

# CUTS

## the view from foster carers

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

### Who we are

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming fostered children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. We are the essential network for foster care, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children, inspiring, motivating and supporting them to make foster care better. Together, we're a powerful catalyst for change, influencing and shaping fostering policy and practice at every level.

We work to ensure all fostered children have a positive experience of family life, supporting them to have high aspirations, to overcome the challenges of their early lives and to achieve their very best.

We help foster carers to improve children's lives. We champion the vital role they and their families play in helping fostered children, and work to ensure they are properly recognised, valued and supported.

## Cuts: the view from foster carers

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## 1. Introduction

The number of looked after children is now at its highest level since 1985 and is rising year on year. In England 52,050 children were living in foster families on 31 March 2015. This is nearly four-fifths (79 per cent) of the 66,030 children in care looked after away from home. Foster carers provide children with stability, security, attachment, and often their first positive experience of family life.

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 the UK 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 732 responses 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."*

### Who responded to the survey

In total The Fostering Network received 732 responses to the survey. Of these, 596 (82 per cent) fostered for a local authority/trust and 135 (18 per cent) for an independent fostering provider (IFP). For comparison<sup>1</sup>, in England 68 per cent of children in foster care are in a local authority placement and 32 per cent are in an IFP placement. The spread of respondents across the UK was broadly in line with the relative populations of the four countries. We restricted the survey to those who had been fostering for three years or more to allow respondents to make an assessment of the impact of the cuts over a period of time.

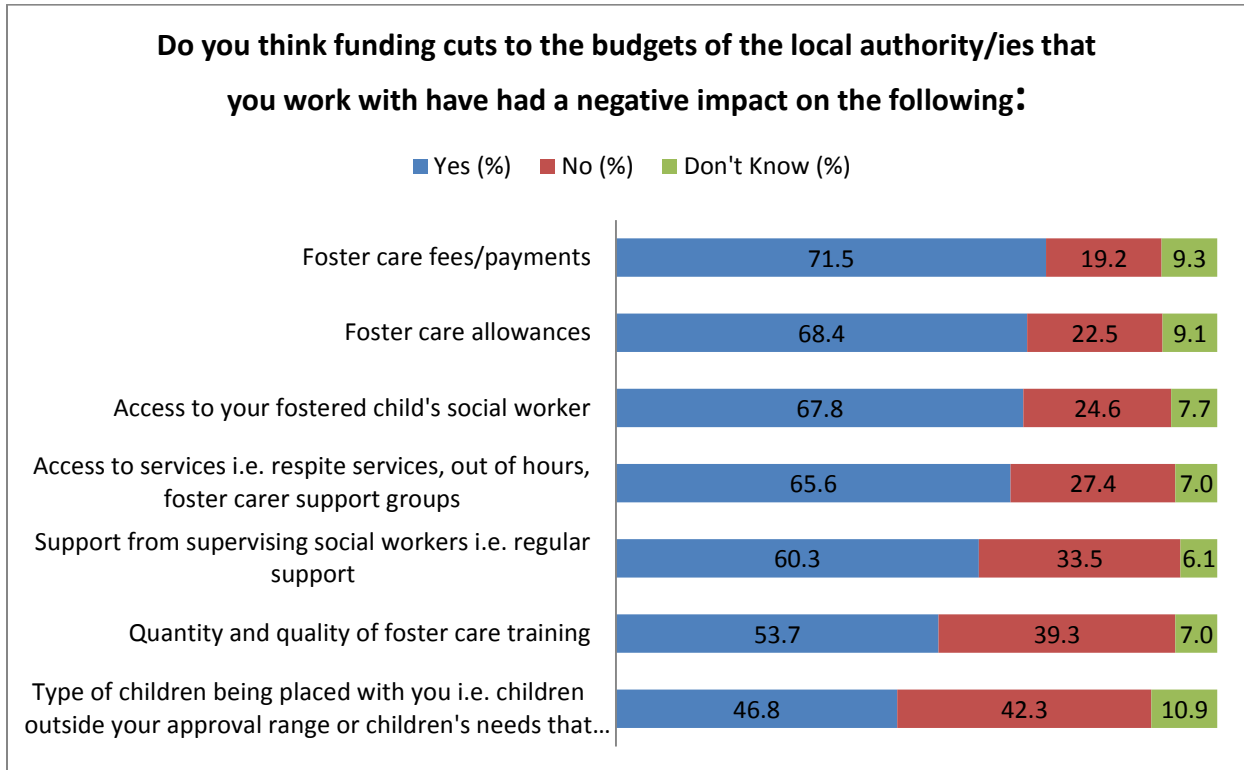
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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-placements-as-at-31-march-2014>

## 2. Impact of the funding cuts on foster care

### Impact of cuts on specific areas of foster care

We asked respondents to answer “yes” “no” or “don’t know” to whether they felt funding cuts had impacted upon a number of different aspects of day to day fostering. The results are shown in the following graph:



It is immediately apparent that the impact of cuts is causing widespread concern for foster carers in most aspects of their work, with only one category having less than 50 per cent “yes” responses. We will explore the issues below in order of highest to lowest impact.

## Fees

While only roughly half of foster carers in the UK receive any kind of fee in any case<sup>2</sup>, over 70 per cent of respondents said they have felt a negative impact on the fee for the work they do. The top three themes that emerged from the comments section were:

- Fees frozen, sometimes for many years
- Fees not keeping up with the cost of living
- Foster carers feeling overworked and undervalued.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*“We are expected to do more and more for no remuneration”*

*“Fees are not attractive enough to encourage more people to become foster carers.”*

*“I am trying to get skills fees but even with my Level 3 childcare and a degree and 30 years child care experience I am still on a ‘no fee’ skills level and receive no payment for 24/7 care.”*

## Allowances

Over two thirds (68 per cent) of respondents felt that allowances (the money from the fostering service to be spent on the needs of the child) had been adversely affected by cuts. The top three themes that emerged in the comments section were:

- Allowances frozen, often for many years. This translates to a cut in real terms
- Allowances failing to cover the cost of looking after the child, meaning the foster carer was dipping into their own pocket to meet the child’s needs
- Allowances cut – one foster carer said £2,000 per year had been taken away from their allowance.

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.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

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<sup>2</sup> The Fostering Network’s State of the Nation Survey, 2014

*"We have had no rise in payments for a number of years and with local authority budgets set to decrease there is no prospect of a raise in allowances any time soon. In real terms with the rising cost of living this means the young people are worse off. This can impact on things like the carer's ability to pay for extras such as school camps and more expensive sports such as horse riding which are so beneficial to young people. Different local authorities prioritise differently from each other so some children may be able to access these things whilst others cannot."*

*"Every bit of money taken off us is less money to spend enhancing the lives of the children."*

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

*"I have been a social care 25 years never before has practice been so secondary to money."*

*"Pressure is being put on carers to use the fostering allowance for things that were not expected before eg to pay for activities and lunch during contact sessions. The petrol allowance/mileage rate now starts after 60 miles not 40. Emergency clothing money gone down 50 percent..."*

### **Access to fostered child's social worker**

Over two thirds (68 per cent) of respondents felt that cuts were reducing the quality of this service. The comments focused on three main areas:

- Social workers are overworked
- There is a high turnover of social workers, with many more agency workers than before
- This level of disruption impacts the children due to lack of continuity of relationships and missed appointments.

The general impression is that foster carers really want to work together with social workers to improve children's lives and that they have great empathy for the stresses their colleagues are under. Children's social work, from a foster carer perspective, is being run on a 'bare minimum provision' basis and it is close to breaking point.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*"Always seems 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"*

*"I'm aware that there is immense pressure in the Children In Need team with increasing workloads, and dependency on expensive agency cover. Budget cuts will inevitably inhibit recruitment, retention and training of social workers. Because of high caseloads, our children's*

*social worker is stressed and extremely busy – sometimes you feel guilty phoning her or asking her to come out to visit because we can see how tired she is.”*

*“My foster child's social worker is massively under pressure and has too many children in her care. Currently she has 29 children which is far too many to give each one the time they need.”*

*“Social workers not able to spend enough time with the children, therefore unable to form relationships and earn their trust.”*

*“The turnover of social workers is quite ridiculous: we have had four this year for one child alone.”*

### Access to services

Two thirds (66 per cent) of respondents felt that cuts had impacted negatively upon their access to other services beyond their fostering service. Stark differences seem to be appearing between both neighbouring authorities and independent or local authority placements. Overwhelmingly, the comments focused on lack of respite provision and poor support groups. Concerns were also raised about problematic or delayed access to mental health services for children.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*“Ha: respite – what a laugh. Often talked about; rarely seen.”*

*“I and another specialist carer haven't had a holiday for over a year as respite cannot be found / funded for our severely disabled children. We have had to fight for every hour's respite that we get and even then it's questioned and attempts are made to cut it.”*

*“Stop making foster carers use their friends as support for respite: it's unprofessional. Also the fight to get additional support for a young person is ridiculous. Support services are becoming like hen's teeth. I often hear children's managers now tell me “it is normal teenage behaviour”, in order to duck responsibility to spend more on resources! Frightening.”*

### Support from supervising social worker

Three out of five respondents (60 per cent) felt that support from their supervising social worker was adversely affected by cuts. The top three themes from the comments in this section were:

- An overriding sense that social workers were overworked due to unmanageable caseloads
- Reduced visits and supervision, particularly less face to face contact



- Reduction in support staff leading to inconsistent personnel, which is damaging to the relationship between foster carer and fostering service.

Many respondents felt that they did receive good support from their social workers, but often these comments had an element of concern because they knew that their social worker was becoming more stressed due to increased caseloads. Some foster carers even felt that they were taking on some of the social worker's role.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*"Good support offered but so many are working with stressful workloads causing them to be off sick."*

*"It has not gone down but we are aware that the social workers now have more paper work and we are now covering for them in places."*

*"My monthly visits have been cut to once every two months with a telephone call in between, and the timing of visits seem rushed and you can't explain your needs in the time given. They have too many cases to look after."*

*"There have been so many cuts to social workers they are spread too thin. It is difficult to pin them down when you need support and we don't have regular contact with our supervising social worker."*

### Quantity and quality of training

Just over half (53 per cent) of respondents felt that training was being affected by cuts. While there were many comments praising the training they received, the majority were concerned that there had been a noticeable reduction in both the availability and quality of training in recent years. Foster carers reported having to seek out and fund training for themselves either via the internet or by engaging with independent trainers directly.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*"For 18 months there was no training officer to save money. Poor training offered. Now there is a person in post, but at reduced salary. As foster carers we have provided our own at a cost to ourselves."*

*"Training is now just a tick box exercise."*

*“Over the past three years, I have seen the number and variety of training courses change - in one year we there was no training available at all - difficult for us, but especially hard on new carers. Not all of that was due to finances - our service was going through a massive upheaval, but I know (having worked for local authorities for a decade) that training is often the first to go when money is tight. Training is vital - to do our jobs well, feel valued and invested in, learn from other carers, allow for professional development - all things that help retain carers, and make sure that the children are well cared for.”*

*“Training budgets are being squeezed and, recently, in our local authority, foster carers were asked to fund their own training for a particular course!”*

### Children being placed

A perceived adverse impact on the type of children being placed was the only category not to attract over 50 per cent of “yes” answers. However, due to a high “don’t know” response (most likely from foster carers with no recent change in placements), there were still more respondents who felt that cuts were causing problems in this category than not.

The primary concern was about children being placed outside of the approval age range. Many comments also touched on fears that by not accepting children outside their approval range, the foster carers may be blacklisted or frozen out.

Concerns were also raised that children with specific needs were being placed with families without the necessary training or support in place to meet those needs.

Another theme that emerged was a fear that children were being taken into care too late in an effort to save money, and were therefore even more damaged by the time they made it to the foster family – making the role of the foster carer more difficult.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*“Children who should be in therapeutic placements are being placed in unqualified foster families.”*

*“0 to 18 is being forced on carers who are not happy with this massive age range, which does not fit carer’s family / field of expertise. Significantly different skills are required caring for a new-born versus caring for a teenager.”*

*“Approval doesn't come into it any more, if you refuse a child it is almost like you are blacklisted. We refused a child outside our approval range and didn't get another child for a year.”*

*“Children with more complex needs are being placed with normal carers, as therapeutic care is no longer used, and very little extra support is given. You have to prove you need it even when they have provided it for past carers.”*

*“Increasingly, we have found local authorities being economical with the truth about a possible placement and as a result we have ended up caring for children who shouldn't be in a mainstream fostering placement.”*

*“Many brought in far too late; constant “firefighting” rather than remedial work.”*

*“Our profile has been changed from 0-8 to 0-18. Why did we spend almost a year being assessed to find out our strengths, when they change it then overnight?”*

*“Some carers are not being supported with difficult children, and then these poor children get moved, and moved, and moved. It's not good enough.”*

*“We were given a child who was way beyond our ability but it saved them money as the child had been years in residential care. We were first time carers and struggled through for over five years before the stress got too much. We are left feeling bad about giving up, bereft at losing the child we have grown to love, and inadequate as foster carers. We did our best but this was beyond us and there was no professional help with this.”*

### 3. Impact of the funding cuts on children and young people

As part of the survey we asked foster carers whether they felt the changes to funding had impacted negatively on the children and young people they care for; 45 per cent of respondents felt the cuts have impacted negatively on children.

Many respondents commented on this question and the overwhelming theme of the responses was the lack of access to mental health services. Some respondents felt that even in crisis situations access to mental health services was denied. Long waiting lists and high thresholds were repeatedly cited as barriers to accessing mental health and counselling services. The other key themes from the comments were:

- Reduced access to children’s social workers due to high caseloads and high turnover
- Lack of consistency in children’s social workers and limited direct contact time for children
- Cuts to early intervention services and respite services.
- Access to services is reliant on the carer’s ability to fight for the service rather than being based on the child’s needs.

Selection of quotes from foster carers:

*“Carers have to really fight for children’s rights.”*

*“Mental health issues are prevalent in our children, but access (to services) is only usually forthcoming after either a serious incident or placement breakdown, which in turn makes things more traumatic and ultimately more expensive too!”*

*“Mental health services can’t be obtained even when the situation is desperate.”*

*“Children do not have time with their social worker to go through things thoroughly and frequently because of other demands. Things are missed and left out because there is no time and paperwork has a priority it never used to have.”*

## 4. Additional information from the survey

We concluded the survey by inviting respondents to provide additional comments. A total of 319 foster carers took the opportunity to make a comment in this section. Of these, only seven stated that they were satisfied with their current fostering experience. There were four main themes that emerged in the rest of the comments, and they are noted below in order of popularity.

### Cuts contributing to a social work crisis

The vast majority of comments focused on the opinion that local authority budgetary cuts were contributing to a crisis in social work, and that this was having a knock-on effect on children in foster care. Many felt that the whole service was close to breaking point and that foster carers were being undervalued.

*“The cuts to local services mean that Government objectives are in tatters... so they throw millions at crisis work when the savings come from preventative work. Therapy, support, and advice workers at the start of problems are replaced by crisis intervention workers when it’s already too late... we are creating a nation of people with mental health issues – including the workers themselves... amazing (fostering) work is happening but the system is sick and dying and no one really cares.”*

*“What is happening to poor and disadvantaged families is criminal: they are driving people towards needing services that will soon not exist or be so stretched that they may as well not exist... we are facing a crisis in children’s services.”*

### Financial constraints for foster carers

Foster carers, as noted earlier in the survey, are feeling the pinch in their pockets from cuts – not just to allowances and fees but from the welfare system as well.

*“New benefit changes have resulted in many foster carers simply giving up and looking for full time work.”*

*“Foster carers work a seven day 24 hour week... finance for carers is absolutely minimal considering the hours demanded.”*

### Poor mental health support for fostered children

Again, as already noted earlier in the survey, there is widespread concern about mental health support. Adequate support to recover from past trauma is essential for fostered children to thrive. This kind of support is sadly lacking and it appears to be getting worse as cuts are taking effect.

*“For our foster children the services of CAMHS has been key to everything. This took **two years** of constant fighting to get put in place... if the money is invested in children’s mental health then there will be far less of a bill to pick up when they become adults.”*

### A need for foster carers to be treated as professionals

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.

*“Please treat foster carers like the professionals we are, and don’t take advantage of our good nature by enforcing cuts to the service and restricting us financially which prevents our placements being offered the best of which they deserve.”*

*“It’s lucky that foster carers are so committed: we don’t strike, we’re always there for the children - what would happen if we followed other companies or organisations (and went on strike)? We get taken for granted, but it’s our unconditional love of vulnerable children and the rewards of their progress that gives us the dedication to carry on.”*

## 5. 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.

Throughout the survey respondents highlighted the impact of reduced social work time on foster families. Many foster carers are being placed under pressure to take children with highly complex needs, sometimes outside their approval range and without access to specialist services. All these factors can lead to placement instability and multiple moves for children in care.

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.

The purpose of the care system should be to protect the child from further harm, offer an environment where the child can rehabilitate from past harm and neglect and improve the outcomes for the child so that they can realise their potential. However, in the current climate where, according to a National Audit Office report<sup>3</sup>, services are not being commissioned based on thorough assessments of the child's needs but rather based on costs, we have to ask if society is failing our current population of looked after children and young people?

This report throws down a challenge to the Government to 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.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Children-in-care1.pdf>

# 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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