



## **A Healthier Wales: A workforce strategy for health and social care**

### **Response from The Fostering Network, September 2019**

#### **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. 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. 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 A Healthier Wales: A workforce strategy for health and social care**

The Fostering Network welcomes the development of a long-term workforce strategy for health and social care. We fully support the vision of the draft strategy and the belief set out in the foreword of the strategy that *'we need to see what we spend on our workforce as an investment not a cost'*.

As the leading fostering charity, The Fostering Network believes the workforce strategy is a valuable opportunity to recognise foster carers as a key part of the social care workforce. As of March 2018, 4,717 children were living with foster families which is 74 per cent of the 6407 children in care looked after away from home in Wales<sup>1</sup>. We estimate that fostering services need to recruit a further 550 foster families in the next year to meet the current need in Wales. These figures demonstrate the key role foster carers play in meeting the needs of looked after children in Wales and the opportunity this strategy presents to recognise the status of foster carers in the social care workforce. It is clear when a workforce is feeling well supported and valued and has a clear workforce development path it improves the experience of the children and young people who are being cared for by the workforce.

Our response follows the key themes of the strategy, with some being integrated together.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics for Wales. Experimental Statistics: Children looked after by local authorities, 2017-18, Nov 2018. Available from: <https://gweddi.gov.wales/docs/statistics/2018/181122-children-looked-after-local-authorities-2017-18-en.pdf>

## **Themes: Valuing our workforce and seamless working**

We welcome the vision set out for parity of esteem through reward and recognition. We believe it is vital not only to recognise foster carers as part of the health and social care workforce but as a key and equal member of the team around the child. The Fostering Network's starting point is that all foster carers must have:

- Status and authority;
- Equal respect as a key member in the team around the child;
- Payment for time and skills, as well as all expenses covered via allowances;
- Support, and learning and development opportunities.

We fully support the priority to ensure safe and open cultures such that all staff can raise concerns, suggest improvements and contribute. Too often we hear from foster carers that they are not treated by others in the team around child with respect and their views are not sought in the care planning process even though they often know the child best. In our latest State of the Nation survey over a third of respondents felt that they were not treated as an equal member of the team by the child's social worker<sup>2</sup>. The children's workforce needs to work collaboratively to ensure foster carers have all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them and those around them safe.

Foster carers need to be given the authority to make the day-to-day decisions that have been delegated to them. Over a quarter (28 per cent) of foster carers we surveyed felt that they were unclear about the decisions related to their fostered child that they had the authority to make<sup>1</sup>. We additionally fully support the work of the National Fostering Framework in developing a standardised approach across Wales to fees and allowances for foster carers.

The Fostering Network believes a key step in valuing foster carers and achieving an equality of status with other parts of the health and social care workforce is to introduce workforce registration. We believe the introduction of registration would address the following key issues in the fostering system:

- The need to increase the status of foster carers in the team around the child;
- The difficulty foster carers have when moving from one service to another and,
- The need for more robust safeguarding measures.

We 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 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 (read more about our position on a register here: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/policy-positions/register-foster-carers>). A 'licence to practice' approach would create a parity with other parts of the children's social care workforce such as residential children's workers and social workers, thus working towards the fifth aim of the strategy to 'work towards a single system'.

Finally, under the theme 'seamless working' we welcome the priorities around minimum standards of training and a common induction programme. The Fostering Network has been working closely with the Fostering Framework which is looking to standardise terms and conditions for foster carers across Wales including the approach to learning and development. We welcome the introduction of the Health and Social Care Induction Framework but we would call for it to be mandatory for foster carers in line with other parts of the health and social care workforce and there must be an increased

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<sup>2</sup> The Fostering Network. State of the Nation's Foster Care: Full Report, Feb 2019

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/stateofthenationsfostercarefullreport.pdf>

emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training, to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care.

### **Recommendations:**

- **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.** Being valued for the skills, knowledge, attitudes and the experience they bring.
- **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.
- **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.**
- **Introduce a national register for foster carers to improve their status in the health and social care workforce as well as ensure greater public protection.**
- **The Health and Social Care Induction framework to be mandatory for foster carers.** If enforced, this would install a set of shared principles among foster carers which could improve outcomes, permanence and stability within the foster care population.

### **Theme: Digital**

The Fostering Network agrees that digital capability of the health and social care workforce offers opportunities to improve the services. We also recognise the need to improve digital literacy. Through our recent consultations<sup>3</sup> we have identified a growing demand for digital resources and a range of learning opportunities including blended learning. There is a need to improve the digital competency of foster carers for training and service improvements purposes as well as to ensure foster carers are aware of digital safety. Digital safety is vital for foster carers in the care of fostered children and young people.

### **Themes: Attraction and recruitment and supply and shape**

We agree with the strategy that different approaches are needed across the range of professions to address specific shortages, but we believe as much attention should be given to retention as well as recruitment. All too often we lose highly skilled and valued members of the workforce through poor terms and conditions.

Recruitment of foster carers is a year-round activity. In an ideal world all recruitment would be targeted and based on needs analyses, with local authorities and independent fostering providers working together to identify what type of placements are required 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 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 independent fostering providers. Independent fostering providers 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, no children will be placed with them.

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<sup>3</sup> Fostering Excellence scoping report, March 2017 and Consultation on the development of a Post Approval Learning and Development Framework for foster carers in Wales (unpublished).

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. Because few foster carers are paid retainers between placements, it is of little cost for fostering services – both local authorities and independent fostering providers – 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 this environment, we end up with a situation in which there is constant recruitment, foster carers with vacancies and shortages of carers for certain “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. 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. We are encouraged by the appointment of Regional Fostering Development Managers, through the National Fostering Framework who are now addressing this issue.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **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 independent fostering providers 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.

#### **Theme: Education and Learning**

We support the vision of this theme in providing excellent learning and education opportunities throughout all stages of the workforce’s career. As stated above the completion of the All Wales Induction Framework for Health and Social Care is a mandatory requirement for workers who have to register but is not yet mandatory for foster carers. Fostering services are expecting all newly approved carers to complete the induction framework but we feel it would provide more consistency in standards if it was mandatory.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The Social Care Workforce should support and promote the implementation of the existing Post Approval and Development Framework for Foster Carers.
- Foster carers should have access to a range of learning and development opportunities e.g. blended, online, self-study and mentoring in addition to traditional ‘classroom’ training.
- Foster carers learning and development should be a core element of the assessment, supervision and annual review process.
- Foster carers should be able to attend integrated training with other members of the ‘team around the child’ including from other sectors such as health and education. Supporting carers and professionals alike to engage with new ideas and materials and share experiences is hugely valuable as it promotes learning from each other for the benefit of the child.

#### **Theme: Health and Wellbeing**

We welcome a call to develop a health and wellbeing framework and action plan to contribute to creating a working environment that leads to positive staff health and wellbeing. This should include mental health support for foster carers dealing with allegations, how to manage stress, how to support

each other and the development of resilience. These recommendations are in line with Working to Achieve a Healthier Future for Wales 2030 goals<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Public Health Wales. 2018. Improving mental well-being and building resilience. Available from: <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/888/page/96946>