

The Education Committee: Fostering Inquiry in England

Submission from The Fostering Network, November 2016

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 the Education Select Committee Fostering Inquiry in England

- The Fostering Network welcomes the Education Select Committee's inquiry into fostering in England. Over the last few years the political and policy focus has been on other areas such as adoption, special guardianship orders and residential care. 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 both with the Inquiry and the Government's imminent stocktake.
- We would hope to see evidence and recommendations highlighted by the Committee incorporated into the Government's stocktake of fostering.
- Our written submission highlights the key issues 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 report due to be published later this year. All statistics in this submission refer to the unpublished State of the Nation report, which was informed by survey responses from just under 2,000 foster carers in England. We would be happy to expand on any of the points highlighted in our response.

Introductory points

- We are clear that while some issues in fostering would be best 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 improvement.

- 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 Inquiry.
- There are challenges around measuring the impact of fostering (or any other form of care) in terms of children’s outcomes. This was highlighted in the National Audit Office report, which found in 2014 that the Department for Education could not demonstrate that it is meeting its objectives for children in foster and residential care. The report stated that the DfE did not have indicators by which it measures the effectiveness of the care system. In addition, there was a lack of understanding of what factors contribute towards the costs of care. We would like to see the Inquiry and stocktake try to address some of these challenging issues which are essential to the improvement of the foster care system.
- A growing issue among foster carers is the issue of employment status. At the moment, foster carers are neither employed, nor self employed in the sense that they can only work for one fostering service at once. We do not address this issue more thoroughly in this submission, but do highlight it as a key area for urgent exploration.

General issues

- The crux of the issue is ensuring that every child in care is found the right placement, and that where this is with a foster family, both child and carer are supported to help make the placement work. We would urge each local authority to 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. A needs analysis would also allow for different types of commissioning models to emerge and commissioning that was more needs and outcome based rather than cost based. It would also help to ensure that fostering services – local

authority and independent fostering provider – only recruited foster carers for whom there was an actual need.

Workforce issues

- **General information:** Foster carers come from all backgrounds and range from their 20s to 80s. However, they are disproportionately female and over 40; this is an ageing workforce. Around 12% of the workforce leaves or retires every year, and The Fostering Network estimates that a further 7,600 more foster families are needed in the next year alone across England.
- **Finance:** The vast majority of foster carers receive at least the minimum fostering allowance recommended by the Government, which is to cover the costs of looking after a fostered child. However, when questioned whether this allowance actually covers the cost of looking after fostered children the number who answered yes has fallen sharply in the last two years. In 2014 80% foster carers felt the allowances covered their costs but in 2016 this figure is only just over 40%. Foster carers are reporting that their general allowances are being frozen while at the same time, mileage and other expenses are being cut. In one instance, the minimum mileage claimable was been cut from five to 10 miles which soon adds up, especially in rural areas. In addition, just over half of foster carers receive a fee in recognition of their time, skills and experience.

Recommendations: The Government should revisit the level of minimum fostering allowances to ensure that they are sufficient to cover costs.

All foster carers should be paid a fee which recognises their skills and expertise, preferably via a tiered payment scheme. Foster carers should also receive retainer fees between placements.

Administration of finance should be transparent so that all fostering services distinguish clearly between fee and allowance payment.

- **Support and training:** Support and training for foster carers need to be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for, and must be flexible to help the carer and child as the child reaches different stages of development. Out-of-hours support is currently inadequate for many foster carers, with just over 40% describing it as “could be better, poor or non-existent”, yet remains essential particularly as children with increasingly more complex needs are coming into the care system. We are also seeing growing evidence of foster carers being pressurised to take children from outside their approval range.

Recommendations: A learning and development framework, covering accredited and standardised pre and post approval training should be introduced across England.

Foster carers should be provided with a range of flexible and accessible training and learning and development opportunities throughout their fostering careers.

All foster carers must have access to high quality out-of-hours support.

All foster carers should have ongoing placement support, including access to specialist and tailor-made support when new children arrive or when needs change as children reach different stages of development.

- **Status and authority:** Foster carers are still not being seen as equal members of the team around the child. The impact of this means that foster carers are too often being denied access to essential meetings and reviews, and crucially are still not being given **full information about the child prior to or during placement**; just over 30% respondents “rarely or never” receive the full information about the child prior to placement. Foster carers believe that information about the child’s behaviour is often withheld by fostering services in order to secure the placement. This type of practice can result in poor matching and more likelihood of placement breakdown, because the foster carers cannot make an assessment of whether they can meet the child’s needs nor if they require additional support and training.

In addition, while all the mechanisms are in place at a policy and guidance level to ensure that foster carers are given the **delegated authority** to make daily decisions about the children in their care, and we believe there has been some improvement, there are still issues at practice and cultural level to be resolved; 34% of short-term carers and 16% of long-term carers “sometimes, rarely or never” feel able to make day-to-day decisions about their fostered children. We believe that the “blame culture” in social care is at least partly responsible for social workers’ reluctance to allow foster carers to make these decisions without their involvement.

Allegations continue to be an area of real concern for us. Most foster carers accept that allegations are an occupational hazard. However, once an allegation is made, they 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 addition, we are concerned that fostered children are too often removed from foster families after an allegation when child protection thresholds have not been met.

Recommendations: There must be an increased emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in social work training, to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care.

Foster carers, especially those looking after children on long-term placements, must be given the authority to make everyday decisions on behalf of children in their care without unnecessary delays and restrictions.

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 must always be given all the available information they need to help children reach their potential and keep them and those around them safe.

Foster carers should be recognised as part of the children's workforce throughout the UK.

All fostering services should have a transparent framework for dealing with allegations, and ensure that timescales are adhered to.

Foster carers and their families should have access to independent support when needed.

- **Whistleblowing:** The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 (PIDA) does not cover foster carers. Foster carers are in a vulnerable position if they choose to speak out about alleged wrongdoing or poor practice. We are concerned that this may act as a disincentive to foster carers, putting vulnerable children at risk. We support the recommendation of the the Whistleblowing Commission chaired by Sir Anthony Cooper that the Government uses the powers set out in section 20 of the Enterprise Regulatory Reform Act 2013 to extend PIDA to cover foster carers.

Recommendation: To extend PIDA to cover foster carers.

- **Registration:** Currently foster carers who want to move fostering services have to repeat the assessment process with their new service and there is no standardised pre-approval training (although the majority of fostering services use The Fostering Network's *The Skills to Foster*). A central register would enable carers to transfer provider and as a result could drive up standards in training and support for foster carers. Crucially, the central register would also improve safeguarding, as currently there is no way of knowing that an applicant previously fostered elsewhere if they choose to withhold that information.

Recommendation: A central register of foster carers should be introduced.

Practice issues

- **Long-term foster care:** 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 broader permanence framework. Other permanence options, such as special guardianship orders and adoption, need the courts to decide to start and end them, but with long-term foster care all decisions can be made within the children's services department. The impact of this is placement drift – children staying with a foster carer for many years by accident not design – and sometimes placements ending when 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. 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.

Recommendation: The Inquiry should assess how embedded understanding of, belief in and support for long-term foster care is into social work practice and local policy.

- **Placements – matching/stability and breakdown:** There has been little improvement in getting children into the right placement first time. Since 2009 the number of children in care who have had three or more placements in the same year has remained fairly static (11% 2009-14 and 10% in 2015). There has been a continued rise in the numbers of children coming into care over this same period. The largest growing group is children over 10 years of age, and there has also been an increase in the numbers of children with complex needs and disabilities. We are concerned that we often hear of foster carers taking children from outside their approval range or without the specialist training to care for children with complex needs, which can lead to placement instability and sometimes breakdown.

The Fostering Network is excited by early indications from the piloting of the Mockingbird Family Model in England, through the Innovation Fund. The Model was developed by The Mockingbird Society in the USA and 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. The hub carers and foster carers provide 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.

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.

All new and existing foster carers should be offered appropriate training and support to ensure they can offer support to children with complex needs.

Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services when needed.

Good practice models that offer intensive peer support and aim to prevent placement breakdown, such as the Mockingbird Family Model, should be further explored,

The Government must ensure that adequate funds are invested in foster care to ensure that children do not suffer from pressures on local authority budgets.

- **Relationships:** The relationship between fostered children and their former foster carers is increasingly being recognised as extremely important to the development and wellbeing of the child. Research shows the ongoing presence of an existing attachment figure, remaining available and continuing to have a supportive role, is vital in enabling a child to develop new attachments. However, foster carers have told us they have not been able to stay in contact with former fostered children despite the child wanting to stay in touch.

Recommendations: 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.

Local authorities must ensure that this happens, challenging the prevailing culture where necessary.

When and where local authorities and independent fostering providers are inspected, proper attention should be paid by the inspectors as to how these relationships are being built and supported for children and young people in care.

- **Involvement of young people in their care:** Despite good intentions, children and young people's voices are too often 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. The Fostering Network believes that all fostered young people should have their voices heard and be given the opportunity to shape children's services in partnership with local authorities and decision makers.

Recommendations: Local authorities should ensure that they have in place mechanisms for listening to the voices of their fostered children, whether they live with inhouse carers or are placed with an IFP, through tools such as children in care councils.

- **Social work practice:** The pressures of children's social workers with heavy caseloads often result in high turnover and therefore a lack in continuity in relationship for children in care. In the previous State of the Nation report (2014), this was identified as one of the four key areas that required improvement by foster carers.

Recommendations: Children's social workers must be given manageable caseloads to improve availability and consistency of support for fostered children.

The turnover of social workers – which is so damaging to both fostered children and foster families – should be urgently addressed.

- **Staying Put** – Ensuring that Staying Put achieves in practice what the law change set out to do is an absolute priority for The Fostering Network. We have therefore submitted a separate response around Staying Put, based on stakeholder surveys and the input of The Fostering Network's Staying Put Working Group.

The Fostering Network

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