

## The Fostering Network's response to Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system

March 2026

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### Issue 1: Financial transparency

#### 9. To what extent do you support the idea of increased financial transparency?

Strongly support;

#### 10. In your view, what (if any) are the potential benefits of increased financial transparency?

Our response to this section is based on our survey to 76 foster carers and 33 fostering services along with professional knowledge from interaction with our members.

Overall, both foster carers and fostering services support the idea of increased financial transparency with 79% strongly supporting or somewhat supporting.

The full breakdown:

Foster carers – 62% strongly support, 17% somewhat support, 17% neither support nor oppose, 3% somewhat oppose and 1 % strongly oppose.

Fostering services – 67% strongly support, 12% somewhat support. 15% neither support nor oppose, 3% strongly oppose and 3% don't know.

However, 70% of respondents believe that financial transparency is as an equally significant barrier to recruitment and retention as the whole financial

package offered to foster carers receive, while 26% think the financial package itself is a greater barrier. This suggests that although financial transparency may deliver the benefits outlined below, it will not, on its own, be sufficient to achieve the ambition of achieving homes for 10,000 more children. Therefore, achieving this will require transparency to be accompanied by a strengthened and improved financial offer for foster carers.

The main benefits of financial transparency identified by foster carers and fostering services include:

### **Fairness and Consistency**

A key benefit identified was the increased fairness and consistency that greater financial transparency would bring across the fostering sector. Transparency would help eliminate the current postcode lottery in fees and allowances, where payment levels vary widely between areas and services. By enabling a clear comparison of what each service provided, it would highlight those that are not meeting recommended levels and may incentivise them to improve their offer, particularly as carers may otherwise move to services with a more competitive financial offer.

*“Perhaps it would encourage different fostering services and geographical areas to be fairer and more consistent in their treatment of foster children and carers” – Foster carer*

Financial transparency would also make it clear what carers should receive for different types of fostering. Foster carers reported that they are not always aware of the full range of payments or entitlements available to them, resulting in some receiving less than they should. A transparent system would therefore support equity, prevent underpayment and ensure carers are properly remunerated to meet children’s needs.

*“It’s seen as complicated and foster carers often don’t understand how to move up a level or why other foster carers receive different amounts to themselves.” – Foster carer*

### **Supporting recruitment and retention**

It was also suggested that greater financial transparency would enable prospective foster carers to make fully informed decisions from the outset about whether fostering is financially viable for their household. By removing uncertainty during the enquiry stage, it is likely to reduce early drop off and ensure those that progress to the assessment stage do so knowing what to expect financially. Transparency may also support retention by enabling existing carers who are considering leaving to move to another provider with a clear more sustainable financial offer, rather than exiting fostering entirely.

*“We aren’t foster carers for the money but we can’t do it without it, it’s a difficult question to ask especially when some LA don’t advertise fees and are guarded around the amounts. A potential foster carer knowing from the outset will be more informed and it may attract people if they are thinking of leaving their employment and know how much they will get without the embarrassment of having to ask.” – Foster carer*

In addition, increased transparency could encourage fostering services to strengthen the wider financial package they offer, including providing benefits such as council tax discounts or exemption. In our survey, 86% of foster carers strongly agreed or agreed that receiving a council tax exemption or discount would make them feel more valued by their fostering service. Feeling valued is consistently identified as one of the strongest ways to improve foster carer retention. Therefore, by highlighting which services provide such

financial benefits others may adopt them in order to reduce the risk of their foster carers transferring elsewhere.

*“All foster carers should receive full council tax exemption. We are looking after children / teens that are still in the care of the local authority 24/7. We have opened our homes and hearts to these children. Having the council tax exemption will greatly help with the cost we as carers pay out monthly in the household and in my case just the one adult working. Even if we pay half the tax this will help greatly help with this monthly cost.” – Foster carer*

*“It also supports recruitment and retention, as carers can plan realistically and feel respected as professionals.” – Fostering service*

### **Building trust and accountability**

Another key benefit highlighted by respondents is the increased trust that would be built between foster carers and fostering services. Clear, accessible financial information helps reduce the perception that decisions are inconsistent or made without explanations. Transparency provides reassurance that financial arrangements are fair, objective, and applied evenly across carers.

*“A transparent system builds trust, prevents misunderstanding, and removes the sense that finances are hidden, inconsistent or decided behind closed doors.” – Fostering service*

This increased clarity fosters a more open and collaborative relationship, where foster carers feel respected as partners in the fostering system rather than excluded from critical decisions that directly affect their household and the children in their care.

Respondents noted that greater financial transparency could expose important system level issues, such as fees that have failed to keep pace with inflation, differences between kinship and mainstream payments, and areas where fostering services are underfunded. It would also make visible how much is spent on fostering compared with other parts of children’s services. Several services added that clearer financial information would help stakeholders better understand the true cost of fostering and highlight the significant underfunding that many fostering services currently face, providing an evidence base for future investment and reform.

*“Financial transparency will help to build trust amongst carers and the public; ensuring that resources are being used efficiently for the benefit of the children it is caring for.” – Fostering service*

*“The waste would be visible as well as the dire underfunding in certain areas that are absolutely necessary, but sorely neglected” – Foster carer*

### **Helping carers plan**

Foster carers also emphasised that greater financial transparency would improve their ability to plan and manage household budgets, an issue that has increased during the cost-of-living crisis. Clear information about what fees, allowances and uplifts they are entitled to would help carers understand the full financial picture from the outset, reducing uncertainty and ensuring they can sustainably meet the needs of the children in their care.

Respondents noted that transparency would also make it easier to identify which additional payments they are able to claim for such as support for holidays, birthdays, clothing or essential equipment, areas where carers reported frequent confusion and inconsistency.

Foster carers further highlighted that greater transparency would support them in managing their tax responsibilities, particularly as fostering has different rules and allowances. Clearer guidance on what is paid and how it is categorised would reduce administrative stress and improve confidence that they are complying with requirements.

*“So potential carers can work out if they get enough financially to cover their mortgage/rent/bills and the things the children need to create a stable environment for everyone.” – Foster carer*

### **Improving outcomes for children**

Clear and consistent expectations around financial support were highlighted as essential to ensuring that all children in foster care receive the experiences, regardless of where they live or which service their foster carers is in. Financial transparency would make it explicit what funding should be provided for key elements such as pocket money, participation in clubs and activities, school trips, holidays, birthday celebrations and religious festivals. Carers reported that these areas are often subject to variation or uncertainty, which can lead to an inequality in the experiences children receive.

### **Reducing complexity**

Foster carers reported that they find the current financial system overly complex and difficult to navigate. 16% of foster carers said they didn't know if they were getting a fee in addition to their allowance, with 28% saying they didn't get a fee at all. This may be because some agencies pay them both as one payment which can cause confusion but it highlights clear inconsistencies between services with either some not paying fees or that foster carers are not receiving clear information about what they are paid. There was also uncertainty amongst foster carers about how different payments are calculated and what they are entitled to. Introducing greater financial transparency, along with a standardised payment framework, would simplify the system and make it far easier for carers to understand what support they are entitled to.

### **11. In your view, what (if any) are the potential challenges of increased financial transparency?**

Although there was strong support for greater financial transparency, some foster carers and fostering services also raised important concerns that should be carefully considered.

Several respondents worried that publicly displaying financial rates could unintentionally attract applicants motivated primarily by money rather than by the welfare of children. Others expressed discomfort with the idea of payments being openly visible, noting that most other professions do not publish individual financial arrangements in such detail.

*“A person should never attempt to Foster just for financial gain. It has to be something that feels important for them to make a difference.” – Foster carer*

Services also highlighted the risk that increased transparency could expose areas where financial packages are significantly lower, potentially prompting carers to transfer to better funded services such as some IFAs who offer more competitive rates. For local authorities facing substantial cost pressures, higher levels of need, or greater deprivation,

increasing payments to match more competitive areas may simply not be feasible without national investment and they may risk losing a lot of their foster carers. As a result, transparency alone, without an accompanying national uplift in the overall financial offer, may unintentionally destabilise local sufficiency.

### **Recommendations**

- **The Fostering Network has consistently recommended that financial transparency must be introduced alongside a strengthened and nationally consistent financial package for foster carers, ensuring that transparency supports, recruitment, retention, and placement stability.**
- **We recommend that the Government:**
  - **Increase the national minimum allowance for foster carers to match The Fostering Network's recommended rates, and commit to an inflationary uplift each year. Carry out a comprehensive review of foster carer fees.**
  - **Introduce, invest in, and monitor the delivery of a national recommended fee framework for foster carers, with fees to be paid for 52 weeks a year, including between placements and during allegation investigations. This should include an inflationary uplift each year.**
  - **Ensure that all fostering services provide all foster carers with transparent information about their fostering payments to distinguish between their fees and allowances, and publish this information.**
  - **Work with Ofsted to ensure that services' financial transparency is monitored and included as part of their inspections (both ILACs and SCIF) for local authorities and IFAs.**

**12. In your view, how important is it for foster carers to know the full financial offer, including incentives (e.g. discounted council tax or free parking in local authority car parks), of different fostering services before making an enquiry?**

Somewhat important;

#### ***For fostering services***

**13. What information on fees, allowances and expenses does your fostering service already publish?**

Not applicable.

#### ***For foster carers***

**14. In your view, how important is it for foster carers to understand the different components of the pay they receive? For example, understanding which component is the allowance, which component is the fee or other expenses.**

Very important;

## **Issue 2: A foster carer register**

### **15 . To what extent do you agree or disagree with introducing a national foster care register?**

Strongly agree

### **16 . What (if any) would be the potential benefits of a national foster care register?**

Our response to the section of the call for evidence is based on the views of our members which we gathered through a focus group of 16 foster carers and 58 fostering services as well as findings from a survey we conducted which was completed by 76 foster carers and 33 fostering services.

Overall, 72% of those that responded to our survey strongly agreed or agreed with introducing a national foster care register.

The breakdown of survey responses:

Foster carers – 38% strongly agree, 37% agree, 17% neither agree nor disagree, 1% disagree. 7% strongly disagree

Fostering services – 30% strongly agree, 33% agree, 27% neither agree nor disagree, 6% disagree, 3% strongly disagree

We asked a question on this in our latest State of the Nations survey and almost half (49%) of foster carers in England said they strongly or slightly support proposals to create a national register, while 22% were neutral and 19% said they need more information. One in ten (11%) said they oppose the idea. Respondents in fostering services were less supportive of proposals for a national register than foster carers, but were still more likely to support the idea (33%) than oppose it (23%)

We asked respondents what objectives they would like a national register to achieve from a number of options - respondents could choose all that apply from:

- Increased status of foster carers
- Improved portability for foster carers
- Improved independent oversight
- Improve safeguarding oversight
- National data and an aid to forecasting the demand for and supply of foster carers
- Improve ability for services to find the right foster carer for children, in the right place, at the right time
- Improve consistency of professional development expectations
- A professional registration body
- A regulatory function
- None of the above
- Other

We also asked a free text question on the advantages and disadvantage of introducing a foster carer register which we analysed. The main benefits of a national foster care register highlighted by our members include:

### **Improved matching**

Members agreed that national and local overview of all approved foster carers, which includes details of their skills, experience and availability, would enhance the matching process. Such a system would enable services to identify carers with the right skills and expertise for each child or young person, supporting more informed and timely decisions. It would also strengthen culturally appropriate matching, helping children and young people maintain vital links to their communities.

It was also identified that the improved visibility of carers a register would create would make it easier to identify foster carers in neighbouring local authorities close to a child's home, school, family and friends - reducing unnecessary moves, disruption and out of area placements. At the same time, a national view of all foster carers would support situations where a child needs to be placed outside their local area for safeguarding reasons, ensuring a suitable foster carer can be identified quickly and safely. Therefore, it was felt a register would support more stable placements, quicker decision making, and better outcomes for children, particularly those with specialist or additional needs.

Overall, 66% of those that responded to our survey would like a national register to improve the ability of services to find the right foster carer for children, in the right place, at the right time, with 76% of foster carers and 42% of services wanting a register to achieve this.

These improvements would support more stable placements, quicker decision making, and better outcomes for children, particularly those with specialist or additional needs.

*“Being able to see at a glance who has capacity to take a child and what their qualification/ expertise is to better match the needs of individual children and speed up the process of placing vulnerable children” – Foster carer*

### **Improved safeguarding**

One of the key benefits both foster carers and fostering services agreed a register would provide is improved safeguarding for children. A national register would maintain a central record of foster carers whose approval has been terminated for safeguarding reasons, ensuring they cannot be reapproved by another fostering service and subsequently care for a child. Currently, fostering services cannot always access this information, particularly when carers transfer between independent agencies and local authorities, leaving potential gaps in oversight. A national system would provide consistent, reliable safeguarding information and prevent individuals who pose a risk from moving undetected across the sector.

Overall, 64% of respondents to our survey would like to see a foster carer register improve safeguarding oversight (62% of foster carers and 64% of fostering services).

*“An advantage would be that should a foster carers/s be found to be abusing the system and/or the child/children in their care they will be subject to the same restrictions and barring as Nurses and Doctors are from the general register and will never be able to foster again.” – Foster carer*

*“Helpful in terms of safeguarding, if there have been deregistrations, the information is readily available if they apply at another agency. This is especially important as transfer agencies can sometime be very difficult to get information from and will not share sometimes the extent of concerns which means areas of information can be missing in assessment.” – Fostering service*

*“Primarily, my focus here is on safeguarding - when a foster carers approval is terminated and they are deregistered, they can still apply to another foster agency. In my view, a register would have more oversight over this.” – Fostering service*

### **Greater professionalisation of foster carers**

Members highlighted that a national register could help improve the professionalisation of foster carers by formally recognising foster carers as part of a regulated professional workforce, similar to social workers, nurses or teachers. Having a central record of approval, training, safeguarding checks and experience would demonstrate that fostering is a skilled and accountable role with clear standards. It was felt this would also give more confidence to birth parents too in foster carers caring for their children.

Overall, 58% of respondents to our survey want a national foster care register to increase the status of foster carers, 68% of foster carers and 49% of fostering services.

*“A register may reinforce fostering as a recognised professional role within children’s services.” – Foster carer*

*“It would raise the profile of foster carers and may change the culture with some social workers who treat them as 'commodities' who are not professional and whose views are not acknowledged. This is very important.” – Fostering service*

*“Would allow carers to make more informed decisions, create a feeling of being a more professional body, more valued & create better earning & employment potential.” – Foster carer*

### **Portability**

Foster carers agreed that a national foster carer register would make it significantly easier to transfer between fostering services. By holding a central record of each foster carer’s details, including their approval status, training history and outcomes of previous assessments, a register would remove the need for foster carers to repeat the full lengthy assessment process, such as completing a new assessment, simply because they have moved house or wish to change provider. This would greatly reduce the time, cost and administrative burden associated with reassessment for both carers and services.

Improved portability would also give foster carers greater choice and flexibility. Carers who feel they are not receiving sufficient support, or who would benefit from a service better suited to their needs, would be able to transfer more easily rather than leaving fostering altogether.

Overall, 59% of respondents to our survey want a national foster care register to improve portability for foster carers, 66% of foster carers and 42% of fostering services.

*“It could make it easier for foster carers to transfer between local authorities or agencies without repeating unnecessary processes, improving workforce mobility and retention.” – Foster carer*

*“Easier for foster carers to relocate without losing approval.” – Foster carer*

### **Better data for recruitment and sufficiency planning**

Member highlighted that a national foster carer register would significantly improve the quality, consistency and usefulness of data collected across the fostering system. Currently, information about foster carers is held separately by individual fostering services, resulting in fragmented, inconsistent and sometimes incomplete datasets.

They noted that this would allow the government and services to better monitor the real numbers of foster carers, and identify trends, such as shortages in particular types of foster care, areas with high transfer activity, or gaps in specialist provision, allowing for more targeted and strategic recruitment.

Data from a national foster carer register would also strengthen long term foster care sufficiency planning. A centralised register would allow local and national bodies to monitor demographic trends such as ages of foster carers, identify where future gaps in capacity are likely to occur, and plan targeted recruitment accordingly. By enabling clearer forecasting, the register would support a more sustainable and resilient fostering workforce over time.

Overall 52% of respondents to our survey want a national foster care register to improve national data and aid forecasting for the demand for and supply of foster carers (51% of foster carers and 55% of fostering services).

### **16. What (if any) would be the potential challenges of a national foster care register?**

While the majority of members were broadly supportive of the principle of a national foster carer register, several important concerns were raised that would need to be addressed.

#### **Data protection**

Members expressed concerns about the volume and sensitivity of information that a national register would hold. Foster carers were particularly worried about who would have access to their personal data and how privacy and confidentiality would be safeguarded. Many stressed that the register must not be publicly accessible, as this could compromise the safety of carers and the children in their care. There were also questions about how information would be shared between agencies, and how the system would comply with data protection legislation when potentially accessed by multiple organisations.

*“Sensitive personal information must be carefully protected. Strong governance and clear access rights would be essential.” Foster carer*

*“Carers from minority groups may fear that a national database increase state scrutiny or that unconscious bias in local reporting could follow them permanently across the country” – Fostering service*

We think that only core information about foster carers and their household should be included and full consideration will need to be given to this by the Government if a register was introduced. These should include approval status and capacity, current availability, household composition, including birth children and pets, demographic information such as religion, gender and language spoken to support cultural matching (with an option to opt out), location (only the first few letters of the postcode). Skills/training and specific expertise (e.g. disabilities or complex needs) could also be included.

We do not think that the register should be accessed by the public, only services and the DfE should have access to the information and there would need to be strict GDPR controls and safeguards in place. We think foster carers should be able to check their information is correct and request that services change it. Consideration would need to building effective digital capabilities for the system to ensure services systems could talk to each other.

Consultation would be needed on whether foster carers should be responsible for updating their own details to facilitate matching suggestions or training, or whether this should be the role of their fostering service.

### **Cost**

Another concern related to the potential cost of establishing and maintaining a national register. Respondents questioned who would fund the system, and whether fostering services, who already face significant budget pressures, would be expected to pay for the additional costs. Some also queried whether foster carers might be required to pay a registration fee, which they felt would be inappropriate and could deter new applicants. The cost benefit balance was a recurring theme, with services seeking clarity on whether the investment may better used elsewhere and whether it would deliver tangible improvements to recruitment, retention, and safeguarding.

We believe that if a register was introduced, it would need to be fully funded by the Government so that services did not have to fund it out of existing already stretched budgets. However, we think the initial costs would eventually be offset by the increase in fostering sufficiency and children coming into foster care which costs less than residential, as well as increased retention of foster carers. We do not think that foster carers should have to pay to join a register as this could negatively affect recruitment.

### **Implementation practicalities and collaboration**

Members also highlighted practical challenges associated with implementing and maintaining the register. Services questioned who would be responsible for regularly updating the information, noting that fostering teams are already working under significant workload pressures. There were concerns about how services would contact foster carers they see on a register, whether that would be through their service or them directly and how this would work when it comes to emergency placements. Some respondents also raised questions about how it would align with existing registers that some services and combined authorities currently have.

We believe a register should not involve updating any information that a service does not already hold or update so it should not involve any more work. It should only hold the information listed above which services already collect. We believe that the approval of foster carers should also remain a local activity carried out by services.

Some services were concerned that some local authorities may be unwilling to 'give up' their foster carers to care for children from neighbouring local authorities as they do not currently

collaborate in this way. We think there needs to be a legal duty introduced alongside the register to ensure information is shared on a register by services and children could be placed in another local authority to ensure both local authorities and IFAs comply. Placing authorities may also have to develop reciprocal agreements or protocols to facilitate cross-authority matching.

However, some services felt this was not a significant barrier as they were already working in this way e.g. those in the hubs were sharing some of this information with each other through spreadsheets and regional care cooperatives (RCC) pilot areas in the South East and Greater Manchester are already sharing commissioning fostering placements. We believe the development of regional hubs and RCCs as part of this across the whole of England could be an important first step in regional collaboration and the development of a national register. Consideration should be given to some RCCs piloting a register in their region as a first step.

### **Over regulation and bureaucracy**

Some respondents expressed concerns that a national foster carer register could introduce an additional layer of regulation into a sector that is already highly regulated. There was also concern that the registration process might feel intrusive to prospective foster carers, particularly following an already intensive assessment. Respondents cautioned that if the register is perceived as another burden rather than a supportive tool, it may deter potential applicants and inadvertently impact recruitment.

*“We may lose a lot of foster carers who may view this as over regulation, particularly if they view that regulations is becoming more tighter than relaxed. Especially those foster carers who find the fostering assessment and monitoring support visits unannounced and announced intrusive” – Fostering service*

A register would need to be built incrementally and we believe this should be co-produced with foster carers and services to ensure it reflects their needs and views. There would need to be significant support and training for both services and foster carers to support the cultural change that would be needed alongside the development of a register so that the process did not feel more intrusive to foster carers.

We do not believe a register would introduce any other layers of assessment as the register will only include details of their approval which is already what their service holds. Proper consideration will need to be given to whether the register also had a regulatory function.

### **17. What features do you think would be most important to include on a national foster carer register for it to be effective? (Free text).**

Members shared that a register should be a database for safeguarding and portability, a matching tool and a portal for learning and development and professionalisation, therefore it would need to include:

#### **Core information about foster carers**

Members highlighted the need for a register to include key information that supports safe and effective matching such as:

- Approval status and capacity
- Current availability
- Household composition, including birth children and pets

- Demographic information such as religion, gender and language spoken to aid cultural matching (with an option to opt out)
- Location – first part of postcode only
- Skills, training and specific expertise (e.g disabilities or complex needs)

### **Safeguarding information**

Safeguarding was one of the strongest themes raised within among foster carers and fostering services, they felt a register should include:

- A record of any safeguarding concerns, allegations and outcomes, with proportionate context
- Hold details of decisions to terminate approval

### **Portability**

Portability was described by members as being a crucial feature of a register, therefore it would need to:

- Include necessary information to follow a foster carer if they move house or transfer services
- Remove the need to repeat Form F assessments
- Reduce duplication, delay and administrative burden

### **Learning and development**

- A place to record what learning and development/training has been undertaken

### **Professional registration body and regulatory function**

Several members also thought that a national foster carer register could function as an independent registration body, 51% of respondents would like a national register to be a professional registration body. This was viewed as a potential way to strengthen oversight, improve consistency in decision making, and mirror the regulatory models used in other professions such as social work and nursing, 36% of respondents would like a register to have a regulatory function.

Foster carers are the only people who provide formal care for children without having to be registered with a central body and frequently say they are not respected in the team around the child. E.g. child minders are registered. This can perpetuate a lack of recognition of the commitment, skill and respect required for the role. Foster carers look after children 24/7 whereas childminders only look after children a few hours/the whole day. We believe that a professional register for foster carers could go some way towards increasing the professional respect and status of foster carers. We believe that without this element, it would not be a full register but just a database of foster carers which could support matching.

However, we and respondents also recognise that a registration body would represent a significant shift in how fostering is regulated and inspected by Ofsted and would require robust governance, resourcing and statutory powers. For this reason, many felt that such a development should be considered only at a later stage, once the core functions of a register, such as improving matching, strengthening safeguarding, and providing accurate national data, are firmly established and operating effectively.

In terms of whether the body could make decisions about the termination of a foster carer's approval, we think the approval of foster carers should remain a local activity but a register could make these centralise decisions.

### **Independent body**

Members (both services and foster carers) agreed that they would prefer an independent body, separate from the Department for Education and Ofsted to hold the register. We agree that it is very important that it is held by an independent body, one option could be Social Work England who hold the fitness to practice register for social workers. Another option is Ofsted the inspectorate that hold the childminding register and inspect childminders (who are also self-employed) in their own home. However, we are not proposing that a register for foster carers should have an inspection function as we believe this is best done by services as part of their inspections. This option would also involve greater changes to legislation and potentially corporate parenting structures as services are currently inspected in their corporate parenting duties by these inspectorates. Another option would be that a new independent body or regulator is set up.

Independence is key to giving foster carers confidence in how their data is managed and how decisions are made. It will also avoid tensions and conflicts of interests between local authority, Independent Fostering Agencies and the body managing the register.

### **18. Please explain why you think these features are most important. In your response, please ensure that you are clear which feature(s) you are referring to.**

Of the members who completed our survey, 66% stated that a national register should be designed to help find the right foster carer for a child, in the right place, at the right time. To achieve this, respondents felt it was essential for the register to include core information such as approval status and capacity, carers' skills and specialist expertise, for example in caring for children with disabilities or complex needs, and key demographic information including religion, gender and languages spoken. This level of detail would support more accurate, timely and culturally appropriate matching across the country.

In our survey, 62% of respondents agreed that a national register should improve safeguarding oversight, including 62% of foster carers and 64% of fostering services. Respondents stressed that safeguarding information, such as concerns, allegations and their outcomes, must be included, with appropriate context, to ensure children's safety. This would prevent individuals who may pose a risk from moving undetected between fostering services. A national register would help close existing gaps by ensuring that serious safeguarding history is consistently visible to authorised professionals and that no foster carer who has harmed a child can be reapproved elsewhere.

With 59% of respondents agreeing that a national register should improve the portability of foster carers, it is essential that the register includes the types of information that would enable carers to move more easily between fostering services. We've heard from foster carers that the current process of transferring, often involving a full repeat of

the assessment, is burdensome, time-consuming and, in some cases, discouraging enough to push carers out of fostering altogether.

A register would ensure that core approval information, training history, assessment outcomes and relevant safeguarding records follow the carer wherever they move. By making approvals portable, the register has the potential to support retention, strengthen continuity of care for children, and create a more flexible, responsive fostering workforce.

42% of respondents would like a national register to improve consistency of professional development expectation, therefore should include a clear and consistent record of a foster carer's learning and development, allowing fostering services across the country to see what mandatory and specialist development carers have already completed. Including learning and development records would also support the wider professionalisation of the fostering workforce. Foster carers undertake extensive training, yet this is not always recognised.

A national register would create a portable, verified record of training and qualifications, ensuring that carers' professional development follows them and is consistently acknowledged, regardless of where they foster.

## **Recommendations**

- **The Fostering Network recommends introducing a national foster care register to increase safeguarding, support matching of children with foster carers and improve foster carers' professional status. We recommend that the register is held by an independent body and that it is developed in collaboration with foster carers and services and piloted with the RCCs as they develop.**

## **Issue 3: Amending the fostering limit**

### **20. What challenges do foster carers report when caring for more than three children in care, including sibling groups?**

Higher risk of placement disruption;  
Limited short break opportunities;  
Managing challenging sibling dynamics;  
Workload pressure;  
Lack of training & support;

Our response to this section is based on our professional expertise and insight from supporting our members (both services and foster carers).

Based on our professional expertise and the extensive insight gathered from supporting both fostering services and foster carers, it is clear that caring for more than three children including sibling groups presents a range of complex challenges. These challenges stem from the practical, emotional, and relational demands of meeting the needs of multiple children, many of whom have experienced trauma and require high levels of individualised attention.

Many foster carers emphasise that caring for more children can limit their ability to provide each child with the individualised time, emotional presence, and support they require. This is particularly significant as the complexity of children's needs continues to increase. Carers describe wanting to spend quality time with each child to build emotional trust, but that the demands of caring for several children at once can make this incredibly challenging.

Carers often report that the sheer intensity of meeting the needs of several children at once can increase the likelihood of placement instability. For example, when one child is emotionally dysregulated, perhaps due to having difficulties at school, or struggling with transitions around family time, it can quickly affect the wider household. Many carers describe feeling guilty as though other children are being overlooked because their attention is focused on managing a crisis situation.

Accessing support such as sleepovers can also become significantly more difficult as the number of children increases. Given the current recruitment crisis, having sufficient carers who can care for multiple children, particularly siblings, is challenging and in practice leads to children who normally live together being separated where a short break is needed. As a result, many foster families caring for larger groups do not have access to sufficient support through their network.

Sibling relationships in care can be deeply affected by trauma, with patterns such as parentification, rivalry, or conflict often becoming intensified within larger groups. Carers describe situations in which older siblings take on inappropriate caregiving roles, or younger siblings compete for attention and reassurance. Supporting each child to establish healthier roles demands close supervision, emotional attunement, and consistent therapeutic support.

Supporting multiple children increases the logistical and emotional workload dramatically. Carers often highlight the complexities in managing competing commitments, including school runs, meetings, therapy sessions, medical appointments and family time arrangements. The demands of this workload can make it difficult for carers to balance the needs of each child while maintaining their own wellbeing and family life. Many carers express a need for more regular hands-on support whether from supervising social workers, therapeutic services, or practical help which services may not always be able to resource consistently.

Many foster carers also have their own birth children, adopted children, or children for whom they hold Special Guardianship Orders. This means that taking on more than three foster children can significantly increase the total number of children in the home, intensifying household demands. Carers report that this can place additional pressure on family routines, reduce the time they have available for their own children, and sometimes impact the overall family dynamic. Balancing the needs of all children including those already part of the family is a considerable emotional and practical task.

## **21. What key criteria should inform decisions about the number of children cared for by a foster carer?**

- Suitability of the living space/environment;
- Emotional and physical needs of the individual children;
- The relationship between the children;
- Child-specific factors such as age, gender and cultural identity;
- The skills and experience of the carer;

All of the above should apply. Assessment and analysis of approval status should be robust at the point of approval and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that all children's needs are being met. Matching decisions must be comprehensive with identification of any gaps in the carers' skills, experience and availability and a support plan in place to address these.

**22. What safeguarding arrangements would be most important to implement if the standard limit were to be removed?**

We strongly disagree with the removal of the standard fostering limit – see question 23 for rationale.

**23. Which of the following approaches do you prefer:**

**Retain the statutory three-child limit;**

We strongly support retaining the statutory three-child fostering limit, as it provides an essential safeguard for both foster carers and children. Removing the limit risks creating situations where foster carers feel pressured either directly or indirectly by their fostering service to accept more children than they can safely or sustainably care for. There is also a danger that services may begin to view any increase in the limit simply as additional 'vacancies', rather than giving full consideration to the carer's capacity or to the needs, stability, and wellbeing of the children already living in the home.

At the same time, we recognise the challenges raised by foster carers, including those within Mockingbird, who have highlighted the difficulties that arise when supporting others with sleepovers or short-term stays while already caring for three children or young people. In circumstances such as these—where it is clearly evidenced that the foster carer has the capacity, stability, support network, and home environment to safely care for more children—we believe that exemptions should continue to be available, as allowed for within existing legislation.

To make this workable in practice, clear internal processes are essential for requesting and granting exemptions. There needs to be consistent and accessible guidance and training so the primary legislation is well understood and implemented effectively. This clarity will ensure that exemptions are sought when appropriate, and that everyone involved is confident in navigating the process.

Where exemptions are granted, there should be a requirement for enhanced monitoring and support, recognising that caring for more than three children can place additional pressures on families. Monitoring should consider the carers's wellbeing including how they are managing in practice, what additional support they require, and whether the arrangement continues to meet the needs of all the children in the household. This oversight provides an important safeguard and helps prevent situations escalating into placement instability or carer burnout.

Alongside this, more robust matching processes are needed to ensure compatibility between children, reduce the risk of instability or disruption, and safeguard the wellbeing of the entire household. Exemptions should only be approved where there is clear evidence that the match is appropriate not only for the incoming child but also for those already living in the home.

We also emphasise the importance of supporting other children within the family who are not fostered. Their experiences and voices must be actively heard and considered within the assessment and exemption process, to understand the impact on the whole household and ensure decisions are child-centred.

In summary, we recommend retaining the statutory three-child limit while strengthening the existing arrangements through clearer guidance, more consistent internal processes, enhanced monitoring, robust matching, and recognition of the needs and voices of all children within the household. Retaining the statutory limit while allowing carefully assessed exemptions ensures that decisions to exceed the standard number are made thoughtfully, with thorough preparation, robust oversight, and appropriate support. This protects foster carers from unrealistic expectations, safeguards the wellbeing of every child in the household, and still allows flexibility where it is clearly appropriate.

**24. To what extent do you agree that amending the standard limit would allow foster carers to provide greater support to each other?**

**Disagree**

While amending the limit may help foster carers support one another through sleepovers, we believe it also risks placing additional pressure on carers who may agree to look after care for more children out of kindness, even when they are not practically able to do so. This could unintentionally stretch carers beyond their capacity and increase the likelihood of placement instability or breakdown.

**Issue 4: DBS checks and vetting for prospective foster carers**

**25. To what extent do you agree that the current arrangements on the filtering of DBS checks is appropriate for foster care, kinship care and adoption?**

**Disagree;**

Our response is based on our interaction with our fostering service and foster carer members. We held specific sessions on issues with DBS checks in September 2025 with nine local authority fostering services in the Midlands, nine IFA fostering services and four panel advisors.

They reported significant variation in what is returned from PNC vs DBS and that DBS lacks full information on foster carers' interaction with police. Services do not routinely request PNC checks for mainstream foster carer applications and rely on self-disclosure and the DBS outcome. They report this can leave gaps as relevant soft information might be missed (see below).

They also reported cases where applicants disclosed information which was not on the DBS so they had to search through case notes and seek additional references to verify it which caused delays.

However, some others have reported PNC returns have less information than DBS which indicates that different police forces produce PNC returns with varying levels of detail.

There is currently inconsistent interpretation of what should be disclosed by DBS vs PNC. One group collectively expressed concerns about the inconsistency in how police forces handle DBS checks and the impact this has on fostering assessments and safeguarding.

DBS checks use PNC data, so there should be overlap, yet there are regional inconsistencies – it is unclear if the data on PNC is not being passed on to DBS or is it filtered out.

**26.To what extent do you agree that the current arrangements on the disclosure of soft intelligence is appropriate for foster care, kinship care and adoption?**

**Disagree;**

Services report that soft intelligence crucial to fostering assessments does not consistently appear through a standard DBS check, as DBS disclosures generally include only convictions, cautions or warnings. As a result, relevant contextual information may be missed, potentially leading to safeguarding risks. By contrast, checks of the Police National Computer (PNC) were highlighted as providing richer information, including incidents where individuals were witnesses, victims, or involved in cases resulting in no further action. They may also provide context relating to family dynamics, such as domestic arguments or neighbour complaint incidents where police attendance was required. This type of soft intelligence is highly valuable for assessment purposes, helping social workers explore an applicant's history, resilience, and any trauma or life experiences that may be relevant to caring for vulnerable children.

Services also highlighted the inconsistency between the checks undertaken for mainstream foster carers and those undertaken for kinship carers under Regulation 24. For emergency kinship placements, PNC checks are routinely completed due to the urgency of the situation, meaning that more comprehensive information is often gathered for kinship applicants than for mainstream foster carers. This inconsistency is concerning given that safeguarding requirements are equally significant across both types of care.

While it is essential to recognise applicants' rights to privacy and rehabilitation, including the principles underpinning spent convictions legislation and wider human rights considerations, these rights must be balanced against the need to protect children. The Children Act 1989 clearly establishes the welfare of the child as the paramount consideration.

Children requiring foster care are among the most vulnerable in society, often having experienced abuse, neglect or significant trauma. Ensuring their safety in foster care is therefore of the utmost importance.

It is important to emphasise that fostering services do not automatically rule out applicants who disclose historical cautions, convictions, or other involvement with the police. Where applicants can demonstrate reflection, insight, and evidence of meaningful change, such lived experience can in fact be regarded as a positive attribute. Individuals who have navigated challenges or had exposure to contextual risks often bring deeper understanding and empathy for children at risk or, or experiencing, issues such as exploitation, peer dynamics and trauma. A comprehensive assessment that explores how applicants have processed their experiences, developed resilience, and built safe, stable lives is essential to assessing risk and determining suitability.

Given that PNC checks are already standard practice within Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH), there is a strong case for adopting them routinely in fostering assessments. Not only does it have the potential to speed up the assessment process, but it would also improve consistency across mainstream and kinship routes, support more thorough and transparent assessments, and enhance safeguarding while still enabling fair, proportionate consideration of applicants' circumstances. A balanced approach, one that upholds applicants' rights, recognises the potential strengths that may come from lived experience and personal growth, but ensures that child welfare remains paramount, would strengthen both the assessment process and the protection of children.

**27. In your view, how well are the DBS filtering rules understood by assessing social workers and children's services?**

**Not very well understood;**

Most assessing social workers will be aware of barring offences outlined in Regulation 26 (6) Schedule 4. However, experience and knowledge of fostering regulations differs significantly across the sector as does practice in services between the use of in-house staff and independent social workers. This could particularly apply to assessing social workers who have previously worked in safeguarding teams who will be familiar with PNC checks where all information is shared. They may not have the understanding of how a DBS differs from a PNC check, and how the filtering rules are applied. They may wrongly assume that a DBS shows all the information held by the police on an individual and feel that they have the information needed complete their assessment. This may impact on the depth of exploration undertaken with applicants to understand more minor or early convictions or cautions in their lives as well as any resulting trauma they experienced from these.

**28. In your view, how confident are social workers and children's services in using the information provided through DBS disclosures to inform their decisions when assessing prospective carers?**

**Not very confident;**

Social workers and children's services do not consistently use information to inform their decisions and, as outlined above, are not always aware of the areas of applicants' backgrounds that may require further exploration as a result of information that is not shared as part of a DBS but remains important to exercising safeguarding duties to children. It is critical that assessing social workers share the information they have gained with their manager, so decisions are not taken in isolation and that scrutiny from the quality assurance process is applied to the analysis. Approaches differ between services as to the formal process of considering such information so guidance in this area would support consistency and oversight.

**29. Do experiences of the DBS process in assessment differ between kinship carers, foster carers, and adopters? Please explain your response.**

**Yes.**

There is a big difference between kinship and mainstream foster carer and adopters experiences. As mentioned above PNCs are regularly used for kinship carers under Reg 24, not foster carers and adopters and we think there should be full PNC checks done for both kinship and mainstream carers for the reasons set out above.

Services felt that kinship cases are often more affected by DBS delays due to complex histories and the need to urgently place children, and this is more problematic as timely assessments are crucial.

**30. We are interested in evidence and examples that illustrate how DBS checks are working as part of vetting procedures for prospective carers. If you wish, please provide anonymised case studies or examples that illustrate how current processes on DBS disclosures / police intelligence have influenced assessments on carer suitability.**

Another key issue raised by services was around timeliness and the subsequent impact this has on the approval process, particularly for kinship carers.

Delays in applicant checks (52%), including medical checks and DBS checks were the top issues cited by services in our State of the Nations survey 2024 which mean the foster carer assessment and approval process takes longer than intended in their service.

Many reported that delays to assessments when unexpected DBS information surfaces late in the process has a knock-on effect on getting assessments to panel. In particular the DBS gets stuck at stage 4 local police level which causes delay to panel. They reported that there are often cases where people have had to phone DBS service directly to chase delayed information, or the courts have ordered DBS to release information to meet deadlines. In one case there was a six-month delay in DBS check, this required judicial intervention to prompt police to provide the necessary information. They felt the judicial system lacks understanding regarding DBS delays which often results in repeated requests for updates that fostering services cannot provide.

Many reported that checks are closed prematurely before standard proceeding times, which means the process has to be restarted - one was closed at 59 days, just shy of the 60 day escalation threshold. This incurs additional time but also cost. Checks can be closed for many reasons which are usually administrative such as names have been misspelt or previous addresses have not been included. The process does not always allow for remedial action and frequently means that a new application has to be made, starting the whole process again. In addition, applications can become stuck at stage 4 resulting in DBS withdrawing the application and advising that the process is restarted.

For kinship/connected carers, delays in DBS checks are particularly problematic as timely assessments are crucial. DBS are very slow which impacts on people being able to be regulated under regulation 24 and therefore leads to a delay in payments. PNCs can come in late and in one case led to a social worker having to go back out and discuss the information received but in fact the information was mis recorded on his record by police.

When services do the DBS check they have to say if it's for children's workforce or children and adult workforce –we believe there should be an option to tick both boxes, foster carers could be barred from working with adults.

The DBS Update Service introduced in 2013 aimed to solve many of the issues arising from the then paper-based DBS service by allowing a single DBS certificate to remain valid and portable between roles within the same workforce and check level. Whilst this will not be applicable to all applicants, there are some who will be registered with the Update Service. Children's services are not consistently using this service and guidance may be helpful to reduce some delays if DBS checks continue in their current form for fostering. If all services then registered their foster carers with the Update Service they could maintain ongoing access that would provide much more up to date information to support safeguarding.

Below is a case example around the importance of soft information for the assessment.

### **Case example**

*Foster carers approved in October 2024. During the assessment an enhanced DBS on the male applicant showed two convictions dating from 2010 and 2016. These were risk assessed as part of our assessment.*

*In May 2025, the male carer was arrested for a drink driving offence and during the position of trust meeting the police revealed that there were several other offences on record that we were not aware of.*

- *A conviction in 2008, 2 cautions including one in 2013 for Battery, there were also penalty notices dating back to his teens and early 20s.*

*(He had made the service aware of his behaviour and dealings with the police during his teens and the penalty notices were not convictions or cautions)*

- *There was further information about an incident in 2021 that had been NFA but this was of concern as it was so recent. The carer has applied to have this removed from the PNC.*

*The carers are currently subject to our standards of care procedures.*

### **Recommendations**

- **The Fostering Network recommends that all mainstream foster carer applications should go through a PNC check as well as a DBS as is the case for kinship carers so that more soft intelligence can be used.**
- **The Government should explore ways to speed up the DBS process, so it reduces delays to the approval process.**
- **Guidance should be issued that states fostering services should register their foster carers with the DBS Update Service.**

### **Issue 5: Consistency in handling allegations for those inside and outside of the care system**

#### **31. To what extent do you agree that services currently make the right decisions on whether an investigation into a foster carer is required?**

##### **Disagree;**

From what we see, there is a lot of variation between services, however on balance we would say disagree given our experiences of supporting foster carers through Advocacy and Mediation services and the practice support that we provide to services.

There are pockets of good, proportionate decision-making particularly where there are clear processes, understanding of definitions, strong relational practice between supervising social workers and the foster carers they are supporting, and strong reflective case discussion between the fostering service with the LADO.

We find thresholds can be applied inconsistently e.g. some services are more risk averse than others.

In many services there is confusion around what constitutes an allegation, and how this differs from standards of care concerns and complaints. This can lead to carers being told that they are subject to an allegation when this is actually a Standards of Care concern. This came out in the focus groups and survey we held with foster carers.

**32. To what extent do you agree that services currently make the right decisions on how to protect children during investigations into allegations against foster carers?**

**Disagree;**

Whilst many services demonstrate robust, child-focused safeguarding responses, decision making can often lack a trauma informed lens. We are aware of many cases where decisions to remove children from their foster carers are taken quickly. Such decision making can feel disproportionate or lack clear rationale. This can be deeply distressing for children and their foster carers, and lead to children experiencing unnecessary disruption and being re-traumatised.

Opportunities to meaningfully engage with children around the allegations are often limited, partly because children's social workers carry high caseloads, reducing the time available for direct work. Consideration should be given to how children can consistently receive the information and support they need and that their wishes and feelings are taken into account in decision making.

This might be from someone with whom they have an established trusting relationship, such as a practitioner within the fostering service, their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), or by appointing an independent advocate, to ensure the voice of the child is heard and meaningfully reflected in decision making.

**33. To what extent do you agree that incidents should only be treated as formal allegations when the Section 47 threshold is met (i.e., where there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm)?**

**Strongly agree;**

The Section 47 threshold provides a clear and consistent framework for determining when an incident should be treated as a formal allegation and when allegations procedures should be followed in cases where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. However, this is not currently being consistently applied. This approach helps reduce the risk of over-escalation of issues that are more appropriately addressed through Standards of Care or other supportive processes.

Concerns about the overall quality of care being provided, or where carers require development, are often better managed initially through supportive mechanisms such as supervision and training rather than formal procedures, see response below (34).

Where there is a new standards of care concern, complaint or allegation we recommend best practice is for services to review any previous concerns, complaints or allegations in a chronological form. This should then be used to review the carers practice, highlight themes and inform ongoing planning and decision making.

Where there are emerging patterns of concerns over time, services should consider whether these patterns meet the threshold for significant harm and require investigation under Section 47 and the formal allegations process.

Consistent application of thresholds requires strong guidance and oversight and would benefit from being clearly outlined within a refreshed version of the National Minimum Standards.

**34. To what extent do you agree that incidents that do not meet the Section 47 threshold should be handled through less formal routes (such as Standards of Care concerns)?**

**Strongly agree;**

Foster care should strive to provide better than 'good enough' care given the trauma many children have experienced and the significant, lasting impact this can have. Children require care that is therapeutic and trauma-informed and foster carers should be appropriately trained, supervised and supported to provide this.

Where incidents do not meet the Section 47 threshold, but there are concerns that the care being provided does not meet the standards expected, using less formal routes is often a more proportionate and constructive way of dealing with concerns and provides space for learning and reflection, and supports a relational approach to best practice. They also help avoid unnecessary negative impact on either the child or the foster carer and may support recruitment and retention.

There are often significant delays in services working together and reaching conclusions during S47 investigations, including delays to undertake police interviews or reach conclusions once they have been undertaken. This is not within the control of the local authority but has significant impact on theirs and carers' experiences of such processes and ensuring that where possible and proportionate, Standards of Care processes which are internal are used, would aid this difficulty and allow for more timely outcomes for carers and most importantly children.

**Issue 6: Innovation**

**35. To what extent do you feel that current regulations and guidance limit the ability of fostering services to implement new approaches?**

**To a small extent;**

**36. What specific regulations or guidance have prevented you from implementing new approaches or being innovative. For each regulation or guidance identified, please explain how you feel this has limited innovation.**

From our interaction with our fostering service members, we do not believe they are not the primary barrier to innovation. Instead, the limiting factors tend to be organisational culture, fear of inspection outcomes, and local policy interpretations that are often stricter than national requirements.

We believe that it is less the regulations and guidance preventing the implementation of new approaches but rather caution and lack of confidence or understanding in the scope of what the regulations already provide and fear of negative Ofsted interpretation of actions which are the key barriers for services.

**37. What (if any) innovative or alternative approaches to fostering have you implemented in your service?**

**Peripatetic foster carers**

We have seen the use of peripatetic foster carers in some of our local authority members across England. This involves foster carers who do not have a spare room of their own and are therefore unable to provide foster care full time or short break

care but can provide support for other foster carers. They are approved as a flexible support carer and may provide day time care and can also stay overnight in the foster carers homes, supporting the children and young people in their care while the foster carer cannot be present, e.g. for sleepovers and short breaks. This works best when the peripatetic foster carers are integrated into a wider group of carers and able to build ongoing relationships with children and young people. This is an important support tool for foster carers as it provides additional levels of local support that is more flexible.

### **Stronger support network**

Some fostering services have embedded the requirement for every approved fostering household to have an approved support network carer as part of their approval. This usually includes a small assessment with basic checks for trusted family and friends to provide regular or emergency care for children in fostering arrangements. Many fostering families tell us that this ensures that all children in the household experience normal family environments, with sleepovers at grandparents/relatives or friends of the foster carers. It creates a wider network of support around every fostering household and support stability for children. This requirement could be added to standards, this should fall under current delegated authority permissions, and any assessment should be proportionate to the circumstances.

### **Location based allocation**

Some services have structured themselves based on local connections and as a result see improved relationships and natural support networks. Supervising Social Workers work in pair to support fostering households in the same or nearby locations. They provide cover for each other, working together to ensure that all fostering households in their area feel connected and supported. They deliver local support groups tailored to the needs of the small fostering community and encourage relationships between fostering families to provide informal support and peer relationships.

### **Out of hours support**

Some services have developed working patterns which include supervising social workers and support workers being available outside of usual working hours are highly rated in respect of the quality and provision of practical support provided to families. In some services staff members within the fostering team work shift patterns to ensure wider working hours, in others staff work on a rota basis to be available during the evenings and weekends. Services who provide this type of out of hours support have improved ability to match new children entering care out of hours, have relationships with the foster carers to support them to feel confident to care and can provide much greater level of input in situations where instability is reported and prevent unplanned endings out of hours.

### **Retaining and prioritising relationships**

Some fostering services have re-structured to ensure that relationships are central to their service offer. Supervising social workers undertake an end-to-end model with a caseload of 10 to 12 approved households to support and 1 or 2 fostering assessments to undertake. This model focuses entirely on creating and maintaining relationships. The staff aim to create a single trusted relationship from point of enquiry, through the recruitment and assessment process and at a minimum until 12 months post approval. This ensures that fostering families have a single point of contact and feel supported by someone who understands the inner workings, strengths and vulnerabilities for the family, using this to

influence matching and support needs into the first year, often the most vulnerable point for newly approved foster carers.

### **Residential home shadowing experience**

A few fostering services have introduced the opportunity for prospective foster carers to shadow and support the work of residential care workers in local children's homes. In one service this was introduced to support myth busting around teenagers and encourage prospective foster carers to consider a wider approval status. This also supported growth of skills, experience and understanding for the prospective foster carer and in some cases resulted in a foster carer being matched to care for a child stepping down from residential to fostering.

### **38. How do current inspection frameworks influence your willingness to innovate?**

Current inspection frameworks can create a perception of risk, this leads to a reluctance to adopt innovation for fear of how Ofsted might judge compliance. We know that Ofsted have gone to lengths to inform services that they will not be judged more negatively for taking on challenging fostering arrangements that may fail if they were it in the best interests of the children to try, however this kind of culture change takes time.

### **39. What evidence-based models have you tried?**

Step up Step Down model

Fostering Wellbeing

**40. Please describe any outcomes observed from these innovative or alternative models. In your response, please make clear: which model you are referring to, and how the outcomes have been identified.**

### **Step Up Step Down in Northern Ireland and Wales**

Step Up Step Down (SUSD) is run by The Fostering Network in partnership with three local authorities (one in Northern Ireland and two in Wales). This provides an innovative, trauma informed approach that uses specially trained Family Support Foster Carers (FSFCs) to deliver intensive, relationship based, whole family support for children on the edge of care. The model enables Family Support Foster Carers to "step up" during crisis with practical mentoring, parenting support, community connection and planned short breaks, and "step down" as families stabilise.

An independent evaluation demonstrated that 68% of families completing SUSD experience reduced statutory intervention. The programme in Northern Ireland supported over 220 children and 140 parents and carers and resulted in 95% of children who were on the edge of care remaining safely with their parents. It has also been used to support planned returns of children from residential care back to family.

Economic analysis confirms the model's value: preventing even one residential placement costing £285,330 annually covers the full annual programme cost, generating at least £1.50 in savings for every £1 invested, rising to £14.50 in specific cases. This approach strengthens family functioning, prevents unnecessary care entry at scale, and offers a proven, evidence based alternative to traditional fostering routes, whilst also offering a new route for foster carer development and can attract a new cohort of foster carers to support families directly in a scalable manner.

### **Fostering Wellbeing in Wales**

Fostering Wellbeing is an innovative programme delivered by The Fostering Network in Wales and funded by Welsh Government. It aims to improve the wellbeing outcomes for care experienced babies, children and young people by influencing the way we work together to provide that care.

The Fostering Wellbeing programme is primarily delivered through five themed masterclasses, during which everyone involved in the 'team around the child' can gain the skills and confidence needed to support young people to reach their full potential.

Pioneers - Fostering Wellbeing Pioneers are foster carers and kinship carers who have attended the masterclasses and wish to contribute more, over and above their fostering role, to support wider activities within the service. Pioneers provide a community of support and champion the voice of fostering throughout Wales.

The Fostering Wellbeing Programme provides structured support, tools, resources and guidance to support planning, recruitment and development for the role at a local and national level. It supports a 'way' of working that values the Pioneers as equal partners in the wider 'team around the child'. The aim is for everyone involved to work together co productively.

## **Issue 7: Removing barriers to kinship and known adults providing care**

### **1. To what extent do you think the Kinship Care guidance (published October 2024) is applied in practice when assessing prospective kinship foster carers?**

#### **Disagree**

Our response to this section is based on our professional expertise and insight from supporting our members (both services and foster carers).

Our response draws on our professional practice expertise and on the experiences shared by our members, including fostering services and foster carers. While the Kinship Care guidance has encouraged reflection and prompted some local authorities to review their kinship strategies, in practice there is inconsistency in how this is applied.

Although the guidance aims to ensure that kinship foster carers are considered for approval where this is in the child's best interests and to prevent negative recommendations based solely on not yet meeting the National Minimum Standards, this has not translated into widespread change. There continues to be an expectation that services will demonstrate compliance with fostering regulations and the National Minimum Standards. As a result, practitioners, panels, and Agency Decision Makers often apply expectations to kinship foster carers that closely mirror those used for mainstream foster carers. Additionally, where services are reluctant to deviate from regulatory requirements, they may instead choose to pursue alternative legal routes, such as Special Guardianship Orders, even when a fostering arrangement might be more suitable.

It is understandable that many kinship families will find it difficult to meet fostering standards, particularly at the assessment stage when they are often processing traumatic events that have occurred within their own family network as well as stepping up to provide care for a child that they know and love. We believe kinship assessments should be approached through a specific kinship lens that recognises the unique context, relationships, and circumstances of carers who frequently step in during a family crisis. Additionally,

post approval kinship foster carers should have access to bespoke training, supervision and support that meet their particular needs.

There is also ongoing debate about whether kinship foster care should sit within the current fostering framework at all. We acknowledge that any reform of this kind would require primary legislation and falls within the remit of the Law Commission's current review into the law on kinship care which will open for consultation later this year. We would recommend that kinship foster care should be removed from the mainstream fostering regulations pending the Law Commission Review and once parliamentary time allows.

Many kinship carers do not initially identify with the term 'foster carer' and find the requirements around training, supervision, and becoming self-employed particularly challenging, especially at the outset. However, it is important to recognise that not all experiences are negative. Some kinship carers report that being assessed and supported as foster carers provides structure, reassurance, and access to training and support that they find valuable.

Overall, although the guidance has raised awareness and encouraged reflection, it has not yet led to widespread consistent practice change. Without changes to the regulatory framework and the creation of Kinship specific standards, this variability is likely to continue.

#### **42. In your view, what would help ensure the Kinship Care guidance is embedded effectively in practice when assessing prospective kinship foster carers?**

To ensure the Kinship Care guidance is effectively embedded in practice when assessing prospective kinship foster carers, clearer national expectations and more practical tools are needed to support consistent implementation. As mentioned above, we would recommend that kinship foster care should be removed from the regulations pending the Law Commission Review and once parliamentary time allows.

Practice tools used by services could include a focus on preparation to foster as a kinship family with clearer understanding of expectations from the outset. This could include a focus on learning and development which is kinship focused and separate from mainstream preparation training to ensure there are no gaps and with aims and objectives which clearly fit the brief of supporting kinship carers and their families to have a thorough overall understanding of kinship fostering. Currently preparation training within some services is delivered in shorter slots thus missing out on vital discussion and topics. Some services combine kinship and mainstream for ease and swiftness.

Assessment of prospective kinship foster carers should include an understanding of finances they will receive, expectations around informal support networks together with the broader formal network of support from the fostering service. This should be available and clearly discussed giving no doubt throughout the assessment what support is available to the prospective kinship carer.

Connection for prospective kinship carers with other experienced foster carers or kinship carers would provide the benefit of understanding expectations of approved kinship foster carers together with a ready-made support network and buddy system to ensure they are as ready to foster and provide a safe caring environment for the connected child.