

# CUTS

## the view from foster carers (England)

the impact of austerity measures on fostered children and the families that care for them



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The  
Fostering  
Network

# Cuts: the view from foster carers

## 1. Introduction

The Fostering Network has become increasingly concerned that the increased demand for children in care services, coupled with drastic cuts to local authority budgets due to austerity measures, has placed a growing pressure on the care system in England. Therefore when the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) launched its inquiry into children's social care services earlier this year The Fostering Network decided it was vital for those who are at the centre of the lives of children in care, foster carers, to have the opportunity to share their views on how funding cuts are impacting on the delivery of foster care.

In February 2016 The Fostering Network surveyed foster carers in England on the subject of funding cuts to local authority budgets and the impact of changes in resources and demand on the children they are caring for. The survey was only open for one week and we received an overwhelming 616 responses<sup>1</sup> from foster carers which has given us a unique insight into the reality of fostering in the current economic climate. We were staggered by the nature of the responses we received from foster carers and the range of consequences that funding cuts are having on every aspect of foster care. As one respondent to the survey said,

*"We have fostered for over 25 years and cared for well over 300 young people and the service has never been in a worse position to deliver young people with a good care service."*

## 2. Impact of the funding cuts

We asked respondents whether they felt funding cuts had impacted upon a number of different aspects of day to day fostering. It was immediately apparent that the impact of the cuts is causing widespread concern for foster carers in most aspects of their work. The key findings are summarised below.

### Access to social work support

Over two thirds (69 per cent) of foster carers felt that cuts were reducing access to their fostered child's social worker, and three out of five respondents (60 per cent) felt that support from their supervising social worker was being adversely affected. The survey responses showed great empathy for the high caseloads and stresses social workers are dealing with. Children's social work, from a foster carer perspective, is being run on a 'bare minimum provision' basis. Many respondents cited the consequence of unmanageable caseloads and high turnover of social workers is the reduced direct time with children and a lack of consistency in support. Both of these factors are ultimately damaging to both fostered children and foster families.

*"Always seem to be the minimum number of visits which means the children are then using our social work (i.e. fostering social workers) support to respond to their needs."*

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 616 responses, 506 (82 per cent) fostered for a local authority/trust and 109 (18 per cent) for an independent fostering provider (IFP).

### Access to social care services

Two thirds (67 per cent) felt that cuts had impacted negatively upon their and their fostered child's access to other services beyond their fostering service. Overwhelmingly, the comments focused on a lack of respite provision and problematic or delayed access to mental health services for children.

### Foster care fees and allowances

Many respondents cited that allowances had been frozen for a number of years, while the cost of living increased. Moreover, some reported that they were now expected to pay for things that had previously been covered by an additional allowance, such as mileage and replacing equipment and breakages. Overall, there was a feeling among two-thirds of foster carers (70 per cent) that their allowances had been negatively impacted by local authority cuts. In addition, a similar percentage (73 per cent) said that cuts have had a negative impact on the fees they receive for fostering.

The impact of this financial pressure means that some foster carers will be spending out of their own pockets on the children in their care, or that some fostered children are going without.

*"Finance seems to colour every decision negatively. I feel guilty if I make any requests."*

## 3. Conclusion

Foster carers are at the centre of the lives of the children in their care, and are best positioned to see how budget cuts are affecting those children. The Fostering Network is extremely concerned that so many foster carers, who responded to this survey, feel that the wellbeing of children in foster care is being damaged by funding cuts to local authority budgets. Foster carers felt that recent cuts are having an adverse impact on their fostered children's access to vital support and services.

The picture painted by the respondents to our survey is a system in crisis. The overwhelming numbers of children entering care and the complexity of their needs means many more children require specialist services and support. However, due to the cuts, these services are being reduced, especially early intervention services, and the remaining support is under increasing pressure.

This report throws down a challenge to the Government to properly recognise both their role as corporate parents of children in care and the vital part that foster care plays in giving these children loving homes and the best chance of a successful life. We urge them to fund local authorities to ensure that foster carers are financially and practically supported to take on the task they devote their lives to doing, as well as ensuring that both foster carers and the children they look after have access to the support and services they need.

# The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. By working with foster families, and the services that support them, we help everyone who is fostered to achieve the very best they can.

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