

The Fostering Network's manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election

In 2020 Scotland made a promise: “that all Scotland’s children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential”¹ and a cross-party commitment was made to keep the Promise by 2030.

A key aim of the Promise is to keep more children safely with their families where possible. But where children cannot live with their families, the Promise is clear that they should belong to a loving home. Foster carers offer children a safe, loving and nurturing home when they need it, whether for one night or for many years. This means they have an important role to play in keeping the Promise.

11,844 children are ‘looked after’ in Scotland and most are cared for in kinship care (35%) or foster care (32%).² The number of children in care in Scotland has been falling since 2012,³ but the number of foster carers is falling at an even faster rate.⁴ Meanwhile, care-experienced people continue to face multiple disadvantages in health, housing, justice, education and employment.⁵

The Fostering Network is calling on all political parties to commit to taking bold, urgent action to improve the lives of care-experienced people, including by tackling the retention and recruitment crisis in foster care so there are enough foster families to meet children’s needs.

We are calling on all political parties to:

1

Focus on care-experienced children and young people

2

Support and value foster carers

3

Invest in and reform the wider system supporting children and young people with care experience

It is paramount that all children have the support and long-lasting relationships they need to be able to thrive throughout their childhood and beyond. Scotland's 'care system' should provide a stable family environment for children wherever possible, for as long as they need it.

The problem

Many children experience disruption to their education and relationships when they come into care or move between care 'placements'. In our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, foster carers in Scotland told us that 27% of children they foster were living in a different local authority area before they came into care. Only half of foster carers said the child they were most recently matched with was able to be placed with their siblings where appropriate. And only 35% said their home was in a good location for the child to stay at the same school.⁶

Young people in foster care are required to leave home far earlier than many of their peers without care experience, and often before they are ready. Continuing Care only allows young people to stay with their foster carers until the age of 21, whereas most young people in Scotland live at home until at least age 24.⁷ Continuing Care is also poorly funded; most foster carers we surveyed (57%) said they are worse off financially as a result of offering it.⁶

When children do move on from foster care, whether to independence, back to their parents or to another care setting, they often face further disruption to relationships. Less than half (42%) of foster carers told us they always or usually keep in touch with children they have previously fostered, and only 24% feel supported to keep in touch where appropriate.⁶ Children's important relationships should never be unnecessarily severed and they should always have a say in who they want to keep in touch with.

As well as avoiding unnecessary disruption to children in care, it's crucial that support is available to help them heal from the trauma that comes with being removed from their family and taken into care, and to ultimately thrive. 40% of foster carers told us they are fostering a child who needs mental health support but isn't getting it, up from 32% in 2021. Just over half (54%) of those fostering a child who receives additional support for their learning said this support is sufficient.⁶ The attainment gap between care-experienced young people and their peers is widening.⁸

What your political party can do about it:

- Ensure there is a diverse pool of locally-based foster carers to enable all children to live with carers who can meet their needs, in their communities.
- Fully fund and extend Continuing Care to ensure every child has stability in their foster home and is supported to stay until they are 26 if they wish to.
- Introduce measures to ensure every child can nurture and maintain positive, lifelong, trusting relationships with their family and others who are important to them, including foster carers, in line with our [Keep Connected principles](#).
- Invest in children's mental health services and additional support for learning.

Support and value

foster carers

To support children to thrive, our vision is that all foster carers should be recognised as equal and valued members of the team around the child. Their skills, knowledge and expertise should be respected, and systems must be in place to help them provide the best possible care for children; to “hold the hands of those who hold the hand of the child”.¹

The problem

Foster carers have a unique role within the children's sector – they are the only members of the sector who care for children in their own homes, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and welcome them as part of their families. But we do not have enough. In Scotland, the number of fostering households decreased by 8% in the year to December 2023, with more than twice as many households leaving than joining.⁴ Foster carers are leaving the role for various reasons, but our 2024 State of the Nations survey⁶ found that they centre around three key themes:

1. A lack of respect from other members of the team around the child

Only 57% of foster carers always or usually feel treated as equal and valued members of the team around the child by children's social workers.

We believe one way of elevating the status of foster carers in the team around the child, as well as improving matching, placement sufficiency and the safeguarding of children, is to introduce a national register for foster carers as exists for social workers. 53% of foster carers supported proposals to introduce a national register, while only 9% were opposed.

2. Burnout or poor wellbeing related to fostering

Almost half (49%) of foster carers have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing because of their fostering role. Just over half (54%) 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.

3. A lack of support from fostering services

Foster carers rated support from supervising social workers the most highly, with 73% considering it as excellent or good, but out of hours support was rated the least highly at only 42%. Less than half of foster carers (46%) said they have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster.

Financial support

Many foster carers tell us that fostering is becoming increasingly unaffordable. Less than a third (31%) of foster carers said the fostering allowance and any expenses meet the full costs of looking after the children they foster, down from 49% in 2021. Most foster carers receive a fee in addition to the child's allowance, in recognition of their time, skills and experience, but only one in five fosters carers said their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs. Over 70% of foster carers and fostering services in Scotland said the Government should introduce a national fee framework for foster carers. Foster carers also do not receive a pension, putting their long-term financial security at risk.

What your political party can do about it:

- **Develop a national retention and recruitment strategy** for foster carers to address the reasons they are leaving and make fostering more attractive to prospective applicants.
- **Fund services to deliver 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.
- **Fund innovative fostering programmes** that focus on retention and peer support such as our Mockingbird programme.⁹
- **Improve financial support**, including by increasing the Scottish Recommended Allowance in line with our recommended rates, introducing a national fee framework with fees paid 52 weeks a year, and introducing a national pension scheme for foster carers.
- **Introduce a national register** for foster carers to improve their status in the team around the child, matching and safeguarding measures in the fostering sector.

Invest in & reform

the wider children's social care system and universal services

To provide children with the best chance to thrive, we need a well-funded children's social care system that supports families at the point of need, before they reach crisis point. Universal services must recognise that the impact of care is lifelong.

The problem

The number of children coming into care is decreasing in Scotland, but it's unclear whether this is because more families are being supported to remain safely together, or less intervention is happening where it's needed.

Care experience is closely tied to deprivation, as over half (54%) of children who are 'looked after' live in one of the 20% most deprived areas of Scotland.²

The social care system which should be able to support foster carers is at breaking point, with social worker caseloads and turnover high. Less than half of foster carers we surveyed in Scotland in 2024 said they have had one consistent social worker in the past two years.⁶

On top of this, care-experienced people still experience stigma, discrimination and barriers to achieving their full potential from the wider systems in our society.¹⁰ They are over 1.5 times more likely to experience severe multiple disadvantage including homelessness, substance use, mental health problems and offending.⁵

What your political party can do about it:

- **Prioritise early intervention** and accelerate work to tackle child poverty, including by increasing the Scottish Child Payment.
- **Invest in edge of care services** such as our Step Up Step Down model¹¹ to reduce the number of children who come into care.
- **Introduce measures to address social worker turnover and caseloads**, including exploring the introduction of caseload legislation, shift patterns to replace 9-5, and newly qualified rotational systems.
- **Introduce measures to tackle the stigma and discrimination** faced by care-experienced people, such as setting out explicit rights for them in a Scottish Human Rights Bill,¹² and treating care experience as a protected characteristic.
- **Create a statutory right to independent lifelong advocacy services** for care-experienced people.¹³

1. Independent Care Review (2020) [The Promise](#)
2. Scottish Government (2025) [Children's Social Work Statistics: Looked After Children 2023/24](#)
3. Scottish Government (2015) [Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland, 2013-14](#)
4. Care Inspectorate (2024) [Fostering and adoption statistics 2019/20 to 2023/24](#)
5. Independent Care Review (2020) [The Money](#)
6. The Fostering Network (2025) [State of the Nations' Foster Care: Spotlight on Scotland Report 2024](#)
7. Scotland's Census (2025) [Table View](#)
8. Scottish Government (2025) [Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2023/24](#)
9. [Mockingbird](#) is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides.
10. Who Cares? Scotland (2023) [Lifelong Rights For Care Experienced People](#).
11. [Step Up Step Down](#) is a pioneering approach to supporting families on the edge of care, which reduces the number of children coming into care and improves outcomes for children and families.
12. Scott, D. (2023) [Incorporating International Human Rights: The protection of Care Experienced People's Rights in the Scottish Human Rights Bill](#), Human Rights Consortium Scotland.
13. Who Cares? Scotland (2025) [Action on Advocacy](#)

For more information, please contact the Policy and Campaigns team.

Email: campaigns@fostering.net

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk



[thefosteringnetwork](https://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)



[fosteringnet-scot](#) / [fosteringcampaigns](#)



[@thefosteringnetwork](#)