Education during the Covid-19 pandemic and transitioning back to school: Experiences of the fostering sector

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. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Introduction
Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic we have heard how fostering households across the UK quickly adapted to support children in these unprecedented times. Many foster carers assumed additional responsibilities and roles overnight: supporting children with home learning, supervising virtual contact with birth families in their own home, facilitating virtual social worker visits as well as all their usual fostering duties and responsibilities.

Lockdown has had a significant impact on fostering households. While some foster carers have reported an increase in challenging behaviour and concerns about the wellbeing of children, some fostering families have seen benefits of children being in one place for a sustained period of time and they have seen children feeling settled and calm.

Children in foster care have the same aspirations as other children, however it is well documented that looked after children and young people can face particular challenges in relation to education. On average children in care have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to others of the same age[1]. There is also evidence of disproportional risk regarding school absence and exclusions which are also strongly linked to the number of placement moves a child may have experienced[2]. In addition, there is a higher proportion of children with additional learning needs within the looked after children population compared with the general population and the children in need population[3]. To

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[1] Sebba J Luke N The educational progress and outcomes of children in care: editorial *Oxford Review of Education* 45, 4 (2019), 435 – 442
[2] Sebba J et al The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data (Nuffield Foundation, 2015)
[3] Department for Education Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England, 31 March 2019, 26 March 2020

address this, looked after children across the UK should have individualised education plans and additional funding is provided to schools to support their learning.

To understand more about fostered children's experiences of education during the pandemic we launched a rapid response survey for foster carers and fostering services across the UK. The survey results have helped provide an understanding about both the educational experience of fostered children during lockdown and their needs as they transition back to school.

The survey findings

The rapid response survey was open from 18 – 30 June 2020. We asked foster carers, fostering services and children and young people in foster care about their experiences of education during the pandemic and feelings about transitioning back to school.

The first part of the survey for foster carers and fostering services covered attendance at school of fostered children, provisions children received from their educational providers, the frequency of contact from the educational provider, whether they received any equipment to support learning if necessary and the experiences of the foster carer supporting the child through these changes. The second part of the survey covered children transitioning back to school and what support was felt children would need when doing this.

Foster carers were also given prompt questions to go through with their children and young people to gather their views and experiences. The Fostering Network's staff members also used the prompts in focus groups. The views of children and young people are appended to this report (see Appendix 1).

The following section of this report details the survey's key findings and recommendations. Any names mentioned are pseudonyms.

1. Demographics of the survey respondents

The survey received 487 foster carer responses representing 870 fostered children and young people from across the UK. We received 48 responses from fostering service members of staff. In addition, we were able to gather the thoughts and feelings of a small group of children and young people about their experiences of education and thoughts about returning to school available in Appendix 1.

1.1 Foster carers

- 73 per cent of the respondents fostered for a local authority or health and social care trust and 27 per cent fostered for an independent fostering/voluntary provider.
- 84 per cent were non-relative foster carers, 12 per cent were kinship/family and friends foster carers, two per cent were short break/respite carers and two per cent were in post-18 arrangements.
- 57 per cent were fostering in England, 24 per cent in Northern Ireland, 15 per cent in Scotland and four per cent in Wales.
- 43 per cent of foster carers surveyed had one child in placement, 35 per cent had two children, 16 per cent had three children and six per cent had four or more.

1.2 The children in the foster carers' care

- The majority of children were of secondary school age (34 per cent were aged 11-15 years), closely followed by those of primary school age (31 per cent were aged 5-10). 11 per cent were aged 0 to four years, 10 per cent 16-18 years and six per cent were aged 18 or above.
- 76 per cent attended a mainstream early years, school or college provision, 12 per cent attended a special school, five per cent were in higher or further education, an apprenticeship or work experience and seven per cent in alternative or no provision.

1.3 The fostering service staff

- 33 per cent were fostering service/team managers, 31 per cent were supervising social workers, eight per cent were heads of service and the remaining 28 per cent were in some other role.
- 67 per cent worked for an independent fostering agency and 33 per cent for a local authority or health and social care trust.
- 86 per cent of these responses were from people working in England.

2. Education during the pandemic
2.1 Experiences of families whose children remained at home

Key findings

- Foster carers reported that 78 per cent of their children were not attending school when schools were open to key worker and vulnerable children only.
  - o 49 per cent because it was decided not to send the child.
  - o 21 per cent were unable to access a place due to school closure.
  - o Five per cent because there were no spaces available for them, either due to their behavioural/support needs or because the school could only offer provision to the children of key workers. Fostering services also reported some cases where schools were unable to meet children's needs in school, either due to not offering enough hours or concerns over possibly having to restrain the child and therefore breach social distancing guidelines.
  - o Three per cent because the child refused to attend.
- There were often several contributing factors influencing the decision about school attendance during the pandemic, however the top reasons for not attending were:
  - o the team around the child decided it was best for the child to remain at home;
  - o the household was shielding; and
  - o it was important that the child was not treated differently to their peers/other children in the household.
- Of those children who did not attend school, different provisions were offered at different times. Foster carers reported that:
  - o 74 per cent stated they were given learning resources or guidance for home schooling.
  - o 21 per cent stated they received virtual teaching.
  - o 10 per cent were offered no provision throughout the entire lockdown period.

Some foster carer respondents noted that their children were not offered a place in an educational setting on the basis that their individual needs and behaviours meant they would be unlikely to adhere to public health guidelines.

> *"School were very clear they didn't want them there and basically said they'd send them home if they went in. So they'd be set up to fail"* – foster carer

Schools and governments need to consider children who were disengaged from education prior to lockdown as well as those who have disengaged from education during lockdown; especially given that some children have been denied a school place due to their needs and behaviours.

Through educating at home, foster carers have gained a unique insight into the education of looked after children. Coming out of the pandemic, their thoughts and experiences should be fully considered in educational planning for their children. The quote below encapsulates a number of experiences felt by foster carers about home educating:

> *"Home schooling the children has been very tiring, challenging and sometimes stressful but has also been incredibly rewarding and I feel a better connection to their education and learning"* – foster carer

2.2 Experiences of families whose children attended school during the pandemic

Key findings

- Foster carers reported that 22 per cent of their children attended school during the pandemic.
    - Eight per cent of their children attended school the whole time that schools were open for key worker and vulnerable children only.
    - 14 per cent of children attended some of the time, be that a few days a week from the beginning or that it was decided that the child should attend after a certain date.
- This is backed up by the fostering services who stated that on average, around 19 per cent of their children were attending school.
- The top reason for attending school was that the school provided a routine that the child needed for their own wellbeing.
- Of those children who attended school, different provision was offered at different times. Foster carers reported that:
    - 96 per cent of children received some provision in their usual school with the same or familiar members of staff.
    - 56 per cent received some provision in their usual school, but with different or unfamiliar members of staff.
    - 19 per cent received some provision in a different school or building with unfamiliar staff.

Although the top reason for sending a child to school was to give them a routine, interestingly, this was also the fourth highest reason for not sending a child to school. This was because of concerns about the routine being different, there being a lack of consistency for the child and this provoking anxiety. These findings reflect both how individualised approaches needed to be taken to cater for fostered children's needs and that lockdown could have exacerbated mental health difficulties. This echoes findings by the University of Oxford's UK wide survey Co-SPACE[4] – an ongoing survey capturing how families are coping during the Covid-19 pandemic – which found an increase in mental health difficulties and that the age of the child affected how the child was coping with the change.

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[4] Emerging Minds Co-SPACE study news

3. Support offered by educational authorities
Key findings

- The frequency of contact from educational providers about individual children's needs varied. While carers told us that 32 per cent of children's educational providers contacted them once a week, 14 per cent had not contacted carers at all.
- 36 per cent of foster carers stated that they had been provided with equipment (such as laptops or tablets) to facilitate learning[5]. Of these, the majority had been provided by the local authority or health and social care trust or the school.
- Eight per cent of foster carers stated that they provided the devices themselves for at least one of their children.
- In England, the virtual school acts as a local authority body with oversight of the statutory duty to promote the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are or who have been in care so that they achieve educational outcomes comparable to their peers. 62 per cent of foster carers in England said they had not received any support from their local virtual school during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In each country of the UK there are funds allocated and staff within schools to support looked after children's educational needs. In England there is a designated teacher for looked after children who works with the virtual school and local authority who hold the pupil premium plus funding for looked after children to ensure it meets the child's needs. It is extremely concerning that in England nearly two-thirds of fostered children have had no support for their specific needs from their virtual school during lockdown.

4. Insights into looked after children's education
4.1 Individualised learning for looked after children

A key theme from the survey was the importance of individualised learning for looked after children. Foster carers commented that their home learning experience highlighted the lack of an individualised approach and a lack of differentiated work specific to their child's needs.

They also expressed how their children benefitted from having more personal educational support provided for them, whether this was at home or within a formal educational setting. For example:

> *"Jake appeared to benefit from the 1:1 at home and has enjoyed learning more"* – foster carer

> *"Ameera has done well during lockdown, some pressures around school have been removed and she's been able to learn at her own pace"* – foster carer

The group that felt this lack of individualisation the most were those caring for children with additional learning needs. This was stated by the fostering service staff members who mentioned that education during the pandemic has been harder for children with additional learning needs who have missed the support of schools. The foster carers who look after these children also stated that the support received was not appropriate for their child because of the specialised nature of their needs. Foster carers expressed that:

> *"Support offered but often over her head as dyslexic so behind in year group, hence had to build our own curriculum"* – foster carer

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[5] NB: Some children may have already been provided with devices and equipment by their fostering service prior to the pandemic.

"she has learning difficulties and we found a lot of the work sent we had to modify to her personal needs" – foster carer

"One child has coped well but the other (who receives learning support when in school) has at times struggled" – foster carer

4.2 Positive impact on the wellbeing of children

Additionally, from the fostering services, although the comments suggest children's experiences have been mixed with many missing their friends, it has been observed that children are less anxious as a result of some external pressures being removed, such as attending school.

This was also corroborated by the foster carers. When asked about the impact the change to schooling has had on the fostering household, in an open text answer, 22 per cent explicitly mentioned a positive impact on the wellbeing of the child and better relationships between their fostered children and members of the household. Foster carers stated that:

"We feel time during lockdown has been a positive experience for both the children in our care in enabling us and them to develop and deepen relationship" – foster carer

"TJ moved in just before lockdown so I feel he benefitted by getting to know us better and gained confidence" – foster carer

"One child has attachment issues, and has behaved better being at home with us" – foster carer

For some, having this period of time at home to build relationships and avoiding stressors such as school, movement between contact centres and home and, in some cases, the face to face contact itself has seemed to have a stabilising effect on placements.

5. Transitioning back to school
Key findings

- 74 per cent of foster carers said they were unaware of any special arrangements in place to support looked after children when they return to school.
- We asked foster carers what they thought were the top three most important forms of support needed for all children when they return to school. They chose:
    - Extra tuition including one to one tuition (selected by 58 per cent of respondents).
    - Flexible and individualised transition arrangements (selected by 39 per cent of respondents).
    - Mental health support (selected by 38 per cent of respondents).
- We asked the same of fostering services, similarly, they chose:
    - Flexible and individualised transition arrangements (selected by 83 per cent of respondents).
    - Extra tuition including one to one tuition (selected by 75 per cent of respondents).
    - Guidance for carers and other professionals around vulnerable and disadvantaged children transitioning back to school (selected by 75 per cent of respondents).

Foster carers' experiences of home learning have given them a real insight into the education of looked after children. Their views align with proposals from other pieces of research, such as that by the research group Excluded Lives at the University of Oxford, calling for the adoption of a needs-

based, holistic approach involving good collaboration and communication within and between services, and flexible and responsive curricula[6].

Feelings about what support should be made available resonated with what foster carers stated their biggest concerns were about children returning to school. After coronavirus/public health concerns, foster carers' top three concerns were:

- how their children are going to catch up (not only educationally but also socially and emotionally) after having missed so much school;
- how their children are going to readjust to being back at school and the 'new normal'; and
- how their child(ren)'s mental health and wellbeing is going to be impacted particularly in the context of pre-existing attachment and trauma issues.

Concerns raised by fostering service staff about children transitioning back to school fell into two categories. Firstly, that children would find it difficult emotionally to adapt to the change and being away from their foster carers in the day. Secondly, that children would struggle to adjust to formal learning again, with some people raising concerns that young people would be excluded if they could not follow social distancing rules and three others concerned that looked after children would have fallen behind academically during lockdown.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that the vast majority of children in foster care have been not attending educational settings and have received very different offers and experiences of education throughout the coronavirus pandemic. While some have thrived from more one to one support and the removal of some external pressures, others have experienced increased anxiety and other mental health problems and have been excluded before being given the chance to attend educational provisions. The experience of educating during lockdown has also brought to the fore the need for more individualised education plans for looked after children.

The feelings expressed about transitioning back to school by the fostering sector need to be listened to and a flexible, supportive approach taken which prioritises children and young people's wellbeing and mental health.

The role of the foster carer in the team around the child will be more important than ever when the autumn term begins. Foster carers will know best the child's needs and feelings and it will be essential that they are involved in the dialogue with schools and other professionals as the vast majority have been educating their children at home throughout this time. It is also important that the child is consulted with and given the opportunity to feed into their own education plans.

We welcome the funding already announced by governments to support children as they return to school but the funding requirements will need to be reviewed as children transition back to school and additional funding provided as required. However, as well as funding there may also need to be a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their

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[6] Daniels H Porter J Tawell A Emery H School exclusion risks after COVID-19 (Excluded Lives, Department of Education, University of Oxford June 2020)

educational needs during the transition period and beyond. One such approach that could be taken is detailed by Carpenter and Carpenter[7] in their recovery curriculum.

Contact details:

Kate Lawson, policy manager

Daisy Elliott, policy and research officer

policy@fostering.net

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[7] Carpenter B Carpenter M A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post pandemic (Evidence for learning, 2020)

Recommendations

Recommendations for governments

1. The Fostering Network welcomes the additional education funding announced by the Scottish, Welsh and Westminster governments already to address the impact of Covid-19 on education . We call for the government of Northern Ireland to introduce similar funding. As children transition back to school, their new and emerging needs will have to be assessed and additional funding and support allocated if necessary. It is vital that this funding covers any new or emerging needs of looked after children or those previously looked after. Existing funding should not be used to meet these new needs.
2. Mental health funding will need to be reviewed for those children with a history of trauma as they transition back to school and deal with the impact of the pandemic.
3. Governments must ensure all schools have adequate funds, guidance and resources to:

- put mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of transition planning
- increase one to one and small group learning support
- increase provision for children with special and additional learning needs
- respond flexibly to individual children's needs when making transition arrangements.

Recommendations for education departments

4. To provide specific guidance for schools on supporting looked after children and those with additional learning needs. This could help towards addressing the variability in provision experienced by fostered children during lockdown.
5. Guide and fund schools to make tailored transition arrangements for fostered children on their return to school. There may also need to be a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs during the transition period and beyond.
6. Offer clear direction to schools on approach to behaviour policies in the public health context. While public health needs to be a priority at this time to ensure children, staff and families are kept as safe as possible, schools need to be encouraged to adopt a restorative rather than punitive approach to behaviour.

Recommendations for schools

7. Schools should consider a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs to engage all children in the transition back to school.
8. Schools must recognise the importance of the foster carer role in the team around child and consult with foster carers fully in the transition planning and beyond for their child as they are well placed to assess their needs.
9. Ensure there is no delay in accessing specialist support that has been delayed, or put on hold, due to Covid-19.
10. Create tailored transition plans for fostered children where appropriate.
11. The primary focus of re-engagement should be on children's mental health   and wellbeing. This will support their academic re-engagement.
12. Each school setting should have a member of staff available for looked after children. This staff member should be available for children during the school day and provide a link between home, school and the child's social worker and anyone else involved in supporting the child.
13. Each school should review fostered children's educational needs prior to the transition back to school full-time to ensure that resources are in place to meet existing as well as new needs. The foster carer needs to be fully involved in any review of the child's educational needs to ensure

their views and expertise can be fed in. The existing allowances should not be used to meet additional needs related to Covid-19.

Recommendations for virtual schools

14. Virtual schools, or bodies with similar responsibilities, need to fully engage with all the children they are responsible for. Their role will be vital in the transition back to school.
15. Every looked after child needs to have a consistent and transparent offer from their virtual school or body with similar responsibility. This is essential to try and overcome the postcode lottery of support for looked after children experienced during the pandemic.

Recommendation for fostering services

16. To support foster carers to ensure their views and educational experience of lockdown is heard by all those involved in the team around a child to allow the best transition for each looked after child to be developed.

Recommendations for foster carers

17. To ensure clear communication between themselves, the school and the children's social worker and their full involvement in the transition planning for the child(ren) in their care.
18. To promote the positives about returning to school to their fostered children, such as seeing their friends. The variability in educational provision and support during lockdown will lead to a range of emotions from carers about their child going back to school. Children will have mixed emotions about returning to school. Foster carers should communicate positively with children whilst acknowledging their anxieties and reach out to others for support if necessary.
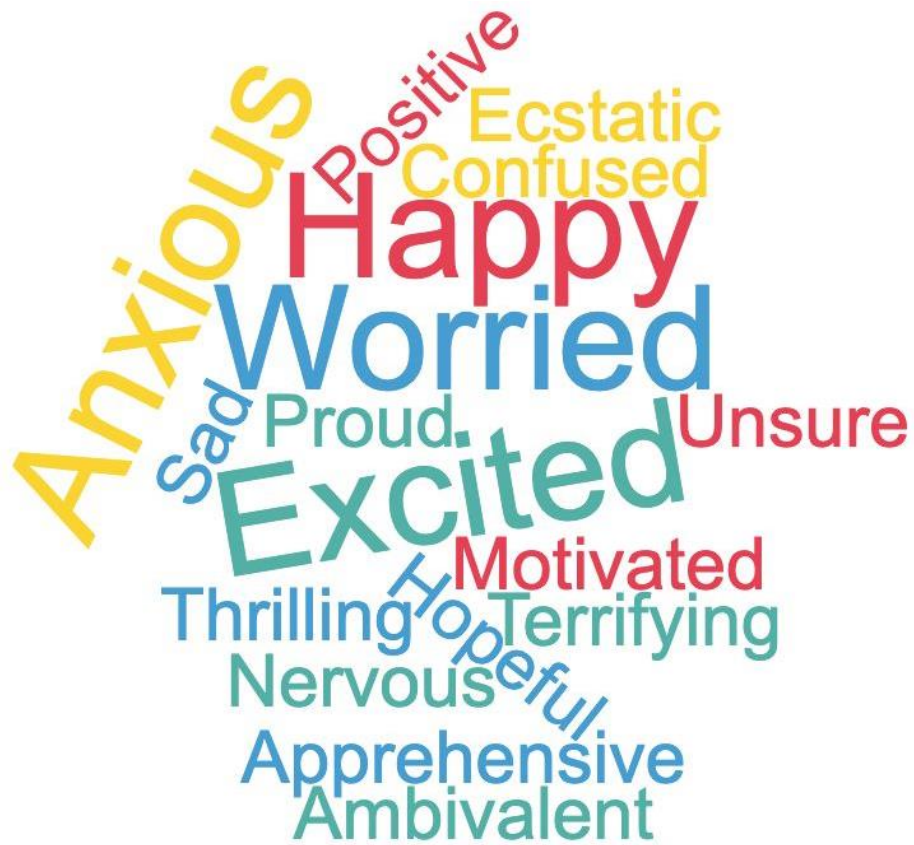
Appendix 1: The views and experiences of children and young people

Seven children and young people from the age of eight to 18 from across the UK shared their views and experiences. We asked them to choose three words (although some chose more than three) to best describe their experiences of education during lockdown and their feelings about transitioning back to school/their education provider. The below word clouds depict what they shared.

Figure 1 Children and young people's views on education during the pandemic

Figure 2 Children and young people's views on transitioning back to their education providers

Appendix 2: Useful resources

- [Trauma informed schools](#) provide appropriate training for schools, communities and organisations so that they become trauma informed and mentally healthy places for all.
- NSPCC have created the following guidance to help [promote mental health and wellbeing in children.](#)
- NSPCC have also created guidance about [returning to school after the coronavirus lockdown.](#)
- ASDAN have [free resources to support home learning and educating](#). They also have [Lift Off](#), a programme for transition from primary to secondary school, but may now have relevance for young people in year 8 to settle back into school, and [Accelerating Progress](#), which supports young people aged 14-16 to achieve a good grade at GCSE in English or Maths.
- Emerging Minds has created an evidence-based resource for parents/carers on [supporting children and young people with worries about Covid-19.](#)