

Education Select Committee Inquiry into Children's Social Care

Written evidence from The Fostering Network, January 2024

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be. We have been leading the fostering agenda for nearly 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

Summary of key points

The Fostering Network (TFN) is responding to this inquiry with a focus on foster carers based on evidence from the services we deliver, insight from our 60,000 individual members and 450 organisational members (both local authorities and independent fostering providers), which cover nearly 77% of foster carers in the UK and key research we have undertaken. Our response outlines the current challenges foster carers and care experienced children are facing in the children's social care system and our recommendations to improve fostering.

- Rising numbers of children in care and a declining number of fostering households is having an impact on care-experienced children and young people who are not being placed in fostering households which are local, near their family or that meet their needs. We need enough highly skilled foster families that can care for them locally where children need them.
- Foster carers offer children and young people a safe, loving and nurturing home when they can't live with their birth families. This means they have a unique chance to make a real difference to a child's life.
- However, sadly more foster carers are leaving than joining. We strongly believe the retention of foster carers is just as important as recruitment of new ones to ensure that there are enough fostering households to provide a wider variety of homes to support better matching and create stable, well-supported environments for children in care to thrive.
- Factors such as insufficient financial frameworks and social support are contributing to foster carers leaving the role and require improvement to increase foster carer retention.
- We welcome the Government's Stable Homes Built on Love (SHBL) strategy's focus on fostering and its increased financial investment into fostering recruitment and retention through the recruitment and retention clusters. However, we believe the Government needs to go further to address the challenges with the sufficiency of foster carers and address the needs of care-experienced children and young people. We would also like to see more synergy between the different elements of the Government's strategy which are being rolled out across England.
- Early intervention to support children on the edge of care is crucial and our Step Up Step Down programme provides essential learning to ensure children on the edge of care can remain with their birth families.
- Being care-experienced has a significant impact on care leaver's outcomes and the Government must better support care-experienced young people into adulthood. One way of doing this is through improving Staying Put. We welcome the extension to 23 but would like to see it extended to 25 and, there are a number financial and logistical issues that we would like to see resolved to ensure all young people in foster care can benefit from this policy if they want to.

1. What is the sufficiency of foster carers to meet the needs of children coming into care?

1. We are delighted that the Government have recognised the need to prioritise and improve the sufficiency of foster care through the biggest ever investment into fostering in decades in their 'Stable Homes Built on Love' strategy of £36m and a programme of reforms to improve the recruitment of foster carers. For too long foster care has been overlooked and underfunded, even though foster carers provide care for two thirds of children in care in England. The number of children in care is continuing to rise each year, (83,840 children in 2023) however, since 2021 the number of foster carers has been declining. In the last five years, the number of fostering households has decreased by 2% (1,045) while the number of children in care has risen by 7% (5690). This year the number of foster carers leaving the role has exceeded the number of joiners, with a net loss of 1,050 fostering households from 2022-2023 which illustrates the urgency of the task. We have predicted that 6,000 foster carers are needed in the next year in England.¹

2. TFN believes for children and young people who cannot live with their families, that foster care is the most effective way to ensure children have safe, stable, nurturing and loving homes. Many studies including [the Independent Care Review](#) have concluded that good foster care is a protective factor for fostered children's wellbeing and long term outcomes. Foster carers provide children with stability, security, attachment, and it can be their first positive experience of family life.

Impact on children of lack of foster carers

3. Increasing numbers of children in care combined with decreasing numbers of foster carers mean that children are being accommodated in placements that don't meet all their needs including residential care, being placed out of area or separated from siblings.

4. One third of children in residential care had foster care on their care plan when they came into care.² This means that many children are living somewhere that does not meet all of their needs. In some cases, a residential home is the most appropriate care setting for a child, however if a child is placed in a care home as a last resort, it can result in worse long-term outcomes for the child. The Independent Care Review found that residential care is also more expensive for society and has poorer outcomes in comparison to supporting young people within a family environment.³

5. TFN echo concerns from the children's sector around the number of children and young people being moved out-of-area. We support Become's #Gonetoofar campaign and submission to this Inquiry which shows how a lack of suitable carers is leading to children being placed miles away from home and experiencing severe disruptions to their lives. The latest stats from the Department for Education (DfE) show that on average 21% of children in care in England were moved more than 20 miles away from home.⁴ Foster placements at least 20 miles outside county boundaries are up 20% since 2019, figures show.

6. Following trauma and abuse at home, siblings are often reported to be the only positive family relationship care experienced children and young people have.⁵ The Children's Commissioner estimated that 26% of children with one sibling in care are separated from their sibling with the percentage increasing with each number of siblings a child in care has.⁶ This means care experienced children are losing relationships that form lifelong family ties and separating from their family support network.

1 The Fostering Network (2023) [Recruitment targets for foster carers](#).

2 Ofsted (2023) [Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023](#).

3 The independent review of children's social care (2022) [Recommendation annexes: Additional detail on review recommendations](#).

4 The Department for Education (2023) [Children looked after in England including adoptions 2022 to 2023](#).

5 Children's Commissioner (2023) [Siblings in Care report](#), p11.

6 Children's Commissioner (2023) [Siblings in Care report](#), p8.

Local and regional commissioning

7. Local services must identify where their fostering workforce does not meet the needs of the children and young people coming into their care. For example, England has an insufficiency of ethnic minority foster carers to meet the demand of children from ethnic minority backgrounds coming into care. Increasing the diversity of the workforce is crucial for meeting children's cultural, language and religious needs.

8. 22% of children in care are mixed race, Black or Asian⁷ but only 15% of foster carers belong to those ethnic minority groups.⁸ Our research on foster carer retention and recruitment (R&R) in England found that there have not been many large-scale recruitment campaigns targeted at specific demographic groups. Efforts to recruit a more diverse workforce of foster carers have included attending Pride events and ensuring an ethnic mix in the visual imagery of fostering families.⁹

9. Sufficiency plans are a legal requirement in England, but in 2021 only 20% of fostering services stated that they were always involved in the sufficiency planning process.¹⁰ There must be increased sufficiency planning at a local level within children's placing authorities to ensure that children in foster care are in the right home, location and have access to education and health care services they need.

10. We understand that Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) are the way the Government plans to address commissioning. 20 RCCs, following implementation would work alongside a national body supporting councils with forecasting demand and the procurement of care from providers. Whilst we welcome attempts to address commissioning on a regional basis across England, we have concerns about how these will match with the R&R clusters footprint which may not include the same local authorities or regions. Timings for implementation may also not align as the RCCs cannot come into force until there is legislation.

Foster carer retention

11. In May 2023, we published research on foster carer R&R. This research combined an analysis of national data sets carried out by the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI), a survey of 1,879 prospective, current and former foster carers, and interviews and focus groups with 52 individuals including fostering service staff and prospective, current and former foster carers. **Our research identified three main reasons for foster carers leaving the role:**

1. A lack of sufficient support for the role

Support from fostering services and social workers

12. Receiving sufficient, consistent support is a key determinant of foster carer retention. Positive experiences of support included having a reliable and easily contactable social worker and being given support without having to ask or advocate for it. Additionally, having a consistent social worker over time allowed for foster carers to develop strong and trusting relationships. Formal structures such as Mockingbird constellations or support hubs were also mentioned as positive examples of support.¹¹

13. In other cases, foster carers noted that high staff turnover and workloads, a lack of understanding of fostering and a lack of communication and coordination between social workers and social care teams all contributed to a lack of support.¹² Foster carers reported that social workers often dismissed their concerns – or felt judged for their concerns – rather than providing meaningful support. In our State of the Nation (SoN) report, one third of foster carers stated that children's social workers rarely or never respond in a timely manner

7 The Department for Education (2023) [Children looked after in England including adoptions 2022 to 2023](#); Ofsted

8 Ofsted (2023) [Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023](#).

9 Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. (2023) *Foster carer Retention and Recruitment in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network.

10 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021 Report](#), p23.

11 The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England.](#), p10.

12 The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England.](#), p10.

to decisions they do not have the authority to make.¹³ This means that in many cases foster carers did not feel part of a collaborative team around the child working to meet their needs.

Support for wellbeing and mental health needs

14. Fostering can be a challenging task which can impact on the mental health and wellbeing on foster carers. Out of all of the survey options in our R&R research, 7% of foster carers stated that mental health/stress/isolation/impact on their social life was the reason they stopped fostering.¹⁴

15. Allegations are the second most common reason why foster carers call our helplines asking for advice around fostering. [Our report](#) on allegations showed that out of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the two years prior to the survey, 57% said they did not receive independent support.¹⁵ 66% of foster carers who experienced an allegation stated that they have considered resigning from fostering during the investigation.¹⁶

16. All children and young people coming into the care system have experienced trauma through coming into the care system (65% of children in 2023 entered care due to abuse or neglect).¹⁷ They also have increasingly complex needs due to their diverse experiences e.g. having experienced child sexual exploitation, trafficking, gang involvement or arriving in the UK as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC). There was a 29% rise in UASC from last year.¹⁸

17. This also suggests a significant learning and development need to ensure foster carers have the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of the children and young people coming into their care. In England, there is no standardised national learning and development framework for foster carers that addresses this.

18. Mental health support for foster carers should be widely available to improve retention and help carers work through their personal challenges.¹⁹ Fostering services should ensure that foster carers' mental health and wellbeing does not deteriorate during the allegations process and make foster carers feel like a valued member of the team around the child. A good example of this is Staffordshire County Council's employee offer, Thinkwell, that has been expanded to all foster carers.²⁰ It aims to meet the needs of individuals who are struggling with their emotional wellbeing, offering foster carers support and counselling if required.

2. Lack of value and respect in the team around the child

19. In our latest SotN survey, only 57% of foster carers reported feeling as though they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by the child's social worker.²¹ Foster carers report that their knowledge around how to care for a child and of specific children's needs was often dismissed and not respected although they spend the most time with the child. Positive experiences included being invited to professional meetings and actively involved in decision making around the child.

20. Foster carers are self-employed for tax purposes but do not enjoy the other benefits of self-employed status. They are not able to sign up to foster for multiple services, are expected to work within a regulatory framework and undertake ongoing professional development but are not adequately remunerated for their time,

13 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021, Thematic report 1: The status of foster carers](#), p15.

14 Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. (2023) *Foster carer Retention and Recruitment in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network, p56.

15 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#), p12.

16 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#), p16.

17 The Department for Education (2023) [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#).

18 The Department for Education (2023) [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#).

19 The Fostering Network (2023) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#), p9.

20 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care, Thematic Report 2: Allegations](#), p9.

21 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021, Thematic Report 1: Foster Carer Status](#), p7.

skills and expertise. Our R&R report found that prospective foster carers found these factors to be key in choosing not to apply or withdrawing applications.²²

21. TFN believes a key mechanism to increase the status and respect of foster carers is a national register which would also improve foster carer terms and conditions through increased portability of the workforce. It would create smoother transitions when foster carers move between fostering services as services could check the central register for their approval details and avoid repeating the assessment and approval process from the beginning. This system would be less bureaucratic and reduce duplication and delays. It would also increase public protection by having a central list of all who meet the requirements of being an approved foster carer, and inspire confidence and trust in the foster care work force due to the requirements to enter and remain on the register. To be clear, we are not talking about placement matching or fostering recruitment registers, both of which we believe are local activities and are best carried out by LAs and fostering services.

3. Inadequacy of financial support

22. Financial support is a key factor in foster carer retention. Over a third of foster carers in our SotN survey said their allowances do not cover the full cost of looking after a child.²³ Longstanding under-funding has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, pushing some foster carers to the point of giving up and deterring people from applying to become foster carers.

23. On top of this, foster carers are not being paid an adequate fee for the time and effort required to meet all of the needs of a child in their care. Covering costs is particularly challenging for single foster carers and most participants noted that the financial compensation was not sufficient to sustain themselves without alternative income.²⁴ Of those who do not feel that allowances meet the costs of looking after a child, 49% stated that more one off payments for exceptional expenses such as for driving lessons, laptops and furniture would help them meet the needs of the child in their care.²⁵

24. Foster carers reported that payments were often very delayed (in some cases by months), that they received incorrect payments and that there was no way of knowing what payments covered the allowance, fee or other expenses. A lack of information around rates of pay for different types of care a foster carer provides and other types of compensation (council tax exemption, parking permits etc.) make it challenging for foster carers to plan.²⁶

Allowances

25. Whilst we welcome the recent 6.88% uplift in the National Minimum Allowance (NMA) rates to above inflation for 2024/2025, this only scratches the surface of the extra financial support foster carers require. Every year we do research into the rates of allowances paid by LAs to foster carers across the UK, [our latest report](#) was published in September. It showed there was a real inconsistency in allowances for foster carers across the UK resulting in a postcode lottery.

26. In England, 32% of LAs are paying under the NMA in one or more categories and only 26% are paying at the NMA for all age bands. This results in the difference in allowance rates for 11-15 year olds per year in England of £8,470.80.²⁷

27. The NMA rates are based on out-of-date research and do not cover the full costs of caring for a child.²⁸ Foster families are currently receiving much less than they need to support the children and young people in their care to achieve their best possible outcomes.

22 Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S. (2023) *Foster carer R&R in England*. Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network, p17.

23 The Fostering Network (2023) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021](#).

24 The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England](#), p13.

25 The Fostering Network (2023) [State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021](#).

26 The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England](#).

27 The Fostering Network (2023) ['Our children deserve better' Calling for a fairer funding framework for children and young people in foster care](#), p8.

28 The Fostering Network (2023) ['Our children deserve better' Calling for a fairer funding framework for children and young people in foster care](#).

28. On top of this, LAs have a wide variation in the additional allowances they provide for holidays, birthdays, nappies and other essentials. Our survey of LAs revealed that one-off payments ranged from £20 at the start of the school year to £400 for a holiday.

29. In response to this continual under-funding of foster carer allowances in England, TFN have calculated recommended rates based on extensive research and evidence of the full costs of caring for a child based on Loughborough University's Minimum Income Standard and our work with Pro Bono Economics.

The Fostering Network's 2023/4 recommended rates are:

- £227 per week to raise a child in foster care aged 0-4 years
- £275 per week to raise a child in foster care aged 5-10 years
- £349 per week to raise a child in foster care aged over 11 years.

Post-18 allowances

30. Our SotN survey found that three quarters of foster carers who had cared for a young person in an 18+ arrangement experienced a drop in financial support. Our allowances report found that there is a maximum difference of £12,044.76 per year for 18+ allowances.²⁹

31. For some children, a weekly NMA will be the only funds their foster carers receive, while others may be able to keep receipts and claim for additional items. Some will receive furniture and equipment, some might be able to claim mileage, sometimes extra payments are made during school holidays, or birthdays, occasionally funds for clothing or school trips can be provided, the list of differences goes on. This results in inequality for children due to the variation in financial support available, with some not even receiving enough to maintain a minimum standard of living, let alone being provided with the conditions of living necessary to reach their full potential.

Fees

32. Our SotN report revealed that only 63% of foster carers receive a fee payment. If working a typical 40-hour week, this equated to £1544.40 per calendar month. Just 9% of foster carers reported receiving more than the NLW per calendar month.³⁰

33. Some fostering services also make a lump sum 'financial package' which does not make a distinction between allowances clear. Whilst allowances are for the cost of caring for the child, fees are for the foster carer and recognise their time, skills and expertise, regardless of whether they are currently caring for a child to provide them with a stable income. TFN believes that foster carers should be remunerated for their work; they are the only professional group working within the children's social care workforce which is unpaid or underpaid.

Foster carer recruitment

34. Our R&R report and recent Ofsted statistics shows that there has been an increasing trend in the number of applications which have been withdrawn by foster carers prior to their approval. Out of 8,010 applications received in 2022-2023 only 1,740 made it to the approval stage. 71% (2,070) of these were withdrawn by the applicant up from 55% the previous year.³¹ Whilst understanding the need for the application process to be rigorous, the foster carers found it to be long and intensive. Participants described having to complete training, attend interviews, facilitate home visits, and fill out numerous forms. The typical timeframe for interviewees'

29 The Fostering Network (2023) '[Our children deserve better](#)' *Calling for a fairer funding framework for children and young people in foster care.*

30 The national living wage (NLW) for 2021/22 in the UK at this point was £8.91 per hour. The Fostering Network (2023) '[State of the Nation's Foster Care 2021.](#)'

31 Ofsted (2023) '[Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.](#)'

application processes was around six months, but often extended up to a year. In one case the entire process took two and a half years due to administrative errors.³²

35. Other factors that affected foster carers' decisions to apply were having flexible work arrangements or finishing full-time employment, gaining spare bedrooms due to moving to a bigger house or their children moving out and knowing other foster carers or those involved in social care. Adequate financial compensation and unrealistic recruitment campaigns were also felt to make a difference to decisions. In the focus groups, staff reported that prospective foster carers often withdraw their applications once they realise the complexity and intensity of fostering, which can arise late in the assessment process. Foster carers also reported that initial messaging (e.g. radio and bus adverts) are misleading, and that applicants withdraw once they learn the challenging reality of fostering. Applications are also withdrawn late in the process because prospective carers often believe they can continue working part time, but once they are given an example of a weekly schedule of required meetings, they realise their job does not provide enough flexibility.

36. Similar to our SotN survey each year, we found the top three motivations to foster were: I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care (89%); I want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my family (67%); I enjoy working with children (58%).

37. Foster carer's top three suggestions for improving recruitment were: 1. providing better pay 2. having less turnover of social work staff 3. valuing and respecting the role of foster carers more highly.

Recommendations for the Government:

- a) **Commit to stop children being placed miles from home (unless in their best interests) and develop and publish national and local strategies to increase the supply of appropriate local options.**
- b) **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.³³**
- c) **Ensure all children in foster care have a voice that is heard in decisions that affect them.**
- d) **Ensure there is a diverse, locally based pool of foster carers to enable all children to be placed with foster carers that meet their needs.**
- e) **Following the matching process, foster carers should be fully supported to ensure they can meet all the cultural, language and religious needs of the child. Children should also be involved in the matching process and disclose what is important to them.**
- f) **Ensure there is synergy between the RCCs and R&R clusters which cover different regional footprints.**
- g) **Require LAs to publish their sufficiency plans and record the number of children placed outside of their local area.**

Recruitment and retention

- h) **Re-design the recruitment process to use a relational and strength-based approach, giving enquirers and applicants a chance to hear from foster carers and adults with lived experiences of fostering. Ensure a streamlined and informative process, aiming to equip, empower and support applicants, being flexible and reducing anxiety about the panel process.**
- i) **Ensure that recruitment marketing and communications target needs and diverse prospective foster carer populations, are child-focussed, communicate the complexity of the foster carer role, provide a realistic picture on the fostering role and support, and showcase the difference foster carers can make to children and young people.**

³² The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England](#).

³³ [Keep Connected Principles](#)

- j) **Introduce a national register of foster carers which would improve the portability and status of the workforce, provide a standardisation of pre- and post-approval learning and development and improve safeguarding for children and young people.**

Allowances and fees

- k) **Significantly invest in allowance rates and implement TFN's recommended allowance rates for all foster carers across England.**
- l) **Increase the upper age limit of the NMA to ensure that young people, while still living in a fostering household in post-18 arrangements, can access stability and support into adulthood.**
- m) **Regularly review their NMAs in line with annual inflation and other relevant factors.**
- n) **Expect all fostering services to adhere to nationally agreed allowances.**
- o) **Work with Ofsted to introduce systems to monitor compliance with the NMA, in line with current regulatory requirements, to ensure consistency for children, foster carers and potential future foster carers.**
- p) **Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers, at the very least, receive regular fee payments in line with the NLW for a 40-hour week, which recognises their time, skills and expertise regardless of whether they are currently caring for a child. The amount foster carers should receive needs to be reviewed in conversation with foster carers. Fees should be clearly identified and separate to allowance rates.**

2. What is the progress and projected impact of the Government's implementation of its 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' strategy?

38. We fully support the strategy 'Stable Homes Built on Love' and were delighted to see that fostering is at the heart of it. We applaud the strategy's aim to increase the number of foster carers and reduce the churn rate in the existing foster care workforce to ensure children and young people have skilled foster carers available in the right place at the right time.

39. We also welcome the additional £8.5 million investment for fostering announced in December 2023 which brings the total funding for fostering to £36 million. However, overall the Independent Care Review called for £2 billion investment into children's social care which falls far short of the £200 million committed in SHBL. After decades of underfunding in children's social care and early intervention, there is still a lot more investment required if we want to ensure that all the care experienced children and young people are loved and cared for in stable homes and are able to achieve the outcomes they deserve.

Recruitment and Retention Clusters

40. We welcome the introduction of the nine R&R clusters and the North East Pathfinder which aim to increase the number of foster carers by 9,000 over the next three years. We are looking forward to continuing to work closely with the DfE on the wider roll out of Mockingbird as part of the clusters. We hope the strategy will work towards delivering the extra 6,000 foster carers that we have estimated are needed in England over the next year.

41. We welcome the strategy's focus on recruitment but as we've outlined above retention is just as important. We conducted a survey of 594 foster carers about the Review's recommendations. Half of foster carers who responded agreed that recruiting 9,000 new foster carers over the next three years was a good idea. But, almost all respondents (whether they agreed or disagreed) made the point that retention is equally, if not more, important than recruitment.

'I think we need more focus on the retention of existing foster carers and the true reasons behind foster carer resignations and burn out. Recruiting new foster carers is essential but by dealing with the reasons for resignations we can support newly recruited fostering families much better.' – Foster carer

42. We also consulted with 70 fostering services and key comments were focused on the need for extra financial support also being a key part of the picture:

'9,000 carers is an aspirational target but we need to pay foster carers well to do the job that they do, otherwise a glossy new campaign will achieve nothing.' – Fostering service staff member

43. Research by the DfE to gain a better understanding of fostering conversion rates from enquiry to application and approval found that raising the profile of fostering, centralising advertising, and creating a national fostering package where fees and benefits are consistent across services would be beneficial and could encourage collaboration between services and help reduce competition and poaching.³⁴

44. However, our research found that while foster carer participants considered it important to compensate foster carers fairly for their work and provide honest financial information upfront, they did not consider it the sole factor in recruitment. Focusing recruitment messaging on financial compensation was viewed as potentially damaging to the fostering service. Recruitment staff reported that children in care felt such campaigns made them feel unwanted, and like their carers were just in it for the money. Experienced carers expressed concerns that emphasising the level of fee payments you could receive may encourage applications from people 'for the wrong reasons'. Our research found that the top motivation to become a foster carer was to make a difference to the lives of children in care (89%).

45. The clusters are due to go live in April 2024 so we cannot comment on their efficacy yet, only the plan for their design. The North East Pathfinder ([Foster with North East](#)), the first of the clusters, has been live since September 2023 and is backed by £3.3m investment from DfE. Each cluster will be tailored according to regional need and approved through the tender process and will be made up of clusters of LAs in regions and vary in size. They will have a recruitment hub which will act as a front door for all fostering enquiries coming into the cluster and will have the following elements: experienced call handler(s) who understand the fostering application process; rapid response to online enquiries and emails; experienced foster carer mentorship available pre-approval.

46. We welcome that the hubs will provide a single point of access for all prospective foster carers in the region and improve the journey from enquiry to application and approval and establish a pan-LA approach to fostering recruitment work.

47. Each cluster will also have a regional communications campaign which will provide a central 'landing page' for the communications campaign, ensuring a good user journey through the system. It aims to boost the number of quality enquiries and build evidence of effective marketing strategies.

48. We are pleased to see the regional focus to recruitment as it builds on evidence (including our recent research) that tailoring to regional tone of voice and needs is effective. We are also pleased that the clusters will involve buddying models from former foster carers. Our research also found that it is important that recruitment is child-focused, communicates the complexity of the foster carer role and showcase the difference foster care makes to children and young people. It should also be co-produced with young people, foster carers and fostering services.

49. We welcome an evaluation that is taking place conducted by Centre for Evidence and Implementation and IPPR and hope there will be as much opportunity for shared learning and active evaluation as possible from the North East Pathfinder and other clusters as they take shape.

Mockingbird

50. We are delighted about the wider roll out of Mockingbird through the clusters and its role in the retention of foster carers. With the DfE aiming for 200 constellations across England by 2025, we hope Mockingbird will continue to strengthen peer-support, learning and development and community-based care for more families across England.

³⁴ Orzan et al. (2023) [Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates](#) Department for Education

51. There is a robust evidence base which demonstrates that participation in a Mockingbird constellation will improve the retention of foster carers and the wellbeing of care experienced children. For example, almost all children and young people (98% in 2018 and 97% in 2019³⁵) in the most recent Mockingbird evaluation said that they had an adult who they trusted, who helped them and who sticks by them no matter what. Likewise, households in the model were 82% less likely to de-register than households who did not participate.³⁶

52. However, Mockingbird is just one part of the retention puzzle, not the full solution. The model addresses key issues such as peer support and stability but it is not able to overcome all the wider problems within the fostering system contributing to foster carers leaving such as the inadequate funding framework and the lack of support within fostering services as detailed above. Currently, the Mockingbird constellations which have been commissioned will not cover the entire existing and new foster carer population in LA clusters and therefore can only be part of the retention offer. We are therefore concerned that this could result in a two-tier system for foster carers and children in care.

53. We are continuing to work alongside our partners in FNE and the wider R&R programme to explore new innovations to strengthen Mockingbird's implementation and sustainability. The new cluster structure offers opportunities to share learning and develop new ways of working.

Fosterlink

54. We also welcome the recent introduction of the Fosterlink service for which an original 16 month tender closed in October 2023. Fosterlink will work with LAs primarily not involved in the R&R programme to provide diagnostic support for their fostering services to analyse practices and identify areas for improvement for recruitment for three months. In phase two (12 months) the service will capture and share examples of practice and organise events and workshops to share practice, facilitate networking and peer-to-peer support.

55. We were concerned that a two-tier system could form between those LAs in the R&R clusters and those not in them and Fosterlink goes some way to addressing this. However, we would like to see a coherent plan for implementation for both sets of clusters to ensure this does not happen as there is a lot of opportunity for shared learning between the two models.

Fosterline

56. We are very pleased to have been awarded the contract for Fosterline England until September 2025. It is a free and confidential service, offering advice and information to people thinking about becoming a foster carer and existing foster carers. Whilst Fosterline is not part of the Government's SHBL strategy, it is an important tool which should be a core component of the Government's commitment to supporting foster carer R&R. We would like to see more synergy between this and the Government's strategy, including integrating Fosterline into the DfE's communications around the R&R of foster carers.

57. Otherwise, there is a risk that information is duplicated or varies between Fosterline and the clusters and this affects the quality and consistency of information for foster carers. Each cluster is so different that Fosterline will have a different relationship with each one. There needs to be greater clarity about where Fosterline is signposting to otherwise there will be too much variation.

58. Fosterline has clear KPIs on engaging with foster carers and increasing enquiries to the national service with a very small marketing budget. There is currently no alignment between targets/remit of Fosterline and vision for regional communication campaign in terms of shared communication messaging/referral channels. Currently national (Fosterline) and regional communication campaigns could have different messaging presenting a confusing message to the public and no clear pathway for the user.

35 Ott, E., Mc Grath-Lone, L., Pinto, V., Sanders-Ellis, D. and Trivedi, H. (2020) *Mockingbird programme: Evaluation report*. The Department for Education, p 44.

36 Ott, E., Mc Grath-Lone, L., Pinto, V., Sanders-Ellis, D. and Trivedi, H. (2020) *Mockingbird programme: Evaluation report*. The Department for Education, p 44.

Delegated authority

59. We are pleased that the Government has listened to us and is exploring how to ensure all foster carers have delegated authority by default for day to day decision making through its new Fostering Advisory Board which we sit on. In order for children in care to have the best possible experience, foster carers should be empowered to take appropriate and timely decisions about the children in their care. The updated guidance should follow child-focused policy and practice and foster carers should be given the maximum appropriate powers to take decisions relating to children in their care from the outset of the placement.

Allegations

60. Despite the allegations process being raised as a critical issue for foster carers in our surveys, this was not included in the SHBL strategy. There is currently a significant gap between allegations guidance and practice – foster carers are often not supported adequately or informed of an allegation. Our report on the issue showed that out of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the two years prior to the survey, 57% said they did not receive independent support.³⁷ These factors have a negative impact on the retention of foster carers with 66% of foster carers who experienced an allegation stating that they have considered resigning from fostering during the investigation.³⁸

61. During the allegations process, children often experience instability. Our survey found that 22% of foster carers who had experienced an allegation in the past two years experienced the removal of children in foster care during the investigation.³⁹ Foster carers recognise the importance of investigating allegations to safeguard children. However, the system must change so the uncertainty and lack of support that many foster carers experience during the process can be avoided. Support, counselling and peer mentoring should be widely available to everyone in the fostering household at all times and minimal disruption to children's lives must be prioritised.

Recommendations for the Government :

- a) **Ensure that a full evaluation is carried out from Fosterlinks and that learning from the evaluation of FNE and the R&R clusters is shared so a two-tier system does not develop.**
- b) **Ensure there is alignment between targets/remit of Fosterline and the R&R clusters and the regional communications campaign both in terms of shared communication messaging and referral channels to ensure consistency of support.**
- c) **Ensure the recruitment process uses a relational and strength-based approach, giving enquirers and applicants a chance to hear from foster carers and adults with lived experiences of fostering. Ensure a streamlined and informative process, aiming to equip, empower and support applicants, being flexible and reducing anxiety about the panel process.**
- d) **Ensure that recruitment marketing and communications target needs and diverse prospective foster carer populations, are child-focussed, communicate the complexity of the foster carer role, provide a realistic picture on the fostering role and support, and showcase the difference foster carers can make to children and young people.**
- e) **Explore the option of a more consistent fostering package for foster carers across clusters, including the national fostering allowance and consistent fees and benefits so that foster carers do not face a postcode lottery on this and to encourage collaboration between services and help reduce competition and poaching.**
- f) **Develop a county wide offer for R&R based on the learning from the clusters and Fosterlink that ensures there is not a two-tier system across the UK for foster carers and local authorities.**
- g) **Make Mockingbird available in every available in every local authority for the families that want to be part of it.**

37 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#), p12.

38 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#), p16.

39 The Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation, Thematic report 2: Allegations](#).

- h) **Conduct a deep-dive into allegation investigations in foster care, similar to one completed by the DfE into allegations against teachers. The research should include analysis of current policies and processes, how they are working in practice and barriers to implementation of national guidance. It should also include the police and other agencies involved in allegation investigations to help develop a deeper understanding.**
- i) **Fund independent support services for foster carers experiencing an allegation.**

3. What measures can be undertaken to improve early intervention?

62. TFN's Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme is a support care model that has been proven to improve early intervention and prevent children going into care. We have run it with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) in Northern Ireland since 2016 funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. It has recently expanded to Wales and we are conducting two pilots there funded by the Welsh Government and KPMG Foundation – one launched in December in Pembrokeshire County Council and the other one is in the process of being finalised. SUSD is an extremely effective programme for children on the edge of care, it gives parents the support of a trained Family Support Foster Carer (FSFC) who can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children. 95% of the children and young people cared for in this model have remained with their birth parents.⁴⁰

63. The programme provides holistic, tailored, wrap around, intensive, consistent support over at least 12-15 months using a non-judgmental supportive approach which builds parents' confidence and self-efficacy, providing practical support that allows them to address key issues in the home and make systemic changes in mindset and practices within their families. Social workers, foster carers and parents are trained in trauma informed approaches which align with parenting strategies. With support from foster carers, parents build capacity, understand their children better and become better equipped with a range of strategies to parent their children, which in turn enables greater safety and resilience for the child and the whole family.

64. There can be a wide number of reasons a child gets referred, including being: a member of a family in crisis where no other services are willing or able to help; care experienced but having recently moved back home; or a member of a family where there has been a specific event for example, a bereavement or parental job loss.

Recommendations for Government:

- a) **Use the learning from Northern Ireland and Wales about the effectiveness of SUSD pilot and then roll out the model across England in partnership with TFN. We are seeking licensing for our Step Up, Step Down programme and hold the intellectual property so should be involved in any further roll-out of this model.**

4. How children's social care can impact a child's educational or long-term outcomes and ways to improve outcomes for care leavers

Permanence

65. We strongly believe in the importance of foster care as an option in permanence planning for care experienced children to improve long term outcomes. There has been a legal definition of long-term foster care in England since 2015, which is welcome, but we need to consider how long-term foster care sits in the broader permanence framework. Other permanence options, such as special guardianship orders (SGOs) and adoption, are legal orders and can only be granted, or ended, by the courts. All decisions on long-term foster care sit within LA children's services departments. The implications of this can be placement drift rather than early decisions being made which results in children staying with foster carers for years by accident rather than

40 Flood, R and Thomson, L (2020) *Evaluation of the Pilot of Step Up Step Down (SUSD) Programme*, RF Associates.

design. This leads to children in otherwise stable long-term relationships feeling less secure and more vulnerable to disruption.

66. The Care Review found Permanence for children means “security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging”. This is not connected to legal status, and one route to permanence is not necessarily better than any other. When making a decision about permanency for a child, decision makers need to be clear why a child is being placed in long-term foster care as opposed to SGO or adoption. The key difference between long-term foster care and other permanency options is the child remains in the care system which offers a protective and nurturing environment, remains in a family setting, is able to remain in contact with their birth family and is afforded rights to therapeutic services, access to social work support for the child and foster carer and care leaver entitlements.

67. We want to see long-term foster care being given equal status and consideration in permanence options, and for long-term fostering relationships to be respected, valued and actually seen as permanent as adoptive and special guardianship placements are.

Education

68. Children with care experience have poorer educational outcomes and are more likely than their peers to move schools, be excluded from school and have additional learning or special educational needs. Foster care can help improve the educational attainment and learning of care experienced young people by meeting their wellbeing needs and providing them with stability, consistency and access to increased support and funding.

69. Our Fostering Attainment and Achievement programme provides specialist project workers who work alongside foster carers to provide advice, support and resources to help children in their care engage with the education system. This support extends to young people who are able to access summer programmes and residentials, further and higher education and training, and educational resources such as computers and tuition. We currently run this service with foster carers in Northern Ireland and it is commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board.⁴¹

70. People with care experience are under-represented at higher and further education level and many do not know about the support available to them. Our annual #TickTheBox campaign encourages people with care experience to tick the box when applying to study via UCAS to say they have spent time in care, so they can get the pastoral or financial support they may need, to help them enter and thrive at college or university. The campaign also aims to raise aspirations amongst care experienced young people by showing them the opportunities open to them and tackle any stigma and discrimination they may face.⁴²

Staying Put

71. We strongly believe that being able to benefit from living in a family environment post-18 is in a young person’s best interests and can improve their successful transition into adulthood. On average, a young person doesn’t leave home until the age of 24, so we welcome the extension of Staying Put to 23 and hope that it can be implemented into legislation as soon as possible. We would like to see this extended further to 25 in line with some other care leaver entitlements.

72. However, there are a number of issues with the implementation of the Staying Put duties – financial and logistical - that have resulted in variability in policy, practice and participation at a local level and are impacting on the full potential of this policy.

73. Since the inception of the scheme, all key stakeholders have highlighted that funding is inadequate and that this is the root cause of many of the implementation issues. Foster carers entering onto the scheme experience a loss of income from fostering when entering a Staying Put arrangement. Unlike for foster care, there are no

⁴¹ For more information visit: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/fostering-attainment-and-achievement>

⁴² For more information visit: <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/tick-box>

minimum post-18 allowances and levels vary greatly by local authority and our allowances surveys show many fostering services reduce the allowance given to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that the shortfall is made up from the young person claiming housing benefits.

74. Other implementation issues include continued approval as a foster carer. There is uncertainty among fostering services to recommend continued 'suitability to foster' for carers who do not have space/capacity to offer fostering placements in addition to post-18 arrangements. Foster carers are often left in a position of having to seek re-approval when the young person leaves the post-18 care arrangement; this is a lengthy process which is both unnecessary and costly and can result in foster carers prematurely leaving the workforce.

Recommendations for the Government:

- a) Support our #TickTheBox campaign to encourage care experienced young people to tick the box on their UCAS form to say they are care experienced and ensure they can access the support they should be entitled to.**
- b) Explore learning from our Fostering Attainment and Achievement programme in NI and look to pilot this in England.**
- c) Extend Staying Put up until 25.**
- d) Carry out a full cross-departmental review of Staying Put to remove barriers to successful implementation and ensure it is properly costed and fully funded.**
- e) Ensure foster carers can maintain their approval during a post-18 arrangement if their plan is to return to fostering.**

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