



Summary: Consultation with foster carers

Fostering Allowances: The views of foster carers in Northern Ireland

September 2026

Introduction

Foster carers receive financial allowances designed to cover the costs associated with caring for a child. This includes food, clothes, toiletries, travel and other expenses incurred. Each government of the UK sets its national minimum or recommended allowance for foster carers according to the age and needs of a child. As part of our work to create vital change, The Fostering Network (TFN) advocates for improvements in fostering allowances across the UK.

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. In NI we offer information, advice and support services to foster and kinship carers, families with children on the edge of care, and others working in the area of fostering.

TFN's views are directly informed by our membership. This includes 4000 foster and kinship carers across all Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), and Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs).

About the consultation

The Department of Health is currently reviewing the allowances system for foster and kinship carers in Northern Ireland, and invited TFN to contribute.

This paper summarises the findings of an independent consultation project we developed in partnership with the Department, for our members to share their views and experiences of fostering allowances.¹

➤ We engaged with 295 foster carers

274 Online Survey	64.2% Foster Carers 35.8% Kinship Foster Carers 78.8% Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) 21.2% Independent Fostering Provider (IFP)	21 4 x Focus Groups
19.7% received enhanced allowances for a child(ren) with additional needs 31.6% provided (or within the last 12 months) respite / short break foster care 16.8% provided (or within the last 12 months) post-18 support		
The HSCT survey respondents were evenly distributed: Belfast (20.8%); South Eastern (20.4%); Northern (19.9%); Western (19.4%); and Southern (19.4%)		

Key findings

- There were notable differences between and within HSCTs and IFPs in how foster care allowances, mileage / expenses and discretionary extra payments are structured and funded, leading to an inconsistent approach across services.

¹ Led by Mary Anne Webb, with support from TFN. A full report with recommendations has been submitted to DOH.

“There is not a standardised approach across Trusts, which you think we’re all part of the health and social care group, why are we not doing the same?” (Focus Group)

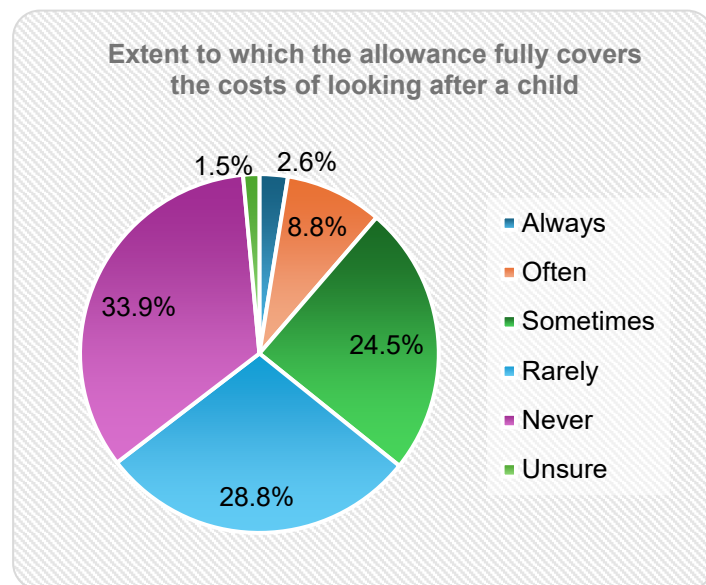
- Foster carers generally lacked awareness about the purpose, structure and operation of the current fostering allowance framework (‘Model Scheme’); and just 23.8% agreed it was easy to understand and navigate.

Most foster carers indicated the allowance model is inadequate across all its expenditure categories:

- **82.1%** Clothing / footwear
- **82.1%** Travel
- **78.1%** Household costs
- **71.1%** Food / school meals
- **53.3%** Pocket money

“We want these children to blend. So, to blend, it’s a pair of Nike trainers at 100 pounds, and school shoes like everybody else and a school bag ... I feel that foster children stick out enough, and it’s hard enough if they haven’t got what everybody else has, they stick out even more and I just wouldn’t do that. So, from that point of view for the clothing, it’s just, it’s very, very hard to make ends meet.” (Focus Group)

“Household expenses, heating costs is up, mileage is crazy. No, it just doesn’t cut it. Allowances do not cut it.” (Focus Group)



- Just 11.4% of foster carers reported that the allowance and expenses always or often met the full costs of caring for a child.

- 59.9% indicated that they used personal income to subsidise these costs.

- Foster carers regularly subsidise the allowance in terms of mileage; holidays; extra-curricular activities; birthdays; school uniforms; and the hidden costs of foster carers’ time (e.g. attending appointments), which can impact on their employment.

“It’s not a case you’re going to choose either the present or the party for the child, you are going to get them both from you. You do that for your own children, so you do it for the foster child as well.” (Focus Group)

- 59.5% of foster carers identified extra-curricular activities such as clubs and hobbies as being the top priority area requiring additional financial support. Considerable associated costs were reported, such as for equipment, and to support sibling contact arrangements.
- 53.6% indicated there should be additional financial support for travel and transport. Mileage costs were consistently highlighted as being more than is built into the allowance; underpinned by a lack of awareness amongst some carers about eligibility for mileage expenses.

Top five areas where foster carers reported that additional financial support would be most beneficial:

1. Extracurricular activities
2. Food / school meals
3. Travel and transport
4. Family holidays
5. Digital inclusion

"I kinship care for two teenagers They have expenses that are not easily categorised, for example gym memberships, sport / extra-curriculars. These all add up pretty quickly and cost a fair bit." (Survey)

"We're encouraged to participate in hobbies and afterschool activities, we're under pressure to give them a rounded childhood, but we have to self-fund our own travel, the equipment. So, they want us to attend but they don't want to encourage it financially." (Focus Group)

Discretionary extra payments

- 18.2% of foster carers reported accessing all the discretionary payments they were aware they were entitled to; and 33.6% were accessing some but probably not all.
- 83% of foster carers reported a lack of information about what is available / eligibility criteria as the main reason for not applying for discretionary payments. Access depends heavily on social workers' knowledge and capacity, which varies.

"I think it should be very clear. This is what we pay in these situations. This is what is covered. So, everybody is clear and then there is no grey areas." (Focus Group)

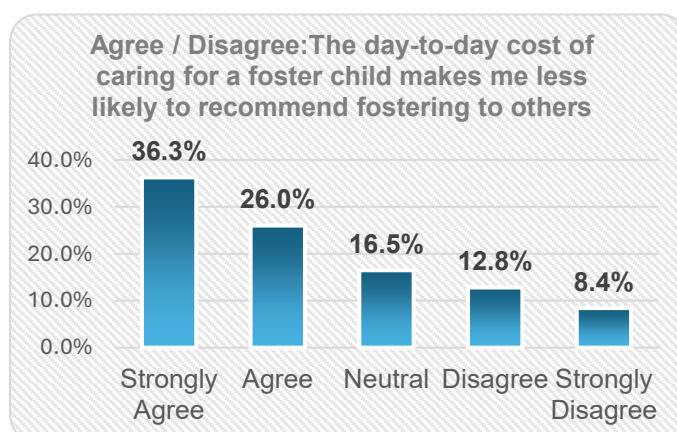
- Some foster carers expressed concern about a 'two-tier' approach existing between respite and full-time foster care, which may also impact on retention.

"Tried providing respite a few times, but we got less allowance than normal fostering which seems unfair... I avoid respite now and wouldn't recommend." (Survey)

A minority of foster carers said the allowance adequately reflects the costs involved with regards to:

- **5.6%** Respite / short break care
- **10.7%** Post-18-support
- **22.3%** Children with additional needs

"Respite money is ridiculous, if you have someone that does respite for your child you're maybe giving them money to take them out because you know the money they get won't even cover a day out ... You're nearly embarrassed to ask other carers to do respite, because you know how little they get." (Focus Group)



- Almost two-thirds of carers (62.3%) indicated that the current allowance would discourage them from recommending fostering.

"...I will be honest with them and say, look, it will probably end up costing you money. Going through the Trust will cost you money. And you need to sit down and work your own finances out and see if you can afford that." (Focus Group)

“I certainly wouldn't recommend somebody foster if they're in full-time work. It takes up an awful lot of your time, to-ing and fro-ing with social workers and whatever else, and then the financial impact of taking time off.” (Focus Group)

Improving fostering allowances

Top three allowance changes which foster carers consistently indicated would have the greatest impact on their role:

1. Higher weekly rates
2. Annual inflation-linked increases
3. Higher rates for older children, and young people (post-18 years)

“As a foster carer currently caring for two children with additional needs, alongside the usual responsibilities of fostering, I know first-hand that these placements require significantly more than standard foster care...The current allowance does not always reflect the reality of these additional demands.” (Survey)

Other key suggestions across the consultation, to improve allowances included:

- **Increase respite / short-break allowances in line with full-time foster carers**, and to reflect the actual costs of care.
- **Provide more support for family holidays**, particularly where children require adapted accommodation, specialist arrangements or additional supervision.
- **Uplift post-18 allowances**, to reflect the actual costs of supporting young people aged 18 – 21 years to make the transition into adulthood, and while in education.
- **Implement existing policy recommendations**, for example, the independent review of children's health and social care stressed the need for improved financial support, and equity in fees and allowances.
- **Implement a retainer fee** as a temporary weekly allowance paid to full-time foster parents during periods when they do not have a child placed in their home.
- **Increase mileage rates** and remove mileage thresholds.

Next steps

Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG), Department of Health: As part of the Fostering Finance Review currently ongoing in SPPG, we approached The Fostering Network and asked them to assist us with gathering the views of foster carers across NI about fostering allowances and the current model. We acknowledge and value the very important role foster carers play, caring for often our most vulnerable children and young people. We know that for some time the current financial package on offer has not kept pace with the rise in the cost of living. The results from this consultation project will be a valuable part of the wider work ongoing to review fostering related expenditure. It highlights the views of foster carers and the challenges experienced in this area, and will provide part of an evidence base in advocating for improved financial support, directly contributing to the development of a proposed updated financial package for fosters carers in the future.

SPPG would like to thank all foster carers for their contributions to this project, and The Fostering Network for kindly agreeing to undertake this work.