

The State of the Nation's Foster Care

what foster carers think and feel about fostering



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2014

The
**Fostering
Network**

Introduction

More than 63,000 children live with over 52,500 foster families across the UK each day. This is about four-fifths (78 per cent) of the almost 80,000 children in care living away from home on any one day.

Foster carers can provide these children stability, security and often their first positive experience of family life. But the system does not always support foster carers to do this, while frequent moves for some children make settling into home and school difficult. This can mean that outcomes for these children are all too often not good enough; these children are not supported and enabled to meet their potential.

Improving the outcomes of most children in care therefore starts with improving foster care. In order to find out what needs to be improved, The Fostering Network invited foster carers to take part in a national survey on a range of issues regarding their fostering work. These issues included practical and financial support, professional development and training and why they foster.

The results are a snapshot of the views of foster carers in 2014. This report highlights the key findings, compares with previous survey results where possible, and makes recommendations for the changes that need to happen to ensure that all fostered children are given the best possible care and helped to fulfil their potential.

Methodology

The survey was promoted to foster carers during June and July 2014, via our website, member e-news, social media and our membership magazine, *Foster Care*. 1,082 foster carers took part in the survey either online or by returning the paper version included in the June issue of *Foster Care* magazine.

We aim to repeat this survey at regular intervals in order to track progress or changes in foster carers' attitudes to the various issues facing them.

Main Themes

We asked what one thing respondents would change to improve the lives of the children they care for. Over 850 replied from across the UK, sharing their views on what they believe could make a real difference.

From these replies, four themes stood out.

- For foster carers to be **respected and treated as a skilled co-professional**, and to be **recognised as part of the team** working with the child; often, in fact, they are the person who knows the child best. Foster carers felt that not only should their experience and expertise be valued and listened to about day-to-day care, but also in long-term planning for children. Foster carers also told us that they wanted to be recognised and treated as professionals by teachers, health care workers, police and others involved in children's lives.

'To be treated as a professional working in a team, your voice heard for the child's care and future.'

'To be treated with more respect and credibility - as an equal partner - by social work colleagues and allowed to execute my fostering responsibilities without so much interference.'

'To get the other professionals working with the child and the fostering service to really accept you as another professional in the team around the child and to listen to your opinion in regard of the child.'

- For foster carers to be given authority to make **everyday decisions about the care of their fostered children**. Repeatedly, foster carers told us that they wanted to be trusted more, so that children and young people could be treated as part of the family and not be made to feel 'different'.

'To have more freedom in making choices; getting approval from social workers can be difficult and time consuming.'

'For social workers to TRUST the people they have chosen to have the parental role for a child.'

- Foster carers said that they, and the children in their care, needed to have **better access to and consistency of social workers**. Many spoke of overwhelming caseloads for social workers meaning that they were not as available as carers and young people would like.

A problem consistently flagged up was the constant change of social workers, particularly for its impact on children. There was also a call for improved communication with foster carers, and for more listening to what children and young people say.

'Consistency of social workers is crucial. Changes of social worker are not good for the looked after children.'

'That the children's social workers have more time for the young people and don't keep being changed. If foster carers can be permanent, why can't social workers?'

'To match a child's social worker to the child in a similar way to the carer.'

- Foster carers said that they need to receive **proper financial support**, to enable them to focus on caring for children and not worrying about their financial situation. Some spoke of feeling pressurised to take part-time jobs when the needs of the children were such that they felt they should be at home. In addition to adequate allowances and fees, carers raised the issue of retainers, holiday pay, sick leave and pensions.

'Less financial worry. I wish we were financially secure allowing us time to solely concentrate on our lovely children.'

'Sort out the finances of fostering so that more people can afford to foster.' *'To receive an appropriate wage for the job we do, so that we don't have to go out to work part time, therefore leaving the fostered children when we should be with them.'*

'Financial recognition for the work done. In most cases you are out of pocket, if you work out what the hourly rate would be most people would not want to be foster carers.'

In addition to these four most common themes, foster carers raised a range of other issues. These included **better matching** and **improved training and support**, to help placements to work and maintain stability. The importance of **sharing all information about a child** with the foster carer was also frequently highlighted. Recognition of and **support for long-term fostering placements** was another key theme, as was a better system for helping young people with the **transition to adult life**. Carers also called for quicker decisions and **better planning about children's long-term futures**, including speedier court judgements and less delay in finding permanent families for children.

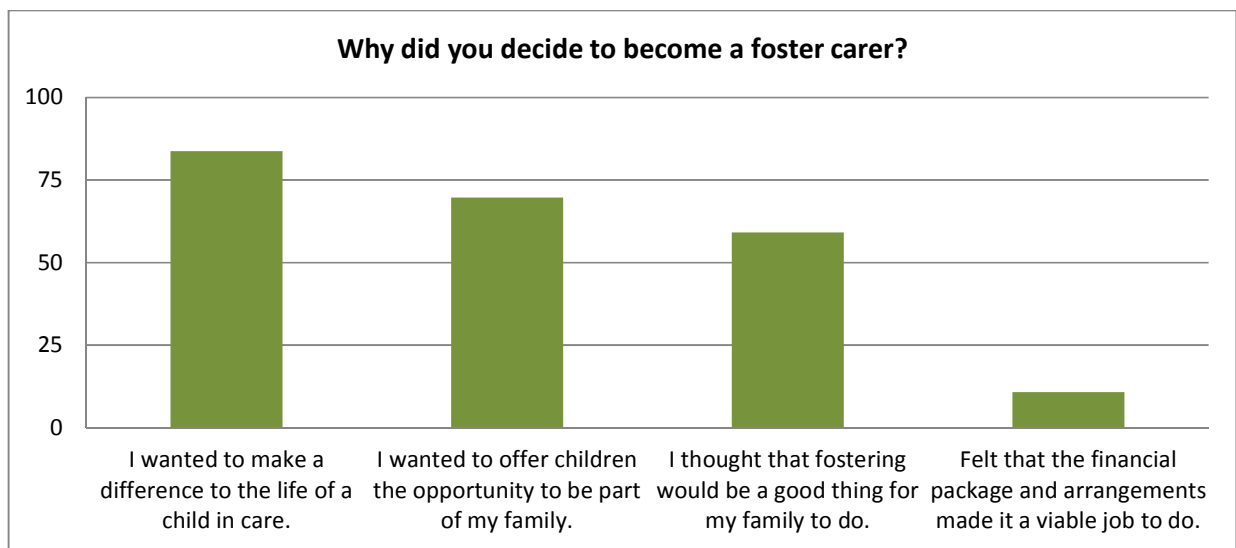
Why Foster?

Why did you decide to become a foster carer?

Respondents could tick as many boxes as they liked from a range of possible answers.

Three options were chosen by more than half of those who answered the question which were:

- 84 per cent** 'I wanted to make a difference to the life of a child in care.'
- 70 per cent** 'I wanted to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family.'
- 59 per cent** 'I thought that fostering would be a good thing for my family to do.'



So, on the whole, people foster for the love of it, to help often troubled young people. Many commented that a previous career working with children such as social work or teaching had encouraged them to foster. However, foster carers were also aware that they and their family often benefited from fostering. Many commented that they foster because they are unable to have children themselves, or want a larger family than they could have themselves. A number commented that fostering is a way of working with children with the flexibility to work from home, many have changed careers in their forties.

Many also said that their faith, sense of social responsibility or their own experiences of fostering and the care system led them to take up fostering.

Also regularly mentioned was the financial package available with people commenting that this needs to make it viable to change careers and take up fostering. However, only one in 10 respondents said that financial viability was a factor in their actual decision to become a foster carer.

What makes you continue to foster?

The top two remain the same, with enjoyment of the job – working with children – being the third most popular reason.

- 88 per cent** 'I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care.'
- 73 per cent** 'I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family.'
- 64 per cent** 'I really enjoy working with the children.'



How foster carers are treated

We asked a number of questions on foster carers' relationship with their foster care provider, whether that is a local authority or an independent provider.

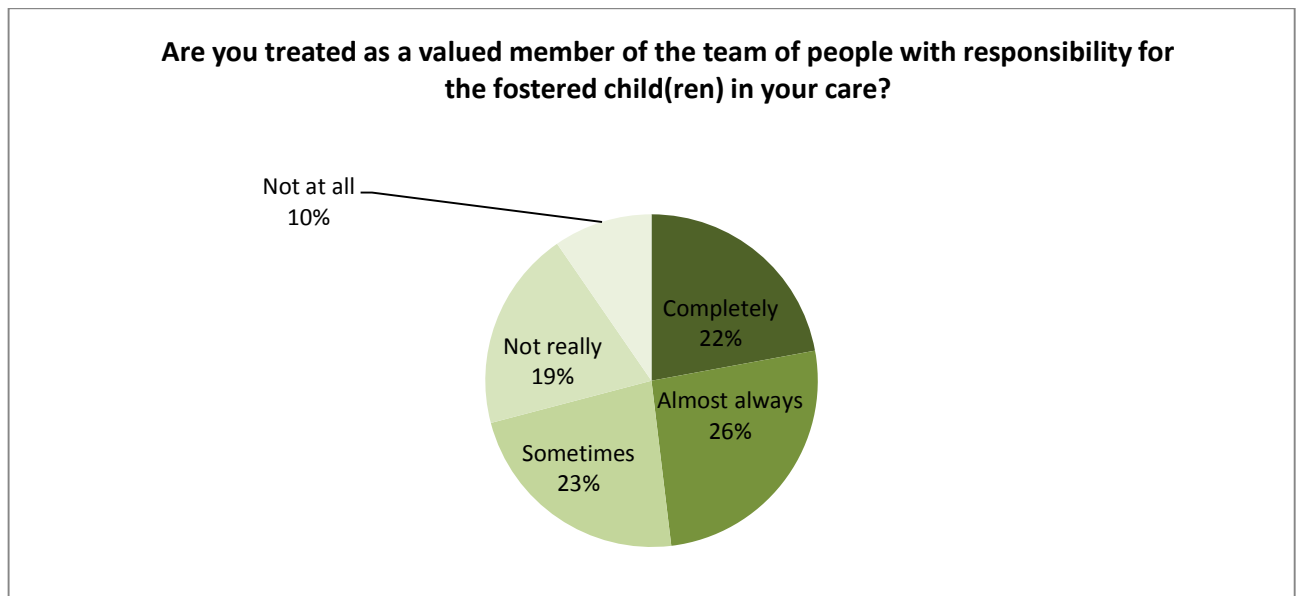
Part of the team?

Foster carers are a key part of the team working with a fostered child, and often, as the person who lives with and looks after the child on a day-to-day basis, the one who knows and understand the child best. But we often hear from foster carers who say they are not recognised and treated as such. So we asked:

Are you treated as a valued member of the team of people with responsibility for the fostered child(ren) in your care?

Responses were generally positive with nearly half saying 'completely' or 'almost always'. However, this of course does mean that more than half of foster carers replied that they feel they are only sometimes treated as a valued team member, or that this does not really happen at all.

This is something we at The Fostering Network hear regularly from foster carers, for example being excluded from meetings about a child's schooling or future, and their views being disregarded.



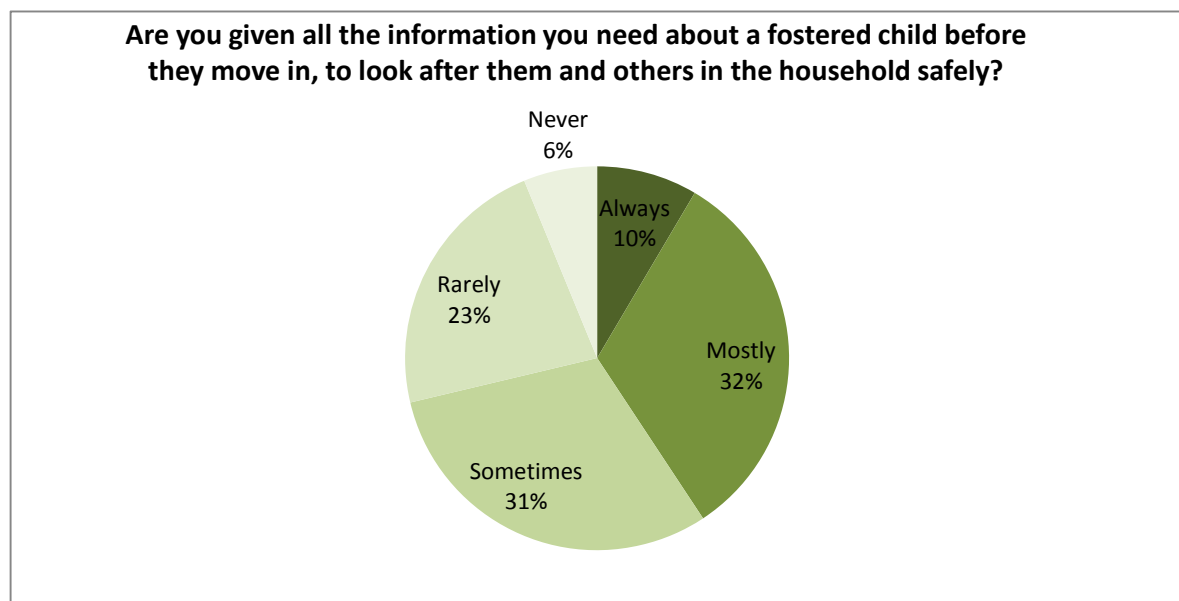
Information sharing

Through The Fostering Network's contact with foster carers we hear a number of stories of children being placed with a foster family without the carer being informed of important information.

Examples have included not informing foster carers of medical conditions such as asthma or diabetes. More worryingly, we have heard examples of foster carers not being informed of behavioural difficulties being displayed due to past sexual abuse of the child. Knowledge of this and training with dealing with these specific problems would be hugely beneficial to the foster carer, their own family and, particularly, the fostered child. We therefore asked:

Are you given all the information you need about a fostered child before they move in, to look after them and others in the household safely?

Fewer than one in 10 foster carers said they were always given the information they need to look after them and others safely, with more than a quarter reporting that they were rarely or never given this information. This shows no improvement from a survey in 2012 of Welsh foster carers, which had almost the same response to this question.¹ In 2009, a survey found that 50 per cent of foster carers reported that in the past three years a child had been placed with them for whom they had not been given all the necessary information to care for them safely.² The findings of this latest survey suggest that figure could be as high as 90 per cent.



Full disclosure of information is of benefit to the foster carer, their family and the children in care who are living with them. Foster carers are more able to meet the needs of a child if they know what those needs are, allowing them to make a full assessment of whether they can properly care for the child and to access extra support or advice where necessary.

Regulations and standards do already make clear the information that authorities must provide to foster carers before a child is placed with them. We need cultural change to ensure that this is

¹ Cann, R., 2012, *Fostering in Wales: 10 years on*, The Fostering Network

² Clarke, H., 2009, *Getting the Support They Need*, The Fostering Network

happening across the UK, so that foster carers can care safely for the child – and others in the household – and help them to achieve their potential. Fostering services should ensure that this happens.

Foster carers must take action too by ensuring that they have all the information they need in order to care safely for a child and ensure the safety of their own family. Where it is difficult to obtain information they should ask to see the child's file, or request that their supervising social worker sees it.

Day-to-day decision making

Another issue which is regularly raised by foster carers is the issue of delegated authority, basically the ability of foster carers to make appropriate everyday decisions for the child in their care.

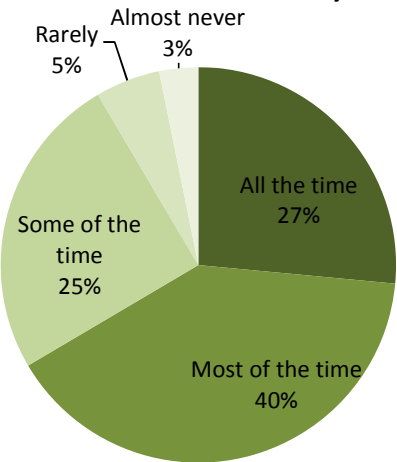
We regularly hear stories from foster carers who, for instance, do not have the authority to sign a consent form for a school trip. The time taken to contact the child's social worker, ask them to sign the form and then return it to the school, often results in school trips being missed because the form cannot be returned in time. Therefore, fostered children and young people often miss out on important parts of their education and, perhaps more importantly, these incidents can set fostered children apart from their classmates and contribute to the general feeling of difference and 'otherness' which fostered young people often experience, and tell us that they are particularly distressed by. We asked foster carers to respond to the statement:

My fostering service allows me to make appropriate decisions about my fostered children as I would do for my own children.

Two-thirds (67 per cent) of respondents said that this was the case all or most of the time. Recent guidance from governments across the UK has put a clearer emphasis on the importance of authority being delegated to foster carers over a wider range of day to day issues, as part of the placement planning process. For example, the revised guidance (Delegation of Authority: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Vol 2 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, July 2013) for England says: "Authority for day to day decisions should be delegated to the child's foster carer, unless there is a valid reason not to."

But despite these improvements, this finding shows that a quarter of foster carers still feel that they are only allowed to make appropriate decisions some of the time, with almost one in 10 saying that they rarely or almost never can.

My fostering service allows me to make appropriate decisions about my fostered children as I would do for my own children.



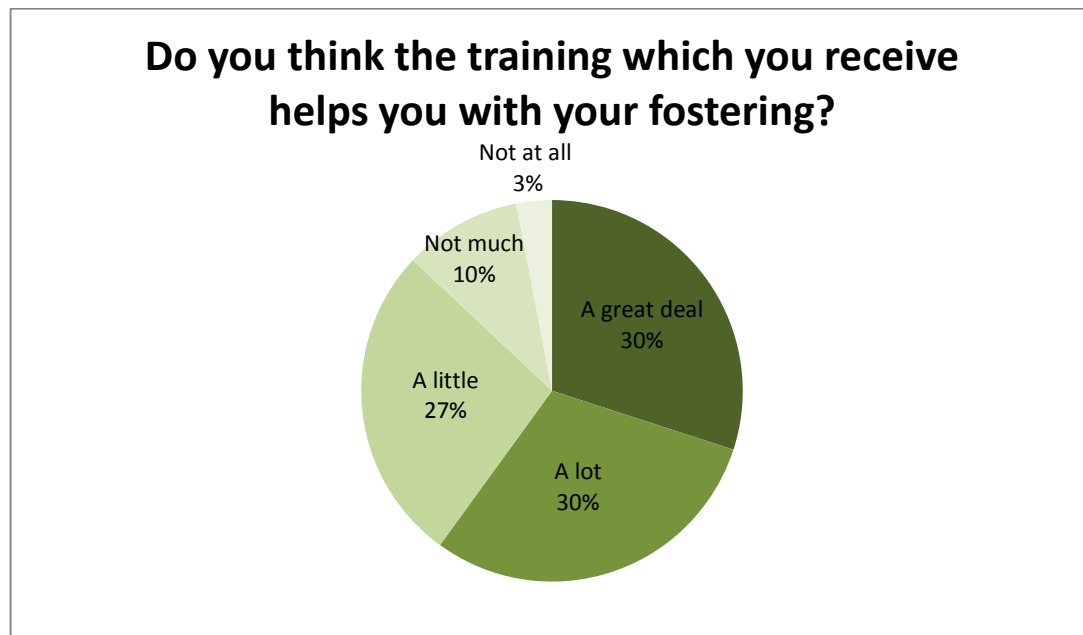
Training and support

In order to become a foster carer, all applicants receive pre-approval training. Ongoing training should also be offered by all fostering services to help with professional development and to improve foster carers' skills. We asked:

Do you think the training which you receive helps you with your fostering?

Over half (60 per cent) said that training helped a great deal or a lot, with only 13 per cent saying they did not find training helpful. This compares with a survey in 2009 which found that 67 per cent of foster carers said that the training they received helped to make them become better foster carers.³

The vast majority (85 per cent) felt that their training has stayed the same or improved over the past two years.



We also asked foster carers:

How do you rate the following support and advice services which you may receive from your fostering service?

Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) felt that support from their supervising social worker was very good or good, which is almost identical to our 2009 survey.⁴ Almost 60 per cent praised their peer support, marginally up from 56 per cent in 2009, and 44 per cent their out of hours support (virtually

³ Clarke, H., 2009, *Learning As They Go*, The Fostering Network

⁴ Clarke, H., 2009, *Getting the Support They Need*, The Fostering Network

unchanged from 2009). Only one-third felt that their access to short break or respite care was very good or good (marginally up from 30 per cent in 2009).

Reflecting the slight improvement since the 2009 survey, almost three quarters (72 per cent) felt that their support had stayed the same or got better over the past two years.

Money: Allowances and payments

There are two components to foster carers' income for their fostering.

An **allowance** is designed to cover the costs of caring for a child. This should cover food, clothes, toiletries and all other incidental expenses incurred in caring for a fostered child. All foster carers receive an allowance.

Secondly, there are **payments**. These are additional, on top of allowances, for the work that foster carers do. Many fostering providers pay different amounts according to the age of the child and to take account of any particular needs or disability which the child may have.

The governments in England and Wales set weekly national minimum allowances that must be met by all fostering services. Health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland follow the levels set in England.

In Scotland, there are currently no national minimum allowances, meaning that all fostering services set their own rates. As a result, the amounts given to foster carers vary hugely between fostering services, and many foster carers are left out of pocket. The Foster Care Review recently led to the Scottish Government announcing new research into allowances. We hope this is the first step towards a minimum allowance in Scotland.

Every year The Fostering Network checks the allowances paid by all local authority and trust fostering services to ensure they meet national minimum levels, and campaigns for them to be brought up to these levels where they are falling short.

In contrast to allowances there is no legal minimum fee for foster carers, nor even a requirement for fee payments to be made. For those that do receive a payment, the amount received across the UK varies widely. So we asked:

Do you receive any payment for fostering on top of your allowances?

Respondents were split close to half and half with 47 per cent saying yes, and 53 per cent no.

On the face of it then, roughly half of foster carers receive a payment on top of their allowance. There may be a proportion of those in the "no" category who actually receive an allowance in excess of what would be expected to cover costs, as the fostering service has chosen this method of making payments over and above expenses. Others will receive a lump sum supposed to cover allowances and payments, without the fostering service making this clear.

However, foster carers who answered "no" clearly perceive that they are not receiving any payment on top of their allowance. This 50-50 split shows no improvement from our previous surveys

spanning seven years⁵, which is disappointing in the lack of progress made. Members of no other profession are required to work for free.

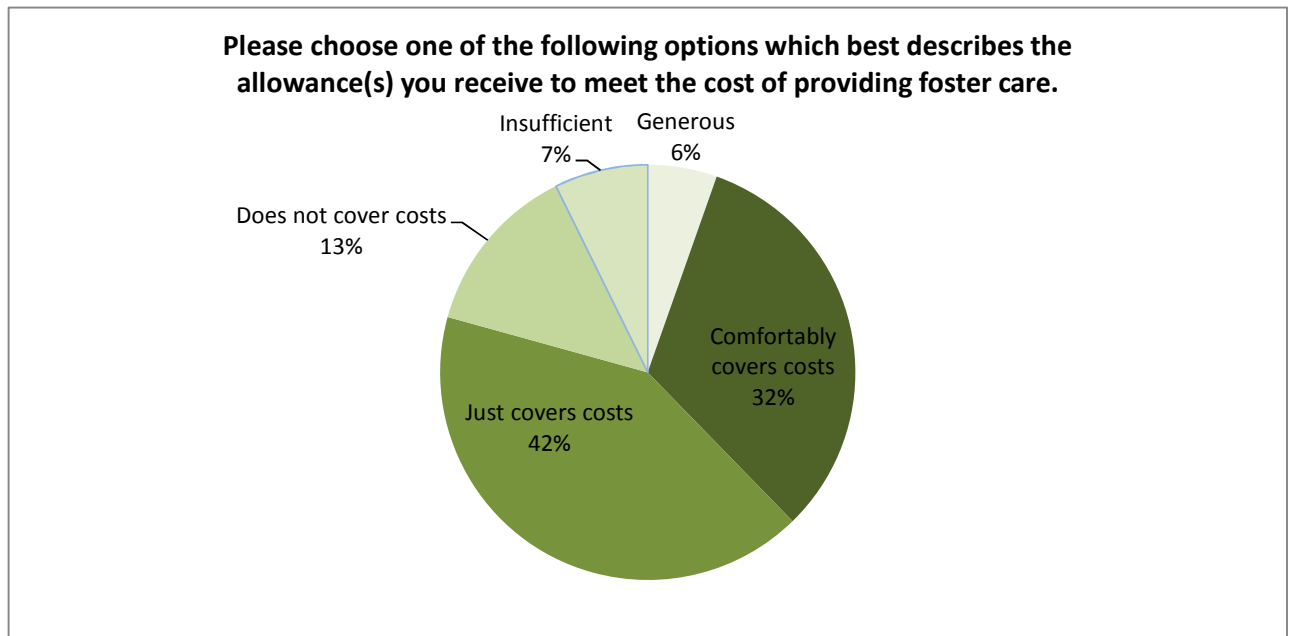
We believe that all foster carers should receive an allowance which covers the costs looking after a fostered child, and a payment commensurate with the time, energy, experience and skills which go into fostering.

Payments and allowances should be separate and clearly identified so that foster carers are clear about which portion of their fostering income should be spent on caring for the child in their care, and which is for the job that they do.

We went on to ask two further questions about the income which foster carers receive:

Please choose one of the following options which best describes the allowance(s) you receive to meet the costs of providing foster care?

Almost 80 per cent of respondents felt that their allowances did cover the costs of fostering. However, one in five still reported that their allowance did not cover their costs. If this held across the foster carer population it would represent up to 10,500 foster families that are paying out of their own pockets the costs required to care for fostered children. As an absolute minimum, fostering services should be paying a level of allowance which ensures that foster carers can fully provide for the needs of the children in their care without having to spend their own money to do so. It is crucial that allowances are updated each year in line with rising costs.



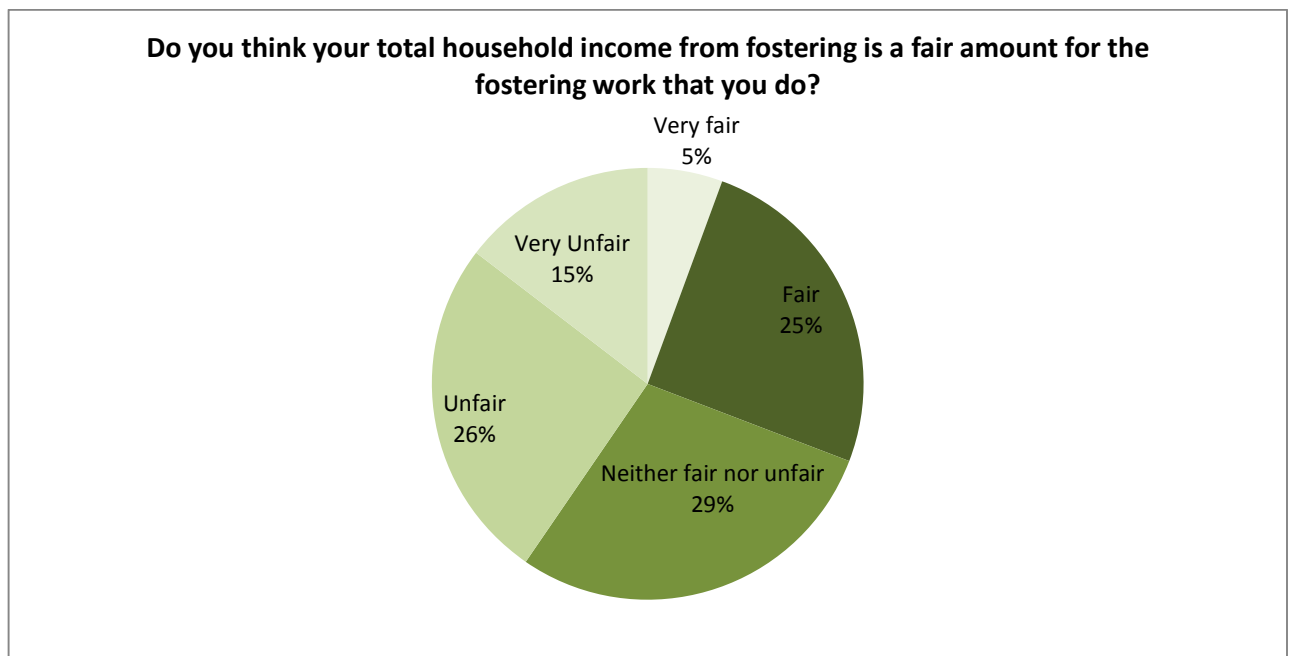
⁵ Swain V., 2007, *Can't Afford to Foster*, The Fostering Network; Tearse M., 2010, *Love Fostering, Need Pay*, The Fostering Network

We went on to ask:

Do you think your total household income from fostering is a fair amount for the fostering work that you do?

Just over 30 per cent felt that their household income from fostering was fair, which leaves nearly seven out of 10 foster carers who do not think this is the case. As this income covers both payments and allowances, we can surmise that 70 per cent of respondents believe that either their allowance does not cover their costs, or their payment (if they receive one) does not reflect the work that they put in, or both.

There is a constant need to recruit new foster carers, particularly for teenagers, disabled children and sibling groups. The ability to attract new carers and retain those who already foster would be greatly enhanced by ensuring that both their costs are covered and that they are paid for the valuable work that they do.



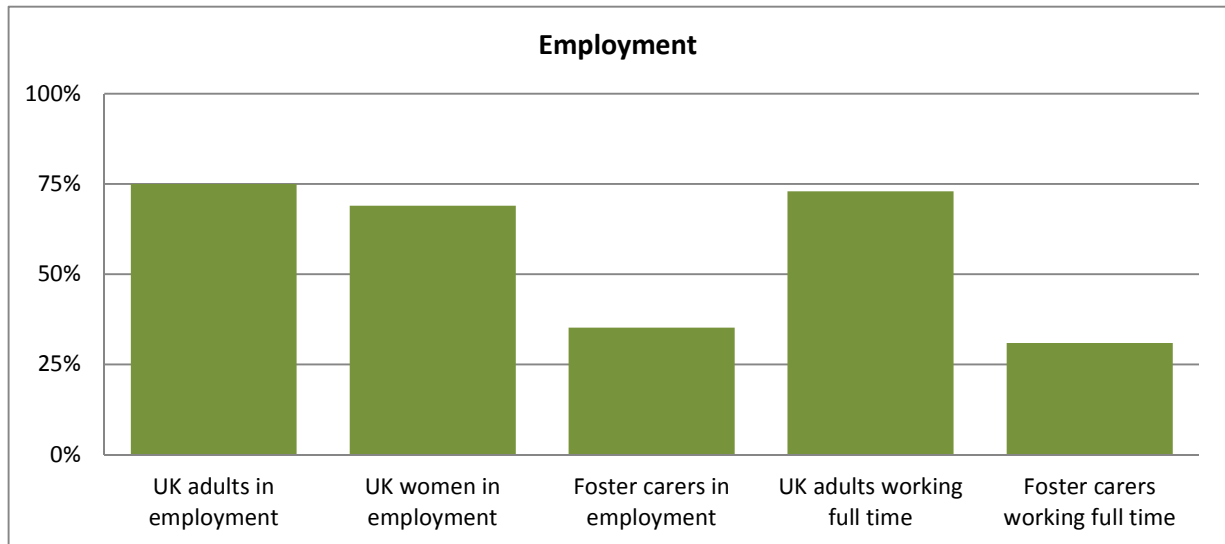
Additionally, we asked:

Do you have any paid employment other than fostering?

Just over one-third of foster carers said yes, meaning that for two-thirds of foster carers, their income from fostering is their only income from work. Across the UK, 75 per cent of adults are employed and 69 per cent of women are employed.

This suggests that for many foster carers, especially those caring for younger children, the time and effort needed to foster effectively precludes additional work, and it is children’s best interests that they are full-time foster carers. However, we that some foster carers feel they have the time and energy to work outside the home as well as meeting children’s needs, but are prevented from doing so by their fostering service and lack of flexibility by employers.⁶

Of those who do additional work, just 31 per cent take this on full time, compared to 73 per cent of UK adults. Among our respondents, 38 per cent worked part time and 39 per cent defined themselves as self-employed or ‘other’.



With just 10 per cent of foster carers in our survey working full time outside the home, it is clear that if we expect foster carers to put in the hours that they do in caring for our young people, and to reduce their hours or give up work in order to do so, we must be prepared to pay them properly for that time.

⁶ Peake, L., 2014, *Combining Fostering and Other Work*, The Fostering Network

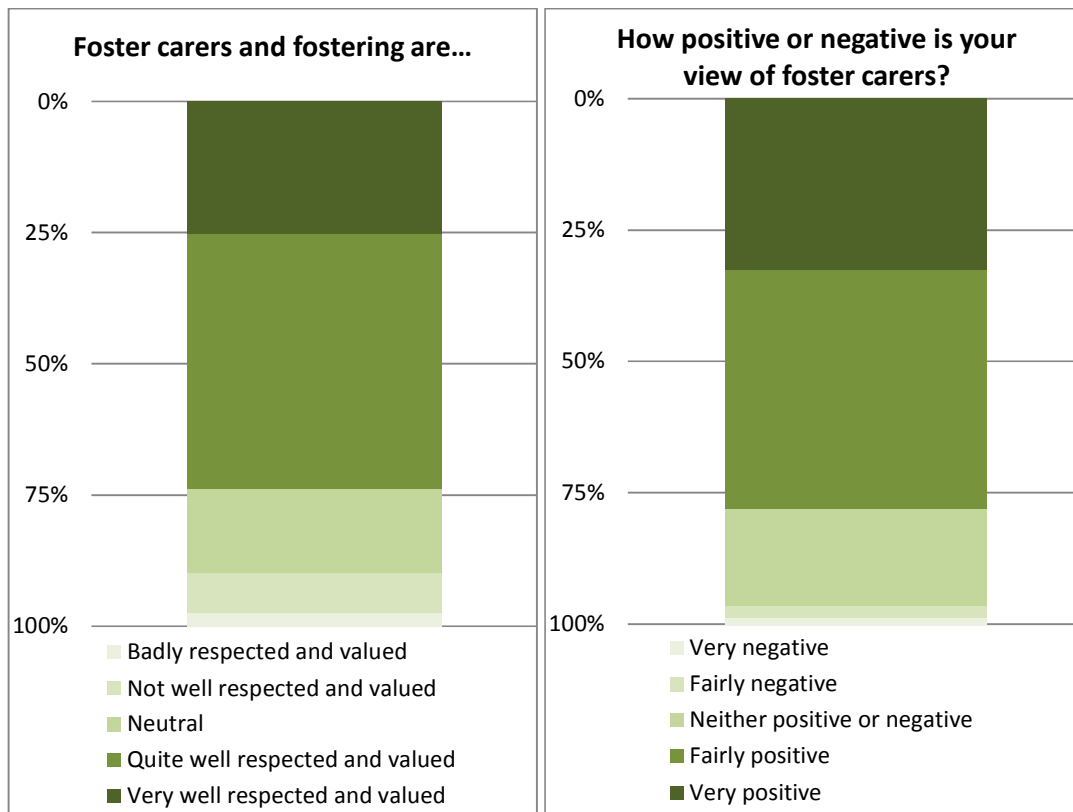
How fostering is viewed by others

In May 2014 we used to a YouGov poll to explore the general public's views of foster care and the work that foster carers do, asking them "Based on your experiences and perceptions, overall how positive or negative is your view of foster carers and the work they do?"

As part of this survey of foster carers, we also asked:

How do you feel that foster carers and the work involved in foster care are viewed by the public in general?

Foster carers and fostering are...	Our survey	YouGov poll	How
positive is your view			
Very well respected and valued positive	25 per cent	33 per cent	Very
Quite well respected and valued positive	49 per cent	46 per cent	Fairly
Neutral	16 per cent	19 per cent	Neither
Not well respected and valued negative	8 per cent	2 per cent	Fairly
Badly respected and valued negative	3 per cent	1 per cent	Very



Foster carers believe, rightly, that the public respects and values the work that they do, but not quite as positively as the public does actually view their work. Foster carers' assessment of the public attitude to them underestimates the number of people who are positive about fostering, and markedly overestimates the numbers with negative views of fostering and foster carers.

Foster carers generally enjoy what they do, and in spite of the struggles, the foster carer workforce is a proud one (84 per cent of respondents agreed they are proud to be a foster carer, with only three per cent disagreeing). What's more, around two-thirds of respondents would recommend fostering to others.

Conclusion

The survey responses highlight some key challenges facing the fostering sector.

Without exception, the themes arising from this survey are those that The Fostering Network recognises as key to ensuring that foster carers are able to focus on looking after the children in their care.

In recent years governments have dedicated time and money to improving adoption and residential care. The Fostering Network believes that it is now time for an undiluted focus on foster care. It is essential that investment is made in the futures of all looked after children and young people so that the gap between outcomes for this group and those for other young people can be closed.

To help fostered children achieve the very best they can, we need a system where:

- 1. Every fostered child and young person has security and stability in their foster home, is helped to make and maintain relationships, is supported to stay until they are ready to leave, and is helped to reach their potential.**
- 2. Every foster carer is respected as a professional child care expert, given all the information they need to care for each child properly, fully involved in decision making and empowered to make appropriate day to day decisions concerning the children in their care.**
- 3. Every foster carer is both fairly compensated for the expenses incurred in caring for a child in their home and paid for their time according to their skills and experience.**

To achieve this we believe we need to see:

1. Investment and monitoring

- Government financial support to ensure that foster care does not suffer from the pressures on local government budgets;
- National strategies backed up with funding for the implementation of innovative approaches such as social pedagogy and other evidence-based schemes;
- Delivery on proposed policy changes around long-term foster care in England;
- Fostering services to provide schemes which allow young people to stay in foster care after they turn 18. Delivery and implementation of these schemes needs to be monitored.
- Permanence options that are appropriate for foster carers and fostered children.

2. A professional framework around fostering

- A national register of foster carers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- A cultural shift to ensure foster carers are treated as full members of the team about the child, that information is shared with them, and that they can exercise appropriate day-to-day decision making.

- Poor practice in care planning being addressed, thereby increasing stability, reducing unnecessary placement moves, and ensuring that fostering placements are properly supported.
- Fostering allowances keeping pace with costs, and foster carers paid according to their time, skills and expertise.

3. A new approach to social work

- 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.
- Children's social workers being 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 – being urgently addressed.

4. A recognition of the importance of relationships

- Wherever possible, and in their best interests, children must be placed with their brothers and sisters.
- Where this is not possible or appropriate, contact between siblings should be maintained, supported and promoted.
- More help should be given to children and young people and their foster carers when placements go through challenging times.
- Children and young people should be more involved in all decisions made about them, particularly when it involves ending placements and moving homes.
- The relationships children and young people make should be supported and protected when a placement ends, for example with previous foster carers.

Appendix – Fostering households

The survey was completed by 827 foster carers living in England, 98 in Scotland, 58 in Wales and 37 in Northern Ireland. 84 per cent were women, 10 per cent men.

According to our survey, the 'average' foster carer is a woman in her fifties, living with her partner, with one child of her own and one fostered child aged under 10.

Age demographics

Ninety per cent of foster carers who responded were between the ages of 36 and 65 with nearly half (46 per cent) in the centre of that range being aged 46 to 55. This gives an average age of foster carers in our survey of just over 51 years.

A quarter of the fostered children living with the survey respondents were pre-school age (under five). A further 27 per cent were primary school age (five to 10 years old). 31 per cent were secondary school age (11 to 15), 13 per cent are aged 16 or 17 and 4 per cent were 18 or over. This gives an average age of children in foster care of 9½.

Number of adults

Just under a quarter (23 per cent) of foster carers lived in a household with just one adult, more than half (56 per cent) had two adults in the household and the other 21 per cent of fostering households had three or more adults. The average number of adults in a fostering household was two.

Foster carers' own children

More than half of foster carers (55 per cent) had no children in their household other than those they were fostering. One in five had one child in addition to fostered children, 15 per cent had two and 10 per cent had three or more other children in their household. The average is 0.8 children.

Numbers of fostered children

We asked foster carers how many fostered children and young people they had with them at the time of the survey. 13 per cent said they had no fostered children living with them. This could be foster carers between placements, those who have been approved to foster but have not yet begun or those who have recently retired from foster care.

45 per cent were caring for one child, 28 per cent two children, 11 per cent three and the remaining three per cent were caring for four or more children in their household. This gives an average number of fostered children per foster carer (with a current placement) of 1.7.

Size of foster families

With an average of 2 adults, 1.7 fostered children, 0.8 other children, the average size of a fostering household is 4.5 people, compared with an average household size of 2.33 people.

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 all children and young people who are fostered to achieve the very best they can.

As the essential network at the heart of foster care, we bring together everyone who is involved in the lives of the children and young people who are fostered. We lead, inspire, motivate and support them to make foster care better.

Together with our members and supporters we are a powerful catalyst for change, and we've been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years. We work with over 400 fostering services and 52,500 foster carers, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

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