foster families and consequently, any change to the demand and funding of looked after children's services will impact heavily on fostering.

It is not just the increase in demand in terms of numbers but also the complexity of needs of the children and young people coming into care. Children and young people coming into the care system may, for example, have been exposed to child sexual exploitation, trafficking domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol misuse, in addition to abuse, neglect and family dysfunction. This changing landscape of need places an increasing pressure on foster carers to develop new skills and expertise.

In addition to the above, the cuts to other parts of the social care system requires foster care to fill these gaps e.g. the closure of parent and child specialist units and residential care provision. Also, funding cuts to other areas of social care such as early intervention services and tightening eligibility criteria to access mental health services impact on foster care.

As a consequence the foster care system has had to develop from an informal, voluntary and unregulated activity to a more formalised, highly regulated and professionalised system of care for vulnerable children and young people, often with complex needs.

In this section we have outlined the key issues for the different aspects of the foster care system. We have started to outline possible alternative models and approaches to structuring the foster care system.

These ideas are at an early stage of development and require detailed discussions and testing with the sector. All the recommendations we put forward in this section have a central aim to improve outcomes for children and young people.

Assessment of children and young people's' needs

All services for children and young people in the care system are dependent on accurate, high quality assessments of need and effective commissioning to meet the identified needs. In order to get the right placement first time for each child there needs to be an accurate assessment of their needs. When a child has to move placements this can be hugely unsettling and often results in poorer outcomes for the child as well as being more costly.

The Fostering Network understands the challenges around assessing and predicting need but we believe there is much room for improvement. It is essential that individual social care assessments of children and young people are

aggregated in each local area or region in order to strategically plan the services required for the looked after children population.

The Fostering Network believes that Local authorities must assess not only the placement needs of children and young people but also the other social care, educational and health needs in order to provide therapeutic services and support for children and young people, many of whom have suffered, abuse and neglect before coming into the care system.

Cuts to local authority services have led to a severe reduction in early intervention children's services. Early support services prevent problems from escalating and risks being identified at an early stage. If there are further cuts to this type of support we will be left with a situation of crisis intervention which will result in more children and young people entering the care system with severe emotional and behavioural problems and requiring specialist support.

We believe that planning for children and intervention should happen in a timely manner and not just in response to crisis. Planning for individual children should allow them to be matched to a carer in the context of that carer's household and the needs of the other children living there, rather than each child's care planning being considered in isolation with no thought being given to competing or conflicting needs of the wider household.

Recommendation

- **Each local authority or region must 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 programme for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population. Local authorities must work with IFPs to achieve this whilst the demand for IFP placements prevails. If this was done at a consistent standard and framework at a local level, it would be possible to aggregate results regionally and nationally for other purposes i.e. recruitment campaigns. It is encouraging that the National Fostering Framework has recognised this as a priority within their work programme.
- **Effective use of the foster care workforce**
- **Recruitment and managing vacancies**

Recruitment of foster carers is a year-round activity. In an ideal world, this recruitment would only be to find foster carers to meet children's needs; all recruitment would be targeted and based on needs analyses, with local authorities and IFPs working together to identify who is needed and where. In reality, however, all fostering services are able to recruit foster carers without regard to whether the skills they bring and homes they offer are actually needed for children, or to whether other carers already exist who could provide the necessary placements.

As a result, there is likely to be a fundamental disconnect between the supply of foster carers and the demand for their services – local authorities have responsibility for all looked after children and therefore can choose to place them with their own foster carers or those fostering for IFPs. IFPs can recruit as many foster carers as they like, but often have little knowledge of current and future demand trends and no influence over commissioning of services. Therefore, if no local authorities choose to use their services, or if these carers don't provide the skillsets or homes required, few children will be placed with them.

The mixed economy has therefore led to a situation in which recruitment in foster care is often driven by increasing numbers rather than by meeting the needs of children currently in the care system. Anecdotally, we hear of local authorities recruiting foster carers to bring children back "in-house", and IFPs recruiting foster carers without reference to whether any local authority has a need for the skills and placements they can offer. Because few foster carers are paid retainers between placements, it is of little cost for fostering services LA and IFP – to keep foster carers on their books even if they are not being used; we know that some foster carers have vacancies for long periods of time, and that they understandably find this very frustrating, particularly if their fostering service is still recruiting new foster carers.

In fact, fostering services often operate in competition with each other over access to new foster carers, with potential applicants being exposed to advertising from multiple fostering services in any one geographical area. This leads to duplicated costs of advertising, as well as potentially confusing people who just want to become foster carers but do not know which service to choose. In addition, we hear stories of fostering services encouraging existing foster carers to move services rather than recruiting people new to fostering, through financial incentives being offered to move existing carers from one service to another and placements being threatened unless the carer agrees to move. This in effect is just moving

existing pool of carers around the system rather than meeting individual children's needs – our State of the Nation 2016 report found that 14 per cent of foster carers had moved service, with a further 2 per cent in the process of moving.

We end up with a situation, in which there is constant recruitment, foster carers with vacancies and shortages of carers for some “types” of children such as teenagers. 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. Communicating with foster carers about why they have vacancies is also crucial.

Recommendations:

- **All recruitment of new foster carers should be targeted to meet needs of the current care population, based on local authority's needs assessments.** No fostering services should be recruiting foster carers for whom there is no demand. Instead local authorities and IFPs should work together to 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 coming into care i.e. target and match skills of carers with the needs of children. Fostering services should encourage any potential applicants whose skills they don't currently need to contact an alternative fostering service which does need these skills.
- **All fostering services must publish an annual statement of vacancies and usage of existing foster carers, as well as need going forward.** This will help prospective foster carers to make an informed choice between fostering services.
- **Closer joint working protocols should be encouraged between local authorities and independent fostering providers.**
- **An increase in regional consortia for needs-led and targeted recruitment should be explored,** to increase effectiveness and reduce duplication
- **Fostering services should pay their foster carers between placements.** While some foster carers may choose to hold a vacancy until a young person who matches the their skill set needs a placement, many foster carers offer a home to a broad range of children and expect to be working as a foster carer on a full-time basis.

- **If a fostering service thinks it is unlikely that they will place a child with a family, they should be clear about this.** For short term gaps, they should consider whether the foster carer can widen the range of children they take or use their skills more creatively between placements (as long as they are being paid a retainer) to support other foster carers, provide short break care, undertake or deliver training, or assist in recruiting foster carers. If a fostering service thinks it is unlikely that they will place a child with a family in the long run, they should tell the carers to allow them to make decisions about the future.

Monitoring and inspection of fostering services

Fostering services should be commissioned on the basis of thorough assessments of the child's needs but rather based on costs. Placements should be measured on the likelihood of improving outcomes for looked after children, rather than being measured on cost.

In order to measure whether we are commissioning effective fostering services we have to be clear of the purpose of the care system and specifically the purpose and benefits of foster care. The Fostering Network believes the care system should protect children from further harm, offer an environment where the child can rehabilitate from past harm and neglect and improve the outcomes for the child so they can realise their potential. We have to ask if the current system is achieving this for all our looked after population.

Over the last 10 years, in Wales, the foster care sector has moved to a formal contracts commissioning framework. As well as the commissioning approach changing over the years the market split has changed. When the independent sector first began to operate in fostering it was to meet the local authority shortfall and to offer specialist placements; the independent sector in Wales now accounts for a significant market share.

However, even though more formalised approaches have been developed, the fundamental principle underlying most commissioning is still simply spot purchasing. Price has become a focus of commissioning foster care placements. Decisions are often being made based on short term affordability rather than what are in the long-term best interests of the child.

The fixing of local authority budgets annually does not lend itself to long-term care planning. There are clear tensions between local authority and independent fostering providers about the true costs of a foster placement, and the differing methods used to calculate costs make it almost impossible to assess value for money. There needs to be more work on how much a 'good' foster placement costs and how we quality assure placements – The Cost of Foster Care³, produced by The Fostering Network and BAAF in 2005 and updated in 2010 by the University of Loughborough, could provide a model here.

Local authorities have multiple roles in the fostering system – child protection, assessment of needs and care planning, corporate parent, placement matching, service delivery and commissioning of services. Local authorities often adopt a sequential approach to commissioning fostering services and look at the in-house services first where they have invested resources and then look externally based on a tiered contracts approach. There needs to be consideration of how we can move away from the competition being created between the two sectors (local authority and independent fostering services) and move towards a more collaborative approach whereby all potential foster carers are in the available pool for children referred.

Finally, commissioning teams within local authorities are sometimes split from practice teams and hold little detailed knowledge of fostering. Some independent providers have reported challenges in their ability to develop a relationship with individual local authorities and that relationships with the commissioning structures are price focused rather than child focused.

Recommendations:

- **Foster care commissioning should always sit within local authority children's services and not the finance/business division of the local authority.** This move would re-focus commissioning on children rather than budgets and bring the decisions closer to practice and those who hold a detailed knowledge of fostering.
- **Commissioners need to understand and exercise their duty of care to looked after children as part of their corporate parenting role.**
- **The commissioning framework for fostering needs to link to outcomes for children and young people rather than cost.**

- **Long-term fostering and ‘When I’m Ready’ placements need to be embedded as part of the commissioning contract and be part of every local authority’s sufficiency duty.**
- **A comprehensive needs analysis of the local looked after children population must inform commissioning models.**
- **Placement of fostered children should not be ended unless a case review has been held and views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carer and the fostering service as well as the placing authority. This will ensure placement decisions are being made purely in the best interests of the child and not for any financially motivated or other reasons.**

Long-term fostering

As stated above fostering is not a single entity and therefore it is worth considering whether it can be best served by a single legal framework or whether a different approach for different types of fostering is required.

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 department.

The implications of this can be placement drift rather than early decisions being made on which results in children staying with foster carers for years by accident rather than design. Also, feedback from our members through our State of the Nation survey shows placements can end when they feel it is not in the best interests of the child, but rather for financial reasons, or lack of support, or a difficult relationship between the carer and social worker, and other reasons that would likely not be accepted if a court were involved. This includes allegations, where child protection thresholds in place for all other children are not adhered to, and children are moved without a proper assessment. The State of the Nation report also found placements can end with little independent review and scrutiny of the decisions.

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 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.

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.

Recommendations

- **Long-term foster care must be given equal status and protection as other permanence options and to ensure long term fostering relationships are respected and valued.** Our view is that children in long-term fostering placements should have a legal order ensuring stability and security of that placement.

Part two: Foster care workforce

Foster carers' employment status is a confused picture. For example, for tax purposes they are considered to be self-employed, but at the same time they can only work for one fostering service at once, unlike other self-employed people. There is also a confusion over their role; while some fostering services insist that foster carers give up or cut down on their other paid work in order to foster, others are clear that foster carers must earn money outside of fostering, and indeed actively encourage "professionals" to bring their skills to fostering alongside their work.

The foster carer workforce holds a diverse range of opinion on the issue of employment status. This lies on a spectrum from expert volunteer on the one hand to fully professional child care expert on the other. The Fostering Network appreciates that this is complex area. We hear regularly from many foster carers,

and while we know many do think full employment by a fostering service might be a way to deal with the problems they are encountering, others – including long-term foster carers and family and friends carers – are less sure. For example they are concerned about the potential impact this could have on tax arrangements, combining fostering with other employment outside of the home, and being able to say no to a placement if it doesn't suit their family situation. This is an area that needs more focus and exploration.

Regardless of employment status, The Fostering Network's starting point is that all foster carers must have:

- Status and authority
- Equal respect as key member in the team around the child
- Payment for time and skills, as well as all expenses covered via allowances
- Support and training

Around 12 per cent of the foster care workforce leaves or retires each year and The Fostering Network currently estimates that a further 450 foster families are needed in the next year across Wales. There remains a significant shortage of placements in Wales for

- foster carers for teenagers;
- foster carers for sibling groups.
- Parent and child placements

Recommendation:

- **The recruitment and retention of foster carers should be driven by the needs of the existing care population, and be based on local authority needs analyses. See part one for more detail.**

Part of the team

Foster carers are a key part of the team working with fostered children. They must be treated as co-professionals and given all the information and authority they need to be able to look after these children to the best of their ability. However, according to the State of the Nation 2016 survey, 32 per cent of foster carers felt

that children's social workers do not treat them as equals. We have noted a rise in fostering being increasingly described as "therapeutic parenting" in some parts of the sector; while foster care of course provides children with a home and family and therefore involves parenting, the needs of most fostered children and the system within which foster carers work require them to be child care experts at the heart of the team.

As part of our State of the Nation survey of 2016, when asked "would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?", only half of foster carers said yes. This represented a marked decrease from our 2014 survey, when the corresponding result was two-thirds. We wanted to find out why a growing number of foster carers feel unable to recommend the role. Analysing the answers of those who answered 'no' to this question showed that foster carers felt increasingly unsupported and underpaid, and that they were not treated as equal members of the team. One example is what happens when foster carers face an allegation, which is unfortunately something that many will experience during their fostering career. Most foster carers accept that allegations are an occupational risk, and nearly all of them will be unsubstantiated or unfounded. However, 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. Moreover, foster carers must be involved in decision making for a child's future, but many feel they are excluded.

Many foster carers also feel that they are still not given the authority to make day-to-day decisions about the children in their care. According to the State of the Nation survey, 33 per cent of short-term placement carers felt that they were only allowed to make appropriate decisions some of the time, rarely or never.

Another long-standing issue is that of information sharing: in our State of the Nation survey, 31 per cent of foster carers reported that they were rarely or never given all of the information about a fostered child prior to placement. This was often about the complexity of the child's needs and challenging behaviour. This is of real concern, because without full disclosure, it is extremely difficult for foster carers to make an informed decision about whether they can look after a child and meet their needs, as well as keeping everyone else in the household safe.

Foster carers need proper supervision and support from their supervising social worker. It is best practice that foster carer review meetings should be independently chaired, although we believe this does not happen routinely.

Recommendations:

- **Foster carers must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions.** Although this already exists in guidance, it is still not happening with sufficient regularity. Strengthened guidance needs to address the need for all professionals – social care, education, health, police and so on – to understand and respect the role and responsibility of foster carers.
- **Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; their views must always be taken into consideration.**
- **Foster carers and fostering services must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them and those around them safe.** As part of the team around the child, foster carers must be given access to children's files, particularly for long-term placements.
- **We recommend all foster care reviews are independently chaired.**
- **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 must be made aware of their statutory entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.**

Support

Fostering is an immensely rewarding role but it can often be challenging. Therefore the support foster carers receive from their fostering service and their peers is crucial and often makes a difference to the stability and success of placements.

Our 2016 State of the Nation survey found that foster carers, on the whole, reported a positive view of support from their supervising social worker, with 66 per cent declaring it to be *excellent* or *good* and 15 per cent saying it was *acceptable*. However, in our 2014 survey the result for the same question was 73

per cent, so there has been a slight drop in the overall rating of supervising social worker support.

We found that out of hours and respite support is currently poor for many foster carers. One third of foster carers describe out of hours support as could be better or poor, while only a quarter of foster carers described respite provision as excellent or good, down from one-third in our 2014 survey⁴.

Recommendations

- **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 fostering services should provide a dedicated full-time support service** for foster carers and **ensure access to respite provision** for all foster carers.
- **Peer support opportunities** should be enabled and promoted at a local level.

Status and portability

We often hear that foster carers feel insufficiently supported by their fostering services. Foster carer charters are an important first step in setting out what this support should entail. They can help to get foster carers get the recognition they deserve and need to provide children with the best possible care, and represent a strong step, along with fees, improved status and authority, and better training, towards a professional foster care workforce.

While we know a number of fostering services have a charter in place, and we have recently sent our updated charter to all fostering services in Wales and will shortly be distributing a tool kit to further embed the principals of the charter. However, much more can be done to encourage more fostering services to take them up, to embed those that currently exist into practice, and to ensure that all charters remain relevant and respected by the whole team around the child.

Increasing the status of foster carers is also about legitimising the occupation as something owned by the foster carer rather than their service. However the process of transferring to another fostering service often requires repeating the assessment process for the new fostering service, a key factor which hampers portability of the workforce. Foster carers responding to the State of the Nation

2016 survey stated that it was not just the bureaucratic hindrances of repeating the assessment process that deterred them from transferring agencies, but also the lack of placements and income during the transition period. With such periods usually lasting several months, this immediately discourages all foster carers who rely on fostering to provide an income for the household. There are also implications for currently fostered children when a foster carer moves services, who are likely to face being moved out of their home during the reassessment process.

We believe that an immediate improvement to the portability of foster carers could be made by the introduction of a register, a centrally held list of approved foster carers in England. A central list would serve a number of purposes in addition to improving portability, as follows:

- improving safeguarding of children and young people, as currently there is no way of knowing that an applicant previously fostered elsewhere if the carer chooses to withhold the information;
- increasing portability of the workforce, enabling them to transfer providers more easily, which as a result could drive up standards in training and support for foster carers;
- supporting the creation of a standardised pre- and post-approval training framework linked to the register; and
- improving the formal status of foster carers to allow the role to be more recognised and valued within the sector and by the general public.

Recommendations:

- **There should be a national register of foster carers in Wales.**
- **It must become a duty for all fostering services to have a charter in place that is reviewed every three years, with a clear and transparent process that allows foster carers and fostering service staff to provide challenge if it is absent or not being adhered to.**
- **When transferring service, the original fostering service should pass on all assessment and review paperwork for the past three years – currently this is in the regulations but it does not happen in practice.**

- **All fostering services should be required to give a reference to the new fostering service.**

Training

Children and young people coming into the care system have an increasingly complex set of needs, due to their diverse experiences, for example child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gangs or arriving as unaccompanied asylum seeking children. 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 with standardised learning objectives 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.

However, 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, as already argued, foster carers are part of the team around the child but are often not treated in that way. They are viewed as the junior partner, and unduly pressurised to take placements that don't correspond to their skills, knowledge and experience.

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. Supervising social workers (SSWs) have a split role – support and supervision and there is no reason why CSWs cannot have one as well. The best children's services already do this. CSW need to build relationships with foster carers and view them as a tool through which to meet the needs of the child. This allows for intervention before a crisis, and not at too late a stage. 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.

Recommendations:

- **A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in Wales, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.** Within this national framework there must be flexibility for training to be tailored to allow foster carers to meet the individual needs of children and promote their own personal development.
- **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 the vast majority of looked after children.** Other professionals working with looked after children should also be given training to understand the role of foster carers.

Finance – allowances and fees

Allowances

Our State of the Nation 2016 survey asked foster carers about allowances. We asked them if they felt their allowance, and the expenses they could claim, met the full costs of looking after fostered children.

Over half of all foster carers said that their allowances did not meet the full costs of looking after fostered children. When we asked this question two years ago 80 per cent of respondents felt their allowances did cover the costs of fostering. In 2016 this figure has fallen sharply to only 42 per cent.

Foster carers told us that allowances have been frozen, while additional payments such as mileage have been cut and that teenagers are especially expensive and the costs far exceed the allowances foster carers receive.

Foster carers and fostering services rightly have high expectations of what children in care should experience, but in many cases, the level of allowances do not allow for those expectations to be met. Caring for a teenager can be especially expensive with the cost of, for example, driving lessons, mobiles and holidays.

Fees

While there are national minimum rates specified by Welsh Government – the money to be spent on looking after the child – the payment of foster carers' fees for their time and skills is determined locally and in Wales there is a significant variance across local authorities.

We believe that all foster carers should be paid for their time, skills and experience, at a level equivalent to that of a residential care worker.

There are a number of issues to consider when exploring fee payments to foster carers:

- While we support retainers, there are foster carers who perform respite care only, or who don't take a placement for a long time by choice. Alternatives to retainers would be required in these situations.
- Moreover, some foster carers are more specialist and would command a higher fee, which could then lead to the issue of perverse incentives: we would not want to see a foster carer penalised for turning a young person's life around from being a "challenging" to a "less challenging" placement and thereby receiving a reduction in pay.
- Some family and friends and long-term foster carers may not want to be paid – we have no firm evidence for this, but hear it anecdotally and would like to see a system that has the flexibility to reflect these.
- Some foster carers have full-time jobs outside the home – should they also be paid as foster carers for these hours, while other foster carers are with children or carrying out other fostering tasks all day?
- In some households both people in a couple would consider themselves primary foster carers and therefore deserving of pay.

Despite the complex issues involved in considering fees, we believe we will only get the high quality service we need if central and local governments are prepared to invest in it.

Recommendations:

- **The Government should review the level of national minimum fostering allowances**
- **All fostering services should be required to pay an allowance at a level that meets or Welsh Government's national minimum allowance, and the Government must fund all local authorities to allow them to achieve this. Consideration should be given to implementing standardised fees and allowance across Wales ensuring fairness and transparency.**
- **All foster carers should be paid for their time and skills, preferably via a tiered payment scheme which includes 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 their entitlement to allowances and fees.**

Foster Carer Approval

Once they have been approved as a foster carer, the foster carer's terms of approval will be determined by the fostering service. This is commonly based on the age range of children. If a foster carer is deemed suitable only to offer certain types of placements, this should be made clear not only in their terms of approval, but also the foster care agreement. Foster carers should not be asked to provide types of placement for which they are not approved.

Recommendation:

- **Foster carers should always 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.**
- **Foster carers must not be asked to provide types of placement outside of their approval range.**

DBS checks

Current practice regarding DBS checks is variable across the UK particularly in respect of the "timeliness" of DBS checks being completed for rising 18 year olds

living in fostering households⁵ i.e. foster carers own children and looked after young people transitioning to adulthood.

In the current provision there is no mechanism to allow for checks in respect of children's services and adults services to be run simultaneously e.g. if a former foster carer moves to work in adults services details held on an enhanced DBS check do not automatically "flag" across and vice versa.

Furthermore children's services are not permitted to request the adults barred list nor are adults services permitted to request the children's barred list.

Recommendations

- **The DBS, and the Home Office should undertake a thorough review of the regulations which govern DBS checks for prospective foster carers and all adult members of a foster care household, including a review of the Update Service.** This would serve to both address the current problems/difficulties in practice across DBS offices in processing checks on young adults and would serve to ensure that children and young people in foster care are afforded consistent practice in respect of safeguarding.
- **All fostering and adoption enhanced DBS checks need also to include information about whether someone is unsuitable to work with vulnerable adults as well as children.** This information is relevant to safeguarding children in the care system.

Part three: Outcomes for children and young people

Relationships

It is well evidenced that those children who lack stability while in care have poorer outcomes⁶. An essential way to achieve stability is to focus on the relationship and attachment the child has with their foster carer(s).

Attachments impact on social and emotional development, educational achievements and mental health. The Care Inquiry in England found that the 'golden thread' running through the care system was relationships. The Inquiry recommended that there should be a renewed focus on using the powers and resources from all sectors in nurturing positive and meaningful relationships for children who cannot stay with, or return to, their birth parents.

Foster carers not only have a vital role to play while the child is living in their home but also in supporting the child as they move on, whether this is a move home or a move to another placement. Children and young people in care and care leavers told us that being able to stay in touch with their former carer was very important to them. However, surveys that The Fostering Networks carried out in 20157 showed one third of foster carers and one third of children and young people had been prevented from having contact and over half of the children and young people surveyed said they were not supported at all to keep in contact with former foster carers. The practice of cutting off the relationship between the child and their former foster carer is damaging and social work practice in this area needs to change.

Another key relationship for children in care is that they have with the independent reviewing officer (IRO). IROs play a crucial role in ensuring children's relationships are recognised, supported and sustained. IROs currently work within local authority structures which many feel can affect their impartiality in representing the best interests of children. We would like to see IROs becoming independent of local authorities and having more authority, in order to be independent and effective, and to be able to truly ensure decisions are in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations:

- **IROs should work for a body outside of the local authority structure, and given more authority to make independent, effective decisions in the interests of the child.**
- **The Government should ensure that guidance and regulations require that 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 their former fostered children as they move home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process.**
- **How children in care's relationships are being built and supported should be considered as part of CSSIW inspections.**

Improving outcomes through innovation

In recent years The Fostering Network has run a number of innovative programmes and projects across the UK which seek to improve outcomes for fostered children and young people, including Mockingbird and Inspiring Voices in England. The

learning from these programmes supports the organisation's objectives to innovate so that our members are able to respond to the changing world of fostering and allow us to improve outcomes for children and young people in foster care and leaving care.

The Fostering Network will continue to deliver the Mockingbird programme over the next three years and beyond in England but we would urge local authorities to consider introducing the programme across Wales. This an alternative method of delivering foster care with the potential to improve placement stability, safety and permanency for children and young people in care and to improve support for, and retention of, foster carers. The Mockingbird Family Model, upon which the Mockingbird programme is based, increases the protective factors around children through the provision of an extended network of family support. It uses the concept of a 'constellation' which is where six to 10 'satellite' families of foster and kinship carers live in close proximity to a dedicated hub home of specially recruited and trained carers offering respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities.

Relationships are central to the Mockingbird programme, with hub carers and foster carers providing frontline care and with social workers able to concentrate on successful relationship building. The hub empowers families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate, and offers children a more positive experience of care. The hub also builds links with other families important to the children's care plans and to resources in the wider community which can provide them with enhanced opportunities to learn, develop and succeed.

Through delivering these programmes clear themes have emerged which we believe can be used to improve local arrangements in the delivery of foster care services:

- **Peer support:** The programmes are based on the central principle of peer support. Peer support can increase the knowledge and confidence of foster carers and prevent problems from escalating which offers children a more positive and stable care experience. Peer support can also be a cost-effective intervention.
- **Foster carers valued as equal members of the team around the child:** We believe it is essential that foster carers are respected and treated as skilled co-professionals, and are recognised as part of the team working with the child.

Often the foster carer is the person who knows the child best. In order for foster carers to be respected as a professional child care expert they need to be given all the information on each child, be fully involved in decision making and empowered to make appropriate day-to-day decisions concerning the children in their care, as explored in part two.

- **Involvement in decisions:** Children and young people should be involved in all decisions made about them, particularly when it involves placement moves or contact arrangements.

Recommendation:

- **Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown, such as the Mockingbird Family Model, should be further explored and invested in across Wales.**

Involvement of young people in their care

At the heart of improving outcomes for children and young people is ensuring they have a strong voice in all decisions which affect their care. Too often, despite good intentions, children and young people's voices are absent from the system, decision making and reviews. We believe that this absence is a contributory factor to a range of the perceived issues within the system.

Last year The Fostering Network completed a project in England, Inspiring Voices, designed to raise young people's and foster carers' awareness of, and engagement with, children in care councils in England. Through this project we ran regional consultation events for young people across the country. The project exposed a great variability in provision. There is a direct link between well-resourced structures and young people being able to influence the design and delivery of services.

The Fostering Network believes that all fostered young people should have their voices heard and be given the opportunity to shape and co-produce children's services in partnership with local authorities and decision makers.

Recommendation:

- **Local authorities should ensure that they have in place mechanisms for listening to the voices of their fostered children, whether they live with in-house carers or are placed with an IFP, e.g. through children in care councils.**

Access to therapeutic support

The Fostering Network firmly believe that there should be the availability of prompt and robust assessment of looked after children's mental health needs, clear pathways for accessing mental health support and sufficient provision.

- **Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services when needed, without delay.**

Life-long care

Children living with their own families are rarely expected to move out and stand on their own two feet at the age of 18, and in fact many rely on family support for many years into adulthood. We would like to see this same "life-long" approach to young people who have grown up in care with the state as corporate parents. When I'm Ready and other 18+ living options are a good first step, but we believe that local authorities should continue their commitment as corporate parents in the longer term. This would have long-term benefits for the individual and both benefits and savings for society as a whole.

Recommendation:

- **Local authorities must be proactive in offering long-term support for care experienced young people, and must outline this in the local offer for care leavers.**
- **Local authorities should ensure all fostering service providers, foster carers and eligible young people are aware of their local 'When I'm Ready' policy.**
- **'When I'm Ready' should be introduced as an option as early as possible in the care planning process and children and young people should be involved in all the decisions which impact on their care.**

Finance

Feedback from foster carers clearly shows that financial reasons are a key factor preventing foster carers from agreeing to When I'm Ready arrangements. Many carers have reported that their income diminishes once the young person reaches 18. For some foster carers this will be too little to allow them to continue to provide a home for the young person, and will therefore cause strong relationships to be severed.

Foster carer fees are often stopped once a young person in their care reaches the age of 18. The fee is a foster carer's income in recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience. We believe that foster carers should not be financially disadvantaged if taking on a staying put arrangement.

Recommendations:

- **Following the success of the national minimum fostering**

allowance, there should also be a national minimum 'When I'm Ready' allowance and an expectation of no financial detriment for foster carers who offer 'When I'm Ready' placements.

- **There should be a reallocation of housing benefit between public authorities and payment must be made directly by the relevant authority to the foster carer.**

Independent Fostering Providers

Commissioning for 'When I'm Ready' is not a contract requirement for Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs) and they often will not receive a fee from the local authority in respect of the staying put arrangement.

Recommendation:

- **We would like to see a principle in place that a young person should not be disadvantaged because of the contractual arrangement between their (former) foster carer's agency and the local authority.**

1 State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016, The Fostering Network (2017)
https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/stateofthenationsfos_tercare2016.pdf

2 For example, Sinclair, I., Wilson, K., and Gibbs, I. (2005) Foster Placements: Why They Succeed and Why They Fail, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London; Schofield, G., Beek, M., Sargent, k., Thoburn, J., (2004) Growing up in foster care, BAAF

3 The Cost of Foster Care, The Fostering Network and BAAF (2005); Update to The Cost of Foster Care, Loughborough University (2010),
<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/update-cost-foster-care.pdf>

4 State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016, The Fostering Network (2017)
https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/stateofthenationsfos_tercare2016.pdf

5 The requirements for a DBS enhanced check on prospective foster carers and members of their household aged 18 or over is determined under The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013; Regulation 26(1A) and (2) Schedule 3.

6 Data Pack Improving Permanence for Looked after Children, Department for Education (2013)

7 Keep Connected: Maintaining Relationships When Moving On. The Fostering Network (2016).