

# State of the Nations' Foster Care

## Spotlight on Northern Ireland Report 2024



# Introduction

Almost 4,000 children in Northern Ireland are in care, and around five in six (84%) of these children are in foster care.<sup>1</sup> Foster families provide children with safe and loving homes when they need them, whether for one night or for many years.

The Fostering Network conducts the State of the Nations' Foster Care survey every three years to provide a reliable picture of the state of foster care across the UK, gathering evidence on what is working and what needs to change. It is the largest independent survey of the UK's fostering sector. This spotlight report focuses on the findings from Northern Ireland, reflecting the views and experiences of the 173 foster carers who responded to the survey, as well as the two fostering services in Northern Ireland who completed the survey.

The key UK findings, combining Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, are available in the summary report.<sup>2</sup> The full findings, broken down by country, can be found in the full report.<sup>3</sup> While a foster carer's journey is not linear, each report is structured to broadly reflect the path from initial recruitment up to the point of considering resigning or retiring.

As in previous years, the survey covers a wide range of issues in fostering and we are very grateful to everyone who took the time to share their views.

Unfortunately, since our last survey in 2021, we have seen existing pressures in the system grow, compounded by a cost of living crisis, demographic changes in the foster carer population, and the increasing challenges faced by children and young people today. Many of these findings make for difficult and dispiriting reading. However, we are also entering a period of opportunity with new legislation and policy developments forthcoming in Northern Ireland to improve children's social care, including the introduction of new regulations for foster care and the development of standards which will change the landscape of foster care. Along with the Reform Programme for Children's Social Care, and the Adoption and Children Act, these are positive developments which are very welcome.

We will use our findings to influence this work and continue pushing for wider change at both a national and a local level, to improve support for foster carers and deliver better outcomes for children and young people in foster care. We remain committed to working with services to improve their offer to foster carers, aiding both recruitment and retention.

## Part One

# Starting out

### Recruitment, application and approval

The number of children in care in Northern Ireland is the highest it has been since 1995, yet the number of foster carers is not keeping pace. While there were 11% more kinship foster carers in 2023/24 than in the previous year, the number of non-kinship foster carers decreased by 29% in the same time period, resulting in an overall increase of only 3% in the foster carer population (kinship and non-kinship combined) in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Kinship foster carers are not recruited in the same way as non-kinship foster carers, as they are typically only approved to care for a specific child or children. Therefore, we have estimated that alongside the increasing numbers of kinship foster carers, around 300 more non-kinship foster families need to be recruited in Northern Ireland this year to meet the needs of all children and young people in care.

### Motivations to foster

We asked foster carers to select their motivations for fostering from a list of options. In 2024, the top three motivations to foster were the same as in 2021:

- 'I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care' (76%)
- 'I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my/ our family' (54%)
- 'I enjoy working with children' (46%).

"My motivation is to love them and give them the care they deserve for as long as they need it."

### Barriers to fostering

We asked fostering services what they consider to be the primary reasons preventing suitable applicants from enquiring to foster. Of the two fostering services in Northern Ireland that completed the survey, one service said the main barriers are **myths about who can foster** and a **lack of exposure to marketing material**. The other service named **low allowances** and a **lack of support for foster carers** as the key barriers.

### Improving the recruitment, assessment and approval process

We also asked fostering services what could improve the recruitment, assessment and approval process for foster carers. One service said **better collaboration** between statutory and independent agencies would improve the process, while the other service highlighted foster carers' **conditions**, particularly bullying of foster carers.

### Demographics of foster carers who responded to the survey

Unlike the rest of the UK, the age profile of foster carers in Northern Ireland who responded to the survey appears to be getting slightly younger. While those aged 55-64 remain the single largest group, their share of survey respondents fell considerably from 38% in 2021 to 32% in 2024. The proportion aged 65-74 also decreased slightly from 15% to 13%. In the same period, there was no change in the proportion of respondents aged 25-34 (4%) and slight increases in the proportion aged 35-44 (from 23% to 25%) and 45-54 (from 21% to 25%).

In terms of ethnicity, the sample was broadly representative of the wider Northern Ireland

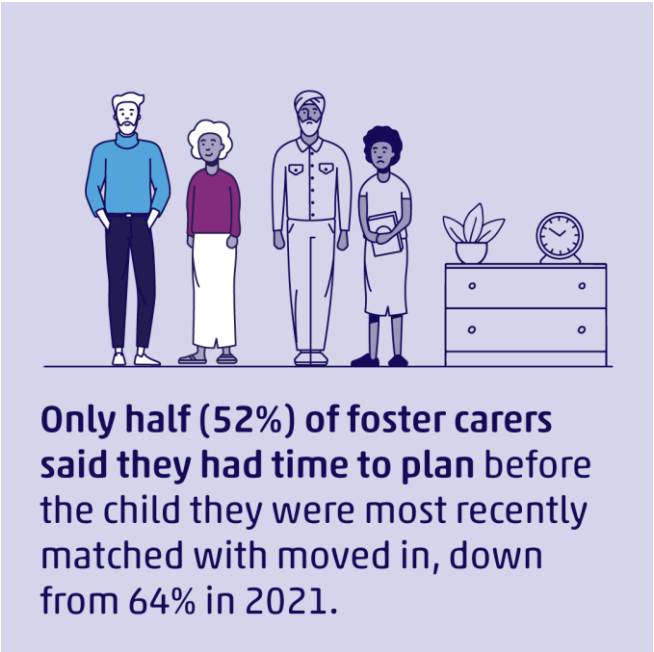
population, as 97% of foster carers surveyed were white. With regard to religious background, 74% of respondents identified as Christian, compared to 80% of the wider population, and 22% had no religion, compared to 17% of the population.

Part Two

Caring for children

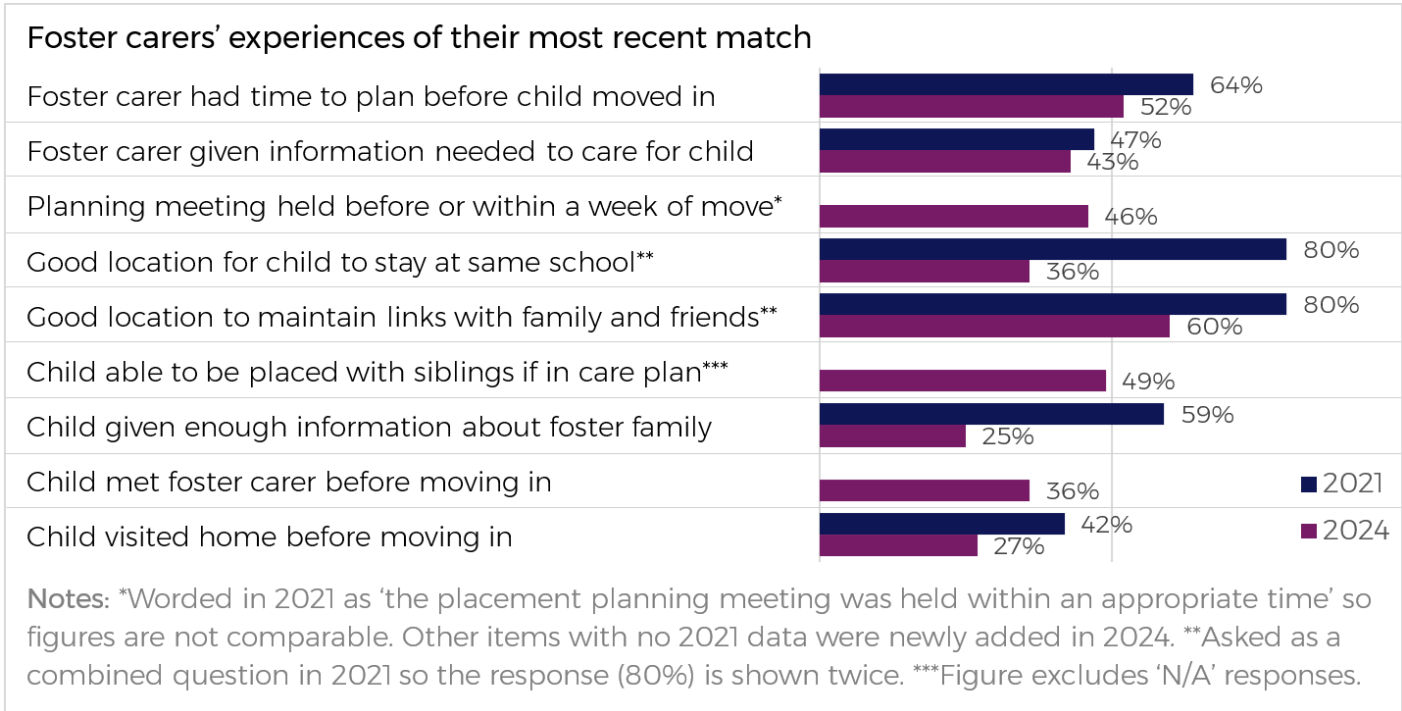
Matching

Good matching is key to ensuring children are looked after by foster carers who can meet their needs, close to home and with their siblings where appropriate. This helps avoid unplanned moves and increases stability for children. However, services often



lack the information they need to make good matches.

Both fostering services in Northern Ireland who completed the survey said they rarely receive all the information required from children’s social workers to inform the matching process. One service said they rarely seek the child’s previous foster carers’ views to feed into the matching process, where applicable, while the other service said they never do so.



This lack of information-sharing carries over to foster carers, as only 43% of those surveyed in Northern Ireland said they were given all the information they needed to care for the child they were most recently matched with. This is a deteriorating picture compared to data gathered in 2021, along with most other aspects of foster carers’ experiences of matching, as shown.

Staying local

Foster carer respondents in Northern Ireland told us that **50% of children they currently foster are living in the same health and social care trust area** as they lived in immediately before they came into care. 24% are living in a different health and social care trust area, but in the same country of the UK. 8.2% have moved to Northern Ireland from a different part of the UK and 7.6% are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Finally, 4.1% are from outside the UK but are not asylum-seeking children.

Vacancies

39% of foster carers who responded in Northern Ireland said they had spent time with an unfilled space for a child in foster care – a ‘vacancy’ – in the past 24 months. The most common reason they gave for this related to their **own personal circumstances**, including that they needed a break. The next most common reason for a vacancy was that they were **waiting for a suitable match**.

“We needed a break as we had no access to respite.”

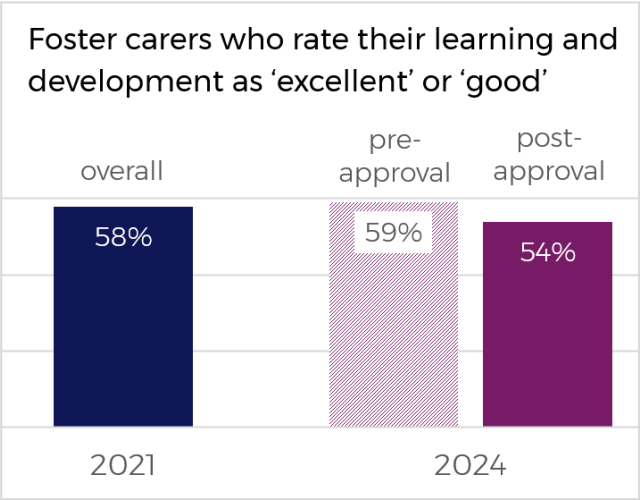
Learning and development

Foster carers are entrusted with the care of children who have often experienced significant trauma and adversity, so it is crucial that they are appropriately trained and able to provide trauma-informed and child-centred care to help children develop and thrive. This includes pre-approval training and regular ongoing post-approval training, tailored to their learning needs. This should be set out in an agreed learning and development (L&D) plan.

However, in 2024, only **43% of foster carers responding said they had an agreed annual learning and development plan**, up from 38% in the 2021 survey.

Quality of learning and development

We asked foster carers approved within the last five years to rate the quality of their pre-approval training; 59% rated it as excellent or good. In comparison, **54% of foster carers rated their post-approval training as excellent or good**. In 2021, we asked foster carers to rate the quality of their training overall, and 58% rated it as excellent or good. This suggests that while pre-approval training fares slightly better, general satisfaction with training has decreased slightly.



## Learning and development requested

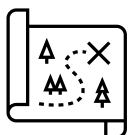
In foster carers' comments about the types of training they would like to receive but cannot access, the top areas of training identified related to:



**Managing the fostering role (41%)**, including allegations, foster carers' rights, and difficulties with social workers.



**Features of training (39%)**, including the amount of training available and how accessible it is.



**Navigating systems (36%)**, including finances, policies and standards, and accessing services for children.



**Children's needs (30%)**, including safeguarding, therapeutic care, and neurodiversity.

"Finances (it's all very unclear and confused). Allegations (what is the policy and expectations on how to treat foster carers). Foster carer rights and minimum standards. Taking action to improve foster carer treatment."

## Views on a standardised learning and development framework

We also asked foster carers and fostering services whether they think there should be a standardised accredited framework for the training of foster carers, which sets out a minimum level of training all foster carers should receive. **64% of foster carers and one of two fostering services agreed that this should be the case for both pre- and post-approval training for foster carers.**

## Family time

Most children in foster care have birth family who they can't live with but may be able to spend time with or visit. This can include parents, siblings and extended family.

A key part of the foster carer's role is often to support children to see their family members. **Just over half (53%) of foster carers in Northern Ireland who responded to the survey said they always or usually feel supported by their service in relation to children's time with their birth family**, a slight increase from 51% in 2021.

Three in five foster carers (62%) said they feel current arrangements for family time are in the best interests of the children they foster.

## Day-to-day decisions

Children and young people in foster care should have the same opportunities as their peers – but foster carers don't always have the authority to make the decisions required for them to access these opportunities, or to give them permission to do so.

**Only a quarter (26%) of foster carers who responded in Northern Ireland said children's social workers are always clear about which decisions they have the authority to make in relation to the children they foster.**

Foster carers were more likely to say they 'always' feel able to make these decisions in relation to children they foster long-term (31%) than those they foster short-term (25%), but both figures have decreased since 2021 (from 38% and 34%, respectively).

16% of foster carers said social workers always respond to requests for decisions in a timely manner.

The main barriers foster carers said they face when making decisions for children in their care related to **difficulties with social workers' involvement (44%)**, including a lack



of communication. Additionally, 13% of comments mentioned **lacking consent from children's birth family**, and 8% mentioned **bureaucracy**.

"Social workers do not get back in time for decisions to be made, leaving children upset and feeling resentful towards foster carers."

The word cloud shows the areas of decisions foster carers said they find the most difficult to make for children in their care.



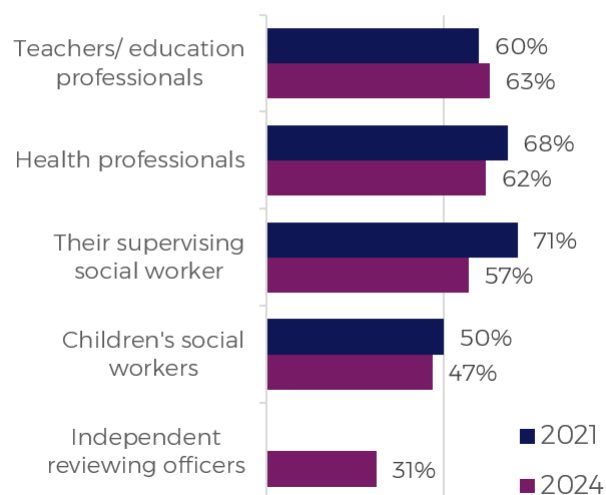
"School trips are always a problem as forms are often needed in a couple of days for the school and SW will need weeks to get them signed."

### Status of foster carers

Foster carers play a vital role in the lives of the children and young people they look after, but they aren't always recognised or valued for this.

As shown, foster carers were most likely to feel they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by **teachers/ education professionals**, followed by **health professionals** and their **supervising social workers**. They were less likely to feel this way about **children's social workers** and **independent reviewing officers (IROs)**. Note that only independent fostering providers in Northern Ireland have IROs, but health and social care trusts do not, so this point is only relevant to the 17% of respondents who foster for an IRO.

Foster carers who 'always' or 'usually' feel treated as equal and valued by...



66% said they are always or usually invited to meetings with teachers/ education professionals, 63% to meetings with health professionals, and 69% to children's care planning and review meetings.

### Register of foster carers

The Fostering Network has been campaigning for a register of foster carers, similar to the registers that exist for other parts of the children's care sector, for several years. We believe this would benefit foster carers' status, as well as improving safeguarding for children, matching, and sufficiency planning.

**Just over a third (35%) of foster carers said they strongly or slightly support proposals to**

**create a register.** A fifth (21%) were opposed, and the remaining respondents were either neutral (20%) or needed more information (24%).

Both fostering services in Northern Ireland who completed the survey were strongly opposed to the idea of a register.

## Protections and rights for foster carers

44% of foster carers reported feeling they have no rights or protections in their role, and a further quarter (24%) said they don't have many. We asked what rights and protections foster carers feel they should have. The top themes related to:

- **Conditions/ treatment (39%),** including protection from harm, professionalisation, and voice.
- **Finances (28%),** including fair pay and pensions.
- **Time off (23%),** including annual leave, access to short breaks, and sick leave.
- **Caring for children (19%),** including decision-making.
- **Allegations (18%).**

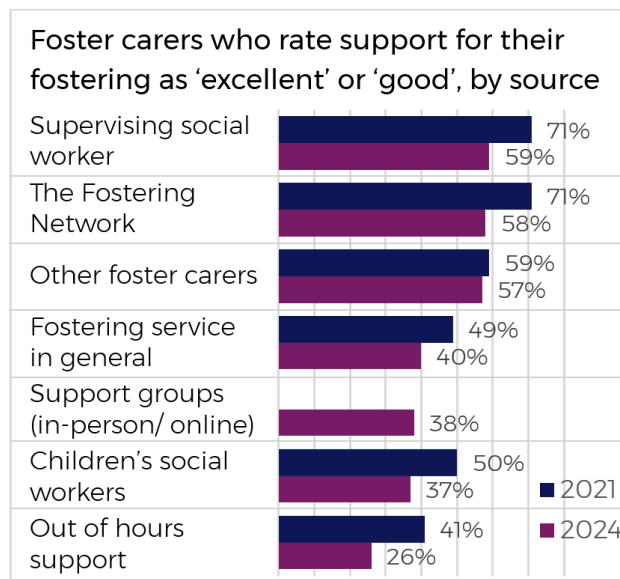
"The right to be treated with respect and treated like a professional. The right to regular respite, and not to feel guilty about asking for it."

"Pay to continue for minimum 3 months in an allegation or loss of placement."

"Protection from retaliation when you raise issues of concern."

## Support for foster carers

Fostering is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be challenging. All foster carers need a range of support to enable them to provide the best possible care for the children they look after, while maintaining their own wellbeing. We asked foster carers to rate the support they receive for their fostering from various sources.



**Support from supervising social workers (SSWs) was rated the most highly,** but as with all other sources of support, this has fallen since 2021. Furthermore, less than a third (32%) of foster carers said they have had one consistent SSW in the past 24 months, down from 38% in 2021.

**Out of hours support was rated the least highly.** Only one fostering service responded to this question, saying they do not provide out of hours support through the foster carer's own supervising social worker.

Only 43% of foster carers said they have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster. Importantly, foster carers with access to this were significantly more likely to recommend fostering (60%) than those without access to it (29%).



## Foster carers' wellbeing

Almost three in five foster carers surveyed in Northern Ireland (63%) reported having experienced burnout or poor wellbeing because of their fostering role. Just over two in five (41%) said they feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing when they need it, without fear of negative consequences for them or the children they foster.

Unsurprisingly, foster carers who have experienced burnout were significantly less likely to recommend fostering (24%) than those who have not experienced burnout (82%). Those who said they feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing were significantly more likely to recommend fostering (74%) than those who do not feel able to (17%).

## Support for children in foster care

Children and young people in care have often experienced trauma and adversity which can affect their development, educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing. Every child in care has the potential to thrive with the right support, but too often this support isn't available when they need it, or isn't adequate.

## Support for learning

Over half (56%) of foster carers surveyed said at least one of the children they foster receives additional support with their learning. This has increased considerably from 44% in 2021.

Of those who foster a child receiving additional support for learning, 52% said they think it is sufficient, up from 48% in 2021.

## Mental health and wellbeing support

Almost half (48%) of foster carers responding to the survey said at least one child they foster is either receiving mental health or wellbeing support or is on a waiting list for support.

The proportion fostering a child who is receiving mental health support fell from 30% in 2021 to 22% in 2024, while the proportion fostering a child who is being referred or waiting for support increased from 11% in 2021 to 26% in 2024.

49% of foster carers said they are fostering a child who needs mental health support but isn't getting it, up from 42% in 2021.



"My 16 year old boy has been waiting for 3 years to access help from CAMHS as he lives in a different trust area even though he's been here 13 years. Because they can't make a decision on who will provide the service, he's left to get progressively worse."

## Allegations

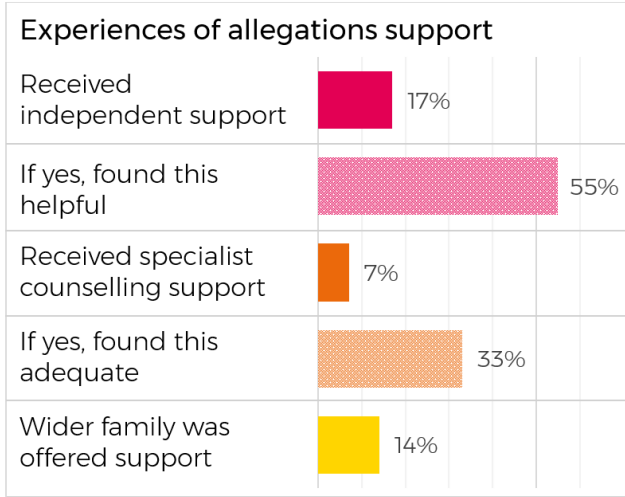
An allegation is a claim from any person that a foster carer or another member of the fostering household has, or may have: behaved in a way that has harmed a child; committed a criminal offence against a child;

or behaved in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. **26% of foster carers who responded in Northern Ireland said they have experienced one or more allegations in the past 24 months.** Many foster carers commented that their service does not distinguish between allegations, concerns and complaints, which may explain why this figure is considerably higher than the UK average of 14%.

Support

It is recognised as best practice for foster carers to receive independent support through the allegations process. However, **only one in six foster carers (17%) surveyed in Northern Ireland said they received independent support** in relation to their most recent allegation, up from 14% in 2021. Just over half (55%) found this helpful, up from a third (33%) in 2021.

Additionally, **only 7% received specialist counselling support** and a third (33%) of these found the support adequate. **14% said their wider family was offered support** by their fostering service.



Allegations against foster carers can be extremely distressing for them and affect their whole family, so this support is vital for their wellbeing and to enable them to continue fostering when it is right to do so.

Timescales of investigations

The most common duration of allegations investigations was six months to one year (42%). One in five foster carers (21%) said the investigation took up to one month; one in six (16%) said it took one to three months; 12% said it took three to six months; and 9% said it took over a year.

Removal of children

A quarter (25%) of foster carers said a child they fostered was removed from their home during their most recent allegation investigation, up from 10% in 2021. This time we also asked if the child was returned; 36% of foster carers who had a child removed said the child was returned to them.

55% of foster carers who had a child removed said they received their usual level of foster carer fees during the allegation investigation.

Impact of allegations

We asked foster carers to share how their experiences of allegations have impacted them. The most commonly reported impact was on their **fostering (31%)**, including feelings about fostering, and fear of allegations. A quarter (25%) referenced the impact on their emotional/ mental health.

"It's an awful way to live looking over your shoulder for the next false allegation."

"Worst experience of my life, I have found myself having panic attacks."

Improving the allegations experience

We also asked foster carers what would improve the allegations experience. The top priorities in comments from foster carers in Northern Ireland were:

- **Fairness (61%)**, including independent investigation and decision-making.
- Better **communication and information-sharing (36%)**, including in writing.
- Better **processes (31%)**, including clarity around the difference between allegations, complaints and concerns.
- **Training (22%)** on the allegations process and foster carers' rights throughout it.
- **Support (19%)**, particularly independent support.

"Remove all responsibility from Trust and agency social workers. Develop a new process that is independent and fair."

"There needs to be a requirement to communicate in writing, they told me 'it was sorted' but I have no idea what this means."

"Separate concerns, complaints and allegations."

## Finances

All foster carers receive an allowance which should cover the costs of looking after the children they foster. Some foster carers also receive a fee in recognition of their role. However, our research continues to show that these are often inadequate and many foster carers have to top up their income in other ways to be able to afford to foster.

### Work and benefits

52% of foster carers in Northern Ireland said they work alongside fostering, up from 49% in 2021. 18% said they receive benefits.

## Allowances

Less than a quarter (24%) of foster carers said the fostering allowance, and any expenses they can claim, meet the full costs of looking after the children they foster. This has decreased from just over half (51%) in 2021.

Over two thirds (69%) of foster carers said they use other personal income, such as their foster carer fees, savings, or partner's income, to cover this extra cost. 46% of foster carers said they have to work to cover the extra cost and 14% said they seek support from family or friends, charities, or other sources.

"Our allowance wasn't enough a few years ago. It hasn't risen with inflation in the last 3 years and we are at breaking point."

## Fees

Only 44% of foster carers in Northern Ireland said they receive a fee. Of these, less than a third (32%) said they feel their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs, for example their bills, rent or mortgage, and food (not for the children they foster).



Most foster carers (63%) said they don't receive a retainer fee if they don't have a

child living in foster care with them. This has increased from 52% in 2021.

While allowances are set by the Government of Northern Ireland, there is no central legislation or guidance about fees for foster carers. Fees are decided individually by each fostering service provider. We asked all survey respondents for their views on this; **68% of foster carers and both fostering services** who completed the survey said government should set a regional fee framework to apply across all fostering services in Northern Ireland.

Managing finances

Over three quarters (77%) of foster carers said the cost of living has had an impact on their fostering.

"I have had to use credit card debt some months to get by."


Part Three

Endings and Post-Foster Care

Children moving on in foster care

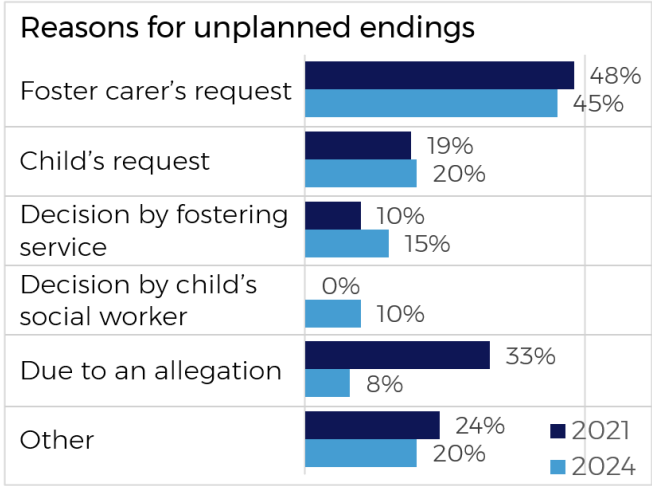
Unplanned endings

Two thirds (66%) of foster carers in Northern Ireland who have experienced a child moving on in the past 24 months said this included an unplanned ending, up from half (50%) in 2021.



**Two thirds of foster carers who have experienced a child moving on in the past 24 months** said this included an unplanned ending, up from half in 2021.

The most common cause of unplanned endings was the foster carer’s own request (45%, down from 48% in 2021). One in five foster carers (20%) specified another reason for their latest unplanned ending. These included references to ‘placement breakdown’, children’s needs, the foster carer’s personal situation, and safeguarding.



"Too often, placements break down because it’s easier to move children than support the placement properly."

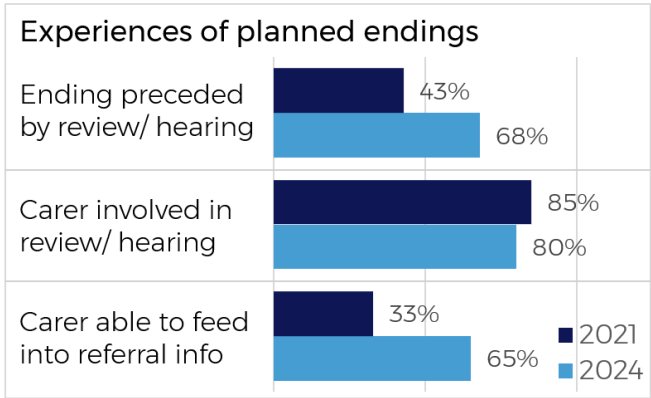
"I could not physically continue the 24 hour care with no support."

In 2024, we also asked fostering services what they consider to be the main changes required to reduce unplanned endings for children in foster care. Of those responding, one service commented that **more foster carers** are needed to reduce unplanned endings. The other service commented that unplanned endings could be reduced by providing **more information** at the beginning of placements, and increasing **support** for foster carers and the children in their care.

Planned endings

Three quarters (75%) of foster carers who experienced a child move on in the past 24 months said this included a planned ending. Of these, **68% said their latest planned ending was preceded by a child’s care plan review or a looked after child review**, up from 43% in 2021. 80% said they were involved in this review, down from 85%.

Two thirds (65%) of foster carers responding said they were given the opportunity to feed into the referral information for the child’s next care arrangement in relation to their latest planned ending, up from a third (33%).



Views on decisions to move children

Less than half of foster carers (48%) reported feeling decisions to move children are always or usually in the best interests of the child. This is a considerable change from 2021 when this figure was 21%.

Going the Extra Mile

Until recently, most young people in foster care were required to leave their foster home as soon as they turned 18, far earlier than their peers not in care – who typically leave home after the age of 24 – and often before they are ready. Following the introduction of the Going the Extra Mile (GEM) scheme in 2010,<sup>4</sup> young people in Northern Ireland can stay with their foster families up to the age of 21 if they are in education, employment or training. The Adoption and Children Act (2022)<sup>5</sup> includes provisions to place the GEM scheme on a statutory footing but these provisions have not yet come into effect.

Transition planning

Early planning is important to ensure smooth transitions between, and out of, care arrangements. However, a **third (33%) of foster carers said in their experience there is typically no planning ahead of a young person’s transition** out of care or into a Going the Extra Mile arrangement. A quarter (24%) said planning typically begins less than six months before the transition, one in ten (10%) said it begins six months to one year before the transition, and 14% said it begins one to two years before the transition. Only 3% said planning typically begins more than two years before the transition.

Barriers to GEM arrangements

We asked foster carers to share the reasons any eligible young people didn’t remain with them in Going the Extra Mile when they turned 18. The top reasons they gave were:

- **The young person didn’t want to stay (53%, up from 50%).**
- **A lack of support from their fostering service (20%, up from 13%).**
- **The foster carer’s fostering income would decrease (20%, up from 13%).**
- **A lack of support from the child’s social worker (17%, down from 25%).**



## Finances in GEM arrangements

Almost two thirds (64%) of foster carers said they are worse off financially as a result of caring for a young person in a Going the Extra Mile arrangement, up from 53% in 2021. 44% said the young person is expected to contribute towards their allowance.

## Comments on GEM arrangements

In foster carers' comments on how well GEM arrangements are working for the young people they foster, the most common theme was **finances (35%)**, particularly issues accessing financial support.

"Social services usually want the young person to move on because they don't have the money or staff to allow them to stay with us for longer. This is always against our wishes because we know that the young person is not ready."

## Keeping in touch

Children and young people's relationships with their foster families are central to helping them feel safe and supported when they can't live with their birth family. When a child moves on from a foster family, they should be able to maintain their relationship with them for as long as they want.

Despite this, **less than two in five foster carers (39%) said they always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered**. Just over half (53%) said these relationships always or usually last long-term, for example, into the children's adulthood.

Only a quarter (24%) of foster carers said they feel very or quite supported to keep in touch with former foster children where appropriate.



## Reasons for not keeping in touch

The most common reason for not keeping in touch was that local practice didn't allow it (43%). Additionally, 17% said it was in the child's best interests not to keep in touch.

## Comments on keeping in touch

The most common themes in foster carers' comments on keeping in touch were:

- **Wanting to keep in touch (29%).**
- **Obstacles to keeping in touch (21%)** – including that services don't encourage or support it.
- **Impact of not keeping in touch (12%)** – including that children feel abandoned.

"I believe social services should make more effort to support keeping in touch. It is difficult for a child to believe you really cared for them when they move from your home and they have no contact from carers again."



## Part Four

# The System

### Shortages of foster carers

In the year prior to 2023/24, the number of non-kinship foster carers in Northern Ireland fell by 29%. While some of this decrease could be explained by a move towards prioritising kinship care for children where possible, reflected in increasing numbers of kinship carers in the same time period, the latter does not fully account for the drastic decrease in non-kinship carer numbers. Rather, as the rest of this survey indicates, this decrease appears to be at least partly driven by issues with foster carers' role satisfaction and wellbeing.

Of the two fostering services in Northern Ireland that completed our survey, one service said the number of approved mainstream fostering households, kinship fostering households, and enquiries to foster for their service have all decreased in the past year. The other service, which does not have any approved kinship fostering households, said the number of mainstream fostering households has increased but the number of enquiries to foster has stayed roughly the same.

Both services said there is a shortage of foster carers to meet the needs of the children in their local population.

### Retention

The retention of foster carers is just as important as recruitment, if not more so, to address the current shortages of foster carers in Northern Ireland. We asked fostering services to share the most effective thing they do to retain foster carers. Only one service answered this question and named their relationships with foster carers, and the intensive support they provide, as the most effective things they do to retain carers.

**Just under half (47%) of foster carers said they will continue fostering for as long as they can**, down from 52% in 2021. 17% said they will continue for under one year, an alarming increase from 3% in 2021. Notably, in response to the question 'what motivates you to foster?' (see the section on Recruitment for discussion of motivations to start fostering), 60% of foster carers selected 'I am committed to the children I am currently fostering' as a key reason.

However, 61% of foster carers said they have either considered (38%) or are still considering (23%) resigning from fostering, most commonly due to:

- **A lack of protections or rights** within the role (**69%**)
- **Financial difficulties** (**48%**)
- **A lack of respect** from other professionals in the team around the child (**46%**)
- **Experience of an allegation/s** (**43%**)
- **Burnout or poor wellbeing** related to fostering (**42%**)
- **A lack of support** from their fostering service (**36%**)

18% of all foster carers we surveyed told us that their fostering income is an essential part of their household income, further emphasising the importance of financial support to allow foster carers to continue in the role.

## Sufficiency planning

Of the two fostering services in Northern Ireland that completed our survey, one service said they have a fostering recruitment and retention (R&R) strategy, but are rarely involved in any local/ regional sufficiency planning for the looked after children population. This service strongly agreed with proposals to create a national fostering R&R strategy for Northern Ireland.

The other service that completed the survey said they do not have an R&R strategy, are only sometimes involved in local/ regional sufficiency planning, and strongly disagreed with proposals to create a national fostering R&R strategy.

## Views and attitudes on fostering

Sadly, only 43% of foster carers surveyed in Northern Ireland said they would recommend fostering to others who may be considering it, down from 45% in 2021. On average, foster carers in Northern Ireland rated their experience of fostering as 5.8 out of 10, down from 6.5 out of 10 in 2021.

We asked foster carers and fostering services what they think currently works well in fostering. The top themes in comments by foster carers were:

- **Positive relationships with social workers (19%)**
- **The fostering community (15%)**
- **The impact of fostering on children and young people (8%)** – tied with the **children and young people themselves (8%)**

Neither of the two services in Northern Ireland that completed the survey shared anything that works well in fostering.

We then asked what foster carers and fostering services would like to see changed to make fostering better. The top themes among foster carers were:

- **Foster carers' finances (18%)**
- **Foster carers' status and respect in the team around the child (15%)**
- **Social workers' capacity and turnover (13%)**

Of the two services in Northern Ireland that completed the survey, one service told us they want to see more **collaboration between statutory and independent providers**, while the other said they want to see more **resources for foster carers**.

## Conclusion

Across many areas of fostering – including matching, status, support, and finances – the evidence from this survey shows that foster carers' experiences, and by extension, those of the children and young people they foster, have worsened since 2021. On other issues such as allegations in fostering families, the findings continue to paint a challenging picture.

However, we've also seen examples of where the right support, particularly from supervising social workers, can help foster carers to change children's lives. Respondents also shared their strong support for practical changes that would make a real difference for foster carers and children and young people. The following recommendations set out the key changes we believe the government, placing authorities and fostering services in Northern Ireland should prioritise.

### The Government of Northern Ireland should:

- Create a national **recruitment and retention strategy** for foster care, and fund a national foster carer **recruitment campaign**, to increase the pool of available carers.

- Invest in the creation, implementation and monitoring of a **standardised framework for pre- and post-approval training** for foster carers.
- Introduce statutory 'opt-out' **maximum delegated authority** for foster carers to make day-to-day decisions on behalf of the children and young people they foster.
- Address sufficiency issues within children and families social work teams, prioritising and financing targeted **social work recruitment** and regulation of caseloads.
- Invest in children's **mental health services** and **additional support for learning**.
- Fund **independent support services**, legal protection, representation and advocacy for all foster carers subject to an allegation, concern or complaint.
- Increase **allowances** to meet our recommended rates<sup>6</sup> and introduce and fund a **national minimum fee framework**, with fees paid 52 weeks a year, and a **national pension scheme** for foster carers.
- Legislate and provide funding to increase the maximum age for GEM to age 25 to enable young people to stay with their foster families for longer, improving **transitions**.
- Produce statutory guidance to support children and young people's **ongoing relationships** with people who matter to them, including their former foster families where appropriate.
- Fund **innovative fostering programmes** that focus on prevention, retention and support, such as Step Up Step Down.

### Placing authorities should:

- Ensure children's profile information is collated by everyone who knows them best and is shared with fostering services to inform **high quality matching**.
- Put the views of children and young people at the centre of decisions on **family time** and **keeping in touch** with former foster carers.
- Ensure all children coming into care receive a **mental health assessment**.

### Fostering services should:

- Ensure all necessary **matching information** about children is shared with potential carers, and children are informed about and have the opportunity to meet their new foster family, well in advance of any move.
- Provide **training** in a range of formats and at different times to increase attendance, focusing particularly on increasing access to training on allegations, foster carers' rights, and foster carer finances.
- Include detail on **day-to-day decisions** in care planning. Ensure foster carers are invited to, and supported at, care planning and review meetings.
- Prioritise improved **support for foster carers**, including therapeutic, peer, and out-of-hours support. Ensure all foster carers have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster.

# About the data

The 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey was completed by 173 foster carers and two fostering services in Northern Ireland.

The current and former foster carers' surveys contained very similar questions, largely about individuals' experiences of fostering, while the services' survey focused more on practice within services. All three surveys were open from 2 May to 14 July 2024 and hosted online using Qualtrics. The surveys were shared with all The Fostering Network's members and promoted through our website, magazine, social media and e-newsletters. Findings were analysed with the support of two independent consultants.

## About the foster carer respondents

83% of respondents said they foster for a health and social care trust. The remainder said they foster for an independent fostering provider, either for-profit (11%) or not-for-profit (6%). Trust foster carers were therefore underrepresented compared to their 91% share of all fostering households in Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Three quarters (77%) of respondents were mainstream (non-kinship) foster carers and a quarter (23%) were family and friends/kinship foster carers (approved or pending approval). Kinship foster carers were therefore underrepresented compared to their 50% share of all fostering households in Northern Ireland.

Additionally, 7% of respondents were Going the Extra Mile carers.

## About the fostering service respondents

One fostering service was a health and social care trust and one was an independent voluntary fostering provider.

The total number of fostering households approved by the services that completed the survey was 366, representing approximately 13% of fostering households in Northern Ireland.

Both respondents who completed the fostering services' survey on behalf of their service were fostering service managers.

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# References

<sup>1</sup> Department of Health & Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2024) [Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2023/24](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ellis. S and Williams. N (2025) [State of the Nations' Foster Care: Summary Report 2024](#), The Fostering Network

<sup>3</sup> Ellis. S and Williams. N (2025) [State of the Nations' Foster Care: Full Report 2024](#), The Fostering Network

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Adoption & Foster Care (n.d.) [Types of foster care](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Adoption and Children Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022, s.128](#)

<sup>6</sup> The Fostering Network (2025) [Fostering allowances](#)



The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of children in foster care.

We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all children and young people in foster care experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

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