



The Fostering Network's response to Fostering reform: proposed changes to assessment and handling allegations of abuse

March 2026

Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations and standards of care concerns

Proposal 1: Amending the role of fostering panels and strengthening quality assurance standards within the assessment process

Questions: 9. To what extent do you agree that fostering panels provide value that is proportionate to the time and resources required to operate them?

Agree

If desired, please explain your responses.

Our response to this section of the consultation is based on the views of our members which were gathered through a focus group with 40 foster carers and 77 fostering services, findings from a survey we conducted which was completed by 76 foster carers and 33 fostering services, a survey completed by 12 members of our National Panel Chair forum and our professional expertise and insight from supporting our members (both services and foster carers). We also held consultation sessions with members of our national FCA (Foster Carers Association) Forum who represent 14,000 foster carers through their FCAs, 18 ADMs, our IFA steering group which consists of regional representatives from across England.

Out of the fostering services that responded to our survey, 69% strongly agree or agreed that fostering panels provide value that is proportionate to the time and resources required to operate them. Fostering services from our focus group and survey believe the value that fostering panels provide includes:

Independent oversight, multiagency perspectives and safeguarding

Fostering panels bring together a diverse group of professionals with knowledge and expertise from across the sector, all of whom are independent of the fostering service.

This independence provides a vital safeguard, ensuring decisions are not influenced by external pressures and remain firmly focused on the needs and best interests of the child. Panel members also play a key role in upholding safeguarding standards during foster carer assessments, using their experience and professional judgement to identify potential risks or gaps that may not have been identified during previous parts of the assessment. Their contribution strengthens the robustness and reliability of approval decisions.

"It is difficult to consider 'value' when thinking about safeguarding children, as it tends to be viewed in monetary terms. Panels offer an invaluable safeguarding function to agencies and I struggle to see how this could be achieved in any other way." – Fostering service

Scrutiny and quality assurance

Panel members bring an independent perspective that enables them to ask detailed questions, often around areas such as family dynamics and support networks, that may not be explored in the same depth during other stages of the assessment. This level of challenge adds significant value by helping to identify gaps and clarify uncertainties. By seeking further explanations, panels create a more informed recommendation that provides robust quality assurance.

One ADM described how panels can be a valuable learning tool for Supervising Social Workers, as they encourage practitioners to reflect on their assessments from new perspectives. Panel members often ask why certain aspects weren't explored, which helps improve future assessments. Knowing that their work will be reviewed also motivates social workers to ensure their assessments are as thorough and well-considered as possible.

"Panels provide strong independent oversight, a lot of the quality assurance processes that are in place are there because of panel expectations and would not be adhered to in the same way if we dispensed of panels" – Fostering service

"Panels are a key aspect to the quality assurance process, bringing both specialist knowledge and the value of lived experiences from foster carers and those who are care experienced. I would like to have seen a stronger response on the removal of panels in the final statement." – Fostering service

Confidence in decision

Fostering panels provide an essential source of confidence and assurance for Agency Decision Makers (ADMs). The detailed minutes produced by panels record the questions asked, the concerns explored, and the rationale behind the panel's recommendation. Fostering services shared with us that ADMs often rely on this independent scrutiny to verify that assessments have been thorough and that all relevant risks as well as strengths have been fully considered. The discussion that takes place with foster carers in panel often mitigates concerns that may have arisen from the written assessment document. This ensures decisions are robust and well evidenced. They also told us that without the independent oversight provided by panels, both ADMs and assessing social workers would feel more isolated in their decision making and lose an important safeguard that supports professional confidence and accountability.

Cost vs Value

Fostering services stated that fostering panels are a relatively low-cost component of the overall approval process. Panel members are paid minimal fees, with one Panel Member from our focus group stating she does not do the role for the money. Yet they contribute significant value through their independent oversight, sector knowledge, and ability to strengthen the quality of assessments and decisions.

“Their role is foundational to a safe and effective fostering service - the cost is balanced by the high level of scrutiny, risk mitigation and long term savings and there is multi-disciplinary expertise” – Fostering service

However, fostering services did raise some concerns with current panel processes which affects how valuable fostering panels can be. They highlighted that there can be significant variation in practice between smaller and larger local authorities and independent fostering agencies. Smaller services (in particular some IFAs) are disadvantaged as they often do not have a dedicated panel advisors and therefore face a higher resource burden and may not find panels as valuable compared to a larger authority.

“(The) panel process and performance is wholly dependent on the individual fostering service, panel administration, panel advisor and the overall efficiency of managing individual SSWs to ensure the relevant reports and assessments are ready in a timely manner to be shared” – Fostering services

Fostering services also felt that current processes can sometimes be overly risk averse, rather than child centred, and can place unrealistic expectations on applicants that do not necessarily contribute to safer or better decisions. In addition, when panels include members without a social work background, there can be gaps in understanding of the fostering role, which may weaken the quality and relevance of scrutiny.

Although fostering panels can create delays to foster carer approvals, it is often not caused by the panel process itself but from other areas of the assessment such as delays to medical and DBS checks. These rely on information from external organisations and without these panels are unable to make an assessment and recommendation.

Fostering services believe that addressing these issues would have far greater impact on improving the value, timeliness and quality of assessments than removing panels from initial assessments.

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.

“Medicals are becoming an issue with GPs not prioritising these and in some cases refusing to complete them.” - Fostering service SotN survey

Foster carers' views

Foster carers shared a range of experiences with panels which is likely reflective of their own and that of their peers' experience. 26% of foster carers that responded to our survey neither agree or disagree that fostering panels provide value that is proportionate, 24% agree and 20% disagree.

Some found the panel process valuable and validating, with one foster carer from our FCA forum described the feeling of respect gained from having a whole group of experts read your documents and agree that would you make a great foster carer

and similarly at the end of the first year having the panel agree you've done a great job. They also saw the value of having multiagency perspective and oversight.

"They provide unique expert advice, questioning and guidance to ensure these children have a stable, safe and loving home" – Foster carer

"The diverse experience and wealth of knowledge held by panel members is invaluable and finances or lack of them should not be placed above the integrity and involved process which maintains standards of care and safeguarding of the most vulnerable in our society." – Foster carer

However many raised concerns about delays and lack of clear communication regarding the purpose of the panel and what to expect. They felt that panel members do not always understand or appreciate the full picture of a family dynamic or home which can lead to decisions that are predetermined or influenced by historic practice rather than current circumstances.

Foster carers also described how they find panels stressful, emotionally overwhelming or even traumatic, particularly when the process is not properly explained or when the environment during the process feels intimidating. They were also concerned about the level of personal information that had to be disclosed to a large group of strangers, describing it as intrusive especially for single carers who reported that this can feel even more intense and disproportional.

Some foster carers felt that the panel process requires a significant amount of time and resources which could be streamlined by reducing the number of panel members and the decreasing the administrative burden. Some also questioned whether the additional scrutiny is needed, suggesting the assessments completed by social workers is sufficient .

"It seems unnecessary when so much preparation has already been undertaken and the supervising social worker is aware of every step of the training and would have rectified any shortcomings prior to panel." – Foster carer

A reoccurring theme was also that foster carers felt they had limited opportunity to provide context or challenge assumptions, leaving them feeling that their voices are not fully heard in the decision making.

Overall, foster carers emphasised that while panels can serve an important validating function, improvements are needed to ensure the process is respectful, makes best use of resources, transparent, and genuinely reflective of carers' experiences and family life.

10. What would you see as the advantages or disadvantages of removing fostering panels from initial assessment and the first annual review process?

As part of our survey, we asked the question "To what extent do you agree that fostering panels should no longer consider initial approval and first year annual review?"

The breakdown of responses are:

Fostering services – 64% strongly disagree, 9% disagree, 15% neither agree nor disagree, 12% strongly agree

Foster carers – 21% strongly disagree, 16% disagree, 20% neither agree nor disagree, 21% agree, 20% strong agree and 2% don't know.

Advantages

Overall, only 32% of respondents to our survey strongly agreed or agreed that fostering panels should no longer be required to consider initial approval and first year annual review.

We asked respondents to choose, from a list of options, what they view as the main advantages to removing panel oversight. The main advantages of removing fostering panels, agreed on by both foster carers and foster services, include faster decision making, less administrative burden and less duplication of work.

53% of foster carers and 42% of fostering services said that removing panels also has the potential to reduce the anxiety and emotional burden experienced by foster carers, particularly around the stress of presenting personal information to a large group.

Fostering services in our focus groups, as well as 46% of those in our survey, suggested that removing panels might also reduce administrative and resource demand, freeing up time, capacity, and staffing that could be used to strengthen other parts of the assessment and support process, 46% of foster carers also agreed with this. Both foster carers and fostering services felt that without the formality of panels, the process might feel less intrusive and more culturally sensitive for applicants.

Disadvantages

However, overall respondents disagreed that fostering panels should no longer consider initial approval and first year annual review, with 48% of fostering services and foster carers strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. Respondents overwhelmingly emphasised significant disadvantages and risks associated with removing fostering panels.

We asked respondents to choose, from a list of options¹, what they viewed as the key disadvantages to removing panels oversight. The most prominent concerns for both foster services and foster carers were for both foster services and foster carers were the loss of independent oversight (58%), scrutiny provided by a diverse, multidisciplinary panel (52%), less opportunity for challenge (50%), loss of quality assurance (46%) which could all lead to serious safeguarding risks if individuals are approved who are a risk to children. 45% ticked increased safeguarding risk as an extremely concerning disadvantage.

Safeguarding risks

One of the key purposes of the panel is to ensure that individuals who apply to foster are suitable to care and provide a safe home for vulnerable children and that they do not pose a risk to children. The safeguarding risks of removing panel are also sadly highlighted in many Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) which outline where panels have failed and could have done more to prevent the approval of people who posed a risk to children. The Fostering Network and many of our members we spoke to, are extremely concerned that if we

¹ The question stated 'What would you see as the disadvantages of removing fostering panel oversight from initial approval and the first year annual review? (Please tick all that apply): Increased safeguarding risks; Loss of quality assurance; Reduced lived-experience perspectives; Reduced multi-agency perspectives; Less opportunity for challenge; Greater pressure and workload for ADM; Loss of independent oversight; Not sure; None; Other

remove the panel it will be like having a poor performing panel (which may as well not have been there) and we would urge the Government to look at the extensive learning around this area. The introduction of the fostering panel into the approval process in the 1980's marked a significant improvement and shift towards protecting children in the UK where fostering was previously not regulated and children often suffered from harm at the hands of their foster carers. We are concerned that removing panel will be a step backwards in safeguarding already vulnerable children in care.

"Foster carers care for our most vulnerable children and I really appreciate the input fostering panels provide. They provide an important safeguarding oversight. Fostering panel members come from different areas of social work and of life. Their oversight is so important. I do not believe approving applicants to become foster carers should just be in the hands of the assessing worker, their manager and then the ADM. Regarding first year annual review the Panel again provide important safeguarding oversight and also gives the foster carer the opportunity to share their experience with independent people." – Fostering service

Sadly we know that people who pose a risk to children do apply to foster but they usually do not even get to the panel because when they are told that a panel of multi-disciplinary professionals are going to make the decision this becomes a clear deterrent. There are not stats on how many people this happens to as this is the foundation of safeguarding and prevention. As many attendees at our focus group told us – the process leading up to panel weeds these people out. We, and many of our members, believe that the Ofsted statistic quoted in the consultation document and the statement – 'that 98.6% of panels approve almost all applications that they consider – indicating that panels almost universally mirror the original assessment by social workers' is misleading. This does not take into account the many assessments that do not reach the ADM and that there will have been many steps back and forth before they see it to ensure it can proceed and quality assure it and any foster carers that they are not confident will get through, will not proceed to the ADM.

Participants also felt that the multi-disciplinary nature of panels fulfilled a strong safeguarding function.

"Panel voice includes care experienced young people, foster carers, adopters, those holding Special Guardianship Orders as well as teachers, health, therapists, police and is the only place where a range of voices can have a view on the work of social workers within the agency. To remove this, will negatively impact the safeguarding function of the panel process. It could not be achieved by one (social work) advisor to the ADM." – Fostering service

Below are some examples of panels failing to fulfil their role well, some more significant than others which ended in SCRs - all three involve foster carers sexually abusing children in their care. Some of these cases demonstrate that the panel raised doubts but the service didn't take these seriously, others are examples where the service had done what they considered to be a thorough assessment but the panel failed in its quality assurance role. One also highlights the problems with DBS and the need for PNCs to share more relevant information. The excerpts below are in no way reflective of the full report but give a taste of the content and the panel findings form part of a much bigger picture. A CoramBAAF publication reviewed all of the serious case reviews for children

in foster care, adoption and SGO from 2007-2019. It contains a section on the effectiveness of panels and the panel failures leading to child deaths.²

Trafford Safeguarding Children Board Review Team in the case of child PB *“concluded that although some queries were raised and tentatively explored, the Fostering Panel could usefully have adopted a far more challenging and questioning approach to the assessments of both foster carers, specifically in relation to the level of reliance on self-reported information, the particular issues related to diversity, and the fact that both applicants would be learning parenting skills for the first time as untested carers. Again, whilst there is no evidence that such challenges would have influenced the decision to recommend approval for the applicants as foster carers, there may well have been a more realistic understanding about their immediate support needs and therefore greater oversight of their developing role as foster carers.”*³

Leicester Safeguarding Children Board into Child C and D found that *“However, there was no information about the previous unsuccessful assessment in the papers that went to fostering panel and the ADM, for reasons that are not known. Had the panel members and ADM known about the previous unsuccessful application they would have wanted to understand the issues and satisfy themselves that they had been resolved before making a recommendation and decision respectively, that the couple were suitable to be foster carers. They would have likely been mindful that the behaviours might only have been suppressed for the duration of the assessment, or re-appear when the carers were under stress, rather than be resolved entirely. They might have made additional recommendations/decisions; for example, that (rather than waiting up to the full maximum of 12 months stipulated in the regulations), the couple have an early first annual review, which included specific feedback from others working with the children (for example school and/ or CAMHS) or for specific training to be completed. They might also have made some observations about cautious matching and additional support/monitoring.*

*The papers presented to panel and ADM did not include any details of the concerns which had accumulated by then. This meant that neither panel members nor ADM had the opportunity to consider whether these meant the carers were still suitable as foster carers either for these children or any children. Even without knowledge of the concerns, there should have been challenge to the service (from panel) about not ensuring there was an unannounced visit since October 2018 and updating the safer care policy to reflect the children in placement's (changing) needs.”*⁴

Between September 2013 and November 2014, the City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Board conducted a Serious Case Review about the sexual abuse of a number of children by two men. One was an approved foster carer, the other a member of his family. The abuse of foster children is known to have taken place between 1999 and 2008. The report states:

² Cleaver, H, Rose, W., (2020) ‘Safeguarding Children living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from case reviews 2007–2019’ CoramBAAF <https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/safeguarding-children-living-foster-carers-adopters-and-special-guardians-learning-case>

³ Trafford Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review into the case of Child PB (May 2017) <https://www.traffordsafeguardingpartnership.org.uk/Docs/Learning-development/Resources/SCR-PB-FINAL-REPORT-May-2017.pdf>

⁴ Leicester Safeguarding Children Partnership Board Serious Case Review into the cases of Child C and D (17 July 2024) <https://lcitylscb.org/media/1981/lcspr-child-c-and-d-final.pdf>

“Doubts about the carers’ motivation for fostering identified at the fostering panel were not kept under review because initial placements with the carers were seen as being successful. There illustrates the risk (still potentially present in any fostering service) that individual workers and the service as a whole may develop an uncritical pride in and loyalty to ‘their’ foster carer.”⁵

Multi agency decision making, standards, independence and consistency

Key to ensuring that panel members bring different professional backgrounds, lived experience, and perspectives that collectively strengthen decision making in a way no single ADM could replicate.

“Panels are made up of a broad range of people who know what fostering is. Their experience leads to good and probing questions about suitability of applicants at the end of the application process. To remove this would be a mistake. In particular the inclusion of care experienced people is a voice that should not be lost for ‘efficiency’” – Foster carer

Fostering services and foster carers warned that removing panels could reduce opportunities to challenge unconscious bias, interrogate assessments, and address potential power imbalances. There were strong concerns that decision making would become less consistent, with variation between local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

Services highlighted that removing panels could create pressures linked to placement demand, with the risk that recruitment targets, sufficiency concerns or urgency to place could influence decisions in the absence of independent scrutiny. The loss of panel minutes was also seen as significant, as these provide an important record of the risks explored, concerns raised, and rationale behind recommendations that are critical for accountability and audit purposes.

“ADMs are busy and they have, LA targets to meet and this will impact their views. Panel allows a range of independent people, to scrutinise the assessment and the foster carers to ensure there are no missing pieces. Cutting corners to save and saving money is not in the best interests of the children.” – Fostering service

Increase in ADM workloads and referrals

ADMs may also face a considerable increase in workload, with the high volume of documentation received requiring detailed scrutiny which may increase the risk of inconsistencies, fatigue, and reduced capacity for thorough decision making. Our survey found that 60% of fostering services are concerned about the greater pressure and workload for ADMs. ADMs also raised that many of them hold additional roles within local authorities so could not take on the extra scrutiny and work that panels provide.

Fostering services also suggested that removing panels could lead to an increase in Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) referrals, if carers disagree with decisions and feel there is no transparent or independent process underpinning them. This may result in additional costs and delays elsewhere in the system.

⁵ City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review Overview report – the sexual abuse of children in a foster home (November 2014) <https://www.chscp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CDM-16569311-v1-CHSCB-Case-FC-Overview-report-FINAL.pdf>

Foster carer perspectives

As set out above, from a foster carer perspective, respondents stressed that panels serve as an important forum for carers to express their views and contribute to the assessment process. Some carers noted that meeting panel members in person provides reassurance about the fairness and transparency of the approval process and allows panel members to gain insight into aspects of the family that may not be fully captured in written reports. Foster carers also told us that being recommended by panel can feel validating, professionalising, and confidence building.

11. What changes (if any) would you seek to make to standards and guidance to ensure that effective quality assurance takes place throughout the assessment process?

Effective quality assurance during the assessment process is critical to the safeguarding of children as well as ensuring that we provide adequate support and learning opportunities to those applicants who have the potential to foster. Panels currently contribute to this process as we have outlined bringing together the voices of everyone who has been involved and applying an objective lens to analysis of strengths and areas for development.

We do not believe the panel should be removed but if it was, and services did not continue with their panel, then we believe that there would be a need for changes to be made to the standards and guidance in the form of an alternative quality assurance mechanism. One way we believe effective quality assurance could take place through the assessment process is through the creation of a new role - Quality Assurance Fostering Manager. This position would be in between the fostering team manager's quality assurance responsibilities and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

This role would be an individual that could bring significant expertise in fostering, safeguarding, and corporate parenting responsibilities, oversee quality assurance of assessments before they reach the ADM, identify themes and learning from issues arising across cases and participate in a range of internal forums that gather intelligence from across the local authority. Therefore ensuring consistent QA practice across teams and reduce variation.

The National Panel Chair forum argued that quality assurance must be undertaken by skilled and experienced managers who are equipped to scrutinise the depth and nuance of fostering assessments.

Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) would need to develop equivalent roles to ensure parity of standards across the sector. Where individual agency viability is a concern, a regional role commissioned by a consortium of local authorities and agencies could be developed. This role could sit within a Regional Care Cooperative, with the Quality Assurance Fostering Manager making recommendations to the ADM. Such an approach would strengthen regional sufficiency, align resources with demand, and ensure consistent standards.

To guarantee appropriate expertise, regulated standards for skills, knowledge, and training should be introduced. There would need to be national guidance to define essential standards for competencies, training requirements, and experience thresholds for the proposed QA Fostering Manager role, formally regulate the skills, qualifications, and experience required for the new role and the ADM. This was seen as essential to ensuring

decisions are made by individuals with sufficient expertise and authority and that the roles are distinct from each other.

To support this role, another change to standards and guidance could be a nationally recognised quality assurance document that ensures that key checks, professional judgements, and areas explored during quality assurance are evidenced. This documentation would support transparency, improve recordkeeping, and help ensure consistency.

We would also advise the introduction of a Quality Assurance recommendation, to aid the ADM decision, outlining the issues considered and the rationale for the quality assurance judgement.

To ensure that diverse perspectives including lived experience of care experienced people and foster carers continue to contribute to the process, further changes are required to standards and guidance. There should be a clear requirement for a joint visit or a second visit as part of the assessment, carried out by practitioners with sufficient experience and confidence to explore complex family dynamics. Newly qualified social workers may not always be best placed to undertake these visits independently, so guidance should emphasise the need for appropriately skilled assessors. Having multiple professional perspectives throughout the process offers an important safeguard and helps ensure that decisions are well informed and balanced. Bringing care experienced people and foster carers into the assessment process would support applicants' development pre-approval.

Updated guidance is also needed on the appropriate use of online assessments and virtual visits, including when they are suitable and how they can complement but not replace in-person work.

12. If panels were not required for approvals, how would we strengthen the role of the Agency Decision Maker or other processes to ensure objectivity and rigour?

If panels were no longer required for approvals, ADMs would need more time, resources and support to adequately take on the additional workload and provide the scrutiny currently provided by panels. Fostering services were concerned that smaller local authorities may particularly struggle and thought they could benefit from shared or regional ADM hubs to ensure they are able to meet quality expectations. They also suggested that clear alternative structures, potentially centralised or through regionalisation would be beneficial, alongside strengthened agency adviser roles to support quality assurance. ADMs would also need to meet foster carers directly.

To maintain objectivity, ADMs would require strengthened independence from the fostering service and the operational pressures they face, especially those related to sufficiency or placement demands. Their function could be outlined more explicitly in legislation or statutory guidance, similar to Independent Reviewing Officers with a focus on being consistent, quality-driven, and have clear separation from the fostering service.

If panels were no longer part of approvals, strong alternative safeguards would be essential. These could include a strengthened agency advisor role that would support analysis and ensure robust quality assurance. Assessment teams would have to be more thorough and robust with more consistent criteria, scrutiny and oversight mechanism in place. There would need to be considerations for how Ofsted might oversee ADM decision making in the same way it scrutinises existing panel arrangements.

Maintaining a culture of communication, curiosity, and professional challenge for ADMs would be vital. Support for foster carers would have to be strengthened in the first year to ensure that child safety remains through methods such as, increased review points, robust oversight and as a foster carer academy.

Members of the National Panel Chair Forum were unanimous in their belief that the Agency Decision Maker role cannot compensate for the loss of panel scrutiny. They explained that a single decision maker cannot replicate the multi-dimensional scrutiny offered by a panel comprising members with lived experience, professional expertise, and diverse backgrounds. Some observed that any attempt to strengthen the ADM function would inevitably involve creating a multi-person review structure, which would simply recreate panels in another form.

13. To what extent do you agree with the proposal to maintain the use of panels for recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers?

Agree

The following questions relate to panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers.

14. What are your views on the number of panel members that should be required to conduct panel business?

Both fostering services and foster carers shared views about the size and composition of fostering panels. Foster carers expressed clear concerns about very large panels, with some reporting experiences of facing more than ten people and describing the process as feeling more like an interrogation than a supportive discussion. They questioned the necessity of such large panels and raised issues about individuals they have never met having access to highly personal and sensitive information about them.

Fostering services, by contrast, reported that panels function well when operating at the current minimum quoracy required by regulation, noting that the statutory threshold is sufficient to ensure effective scrutiny and balanced decision making. They identified that challenges in panel recruitment generally arise only when services seek particular expertise—such as health professionals—but clarified that this is a matter of local practice rather than regulation, and that specialist input can be secured in ways other than formal panel membership.

The current quorum of five members offers an appropriate balance of experience and independence. It ensures that differing or dissenting views can be explored constructively, and the use of an odd number supports clear and robust recommendations. Reducing the number of panel members could risk narrowing the diversity of representation, potentially diminishing the voice of those with lived experience in favour of maintaining only the minimum professional requirements.

15. What are your views on the type of experience or qualifications that panel members should have?

We believe panel members should collectively bring a strong mix of professional expertise and lived experience to ensure balanced, informed, and rigorous decision making. A social work background and a strong understanding of fostering practice should be central, as this provides the grounding needed to assess the quality, safety, and suitability of applications. Panels should also be deliberately multidisciplinary, drawing on professionals from health, education, psychology, and safeguarding to broaden insight and

strengthen scrutiny. Regulation and guidance changes to mandate the breadth of multi-disciplinary insight would strengthen practice and scrutiny.

Importantly, panels should also include lived experience, such as foster carers and care experienced adults, whose perspectives provide vital insight into the realities of fostering and the needs of children in care.

16. What are your views on the level of independence that panel members should have from the fostering service?

Current regulations require a min number of fostering panel members to be completely independent from the fostering service to ensure decisions are fair, objective, and focused solely on children's safety and wellbeing. This requirement could be strengthened to increase independence and the requirement for lived experience could be made clearer in regulations and standards. Independence ensures that panels are not influenced, consciously or unconsciously by organisational pressures such as sufficiency challenges and allows for genuine, unbiased scrutiny of assessments. Foster carers also need confidence that decisions are made through a fair and impartial process. Independent panel members provide reassurance that approvals or recommendations are not swayed by any other considerations other than what is best for the child. Independence allows services to draw on a wider pool of specialist knowledge, including health and education specialists, psychologists, and lived experience from foster carers or care experienced individuals. Independence makes it easier to ensure diversity of thought and experience, enhancing decision making quality and using a truly multidisciplinary approach.

The feedback loop from panel to services in supporting quality assurance is critical to continued service development and practice improvement.

17. What other changes to the requirements for panels that make recommendations on possible deregistrations of foster carers would improve the process?

We believe that in order to improve the process for panels that make recommendations on possible termination of approval, the clear time frames and national minimum standards for completion should be followed. When a fostering service proposes that a foster carer's approval should be terminated, the regulations allow fostering services to present such cases to the panel for advice and scrutiny. This is particularly vital in situations where concerns are complex or contentious.

Where a foster carer resigns during an ongoing investigation or review of their suitability, the statutory framework states under Regulation 28(13) of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, a foster carer may resign at any time by providing written notice, with their approval terminating automatically 28 days after the date the resignation is received, irrespective of panel schedules or any ongoing enquiries. In these circumstances, the fostering panel has no decision-making role. Instead, the resignation is presented to the panel for information only, so that it may be recorded and the panel remains informed about carers leaving the service and the context in which that resignation occurred. Panel involvement does not affect the 28 day statutory termination period, nor does it alter or delay any ongoing safeguarding or learning processes undertaken by the fostering service.

Quality assurance would be strengthened if it was made a requirement for terminations of approval following a foster carer providing 28 days notice to be considered by panel in all cases and would support consistency across the sector. Foster carer attendance at these panels would also ensure their voices are heard either in their own individual situation or for service development. This presentation would also strengthen safeguarding through

the written record of panel discussion that could then be reviewed by future agencies the former foster carers may apply to. Foster carers subject to investigation should always be advised to continue engagement in any investigation to the point of completion, to ensure they can represent their perspective in the report and provide input to panel during the formal process to record the outcome and reason for the termination of approval.

However, if panels are only used for the possible termination of approval of foster carers, we are concerned that there could be several risks created. One concern is that if panel members will only see negative cases, this risks de-skilling panel members as they are no longer seeing a variety of cases, reduces opportunities to see examples of good practice that can be used to inform other cases to support carers that are struggling. It would also create an unhelpful negative association with panels, with foster carers only seeing a panel when there has been an allegation or standards of care concern, this will in turn increase the anxiety felt by foster carers and ultimately could distract from their goal of being a safeguarding tool.

There may also be challenges around capacity if panels are not used for approvals with less panel members being available as they are required less which raises questions around the cost efficiency of this change. Local authorities may need to pool panel members and work across regions to address this.

There is also a concern that some people may be less keen to be a panel member if it is only used to consider termination of approval as they would only be involved in the negative experience and not the positive one of approval as well. As stated above, we do not recommend that the panel process for initial and first year approval is removed but if it is, we think they should remain for possible terminations of approval.

18. Are there other mandated parts of the fostering approval process that should be changed to clarify responsibilities, ensure robust checks and speed up approvals?

Both fostering services and foster carers believe there are many key areas that could be improved in the approval process that could speed up approvals. The vast majority of services and foster carers we spoke to said speeding up other areas of the approval process would make a greater difference to the length of the approval process than removing the panel.

As part of our survey, we provided respondents with options for parts of the fostering approval process that could be changed. Out of the foster carers, that responded, 75% indicated that ex-partner references could be improved, 36% for overseas checks, 34% for health and medical assessments and 30% for analysis of strengths and weaknesses could be improved. The majority of fostering services (63%) voted that health and medical assessments should be improved, 50% ex-partner references, 31% DBS checks and 25% home study assessments and third party reference to be improved. It is important to highlight that previous partner checks is a recommendation from a SCR where the death of children could have been prevented if simple checks with previous partners had been undertaken. Education on this element of the process is essential for the sector along with clarity on the application of this check being subject to where they have raised children together.

Medical assessments are often delayed due to GPs giving priority to NHS appointments and forms getting lost at the surgeries. To improve this, we recommend a national standardised approach to foster carer medicals, allowing assessments to be carried out by nurses or nurse practitioners within the GP practice and digitalising the form to minimise administrative burden. The plans underway to digitalise the NHS App and health

record provide opportunities for services to undertake some parts of the assessment themselves which we would urge the Government to look into instead of removing panels. It may also be of value to consider the role of the medical advisor, many services invest significant resources in this aspect when perhaps a lower level of scrutiny could be applied to the health of prospective foster carers.

Introducing clear recruitment standards with defined time scales would help ensure speed up the process and reduce delays. An assessment timeline should be agreed at the first assessment session, outlining key milestones, expectations on applications, mid-point review, completion, panel and ADM dates, the timeline should not exceed 4 months.

A more formalised Q&A process carried out before the panels could also ensure that any uncertainties or issues are addressed early, reducing the risk of delays at the final stage.

We heard from both foster carers and fostering services that DBS checks are causing delays to the assessment process and have submitted evidence on this in the call for evidence. PNC checks which are undertaken for kinship assessments could be used instead of DBS checks. These are a standard part of practice in Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) and provide soft intelligence that could support open discussion with applicants in understanding the experiences and trauma they could bring to fostering as well as the mitigations that may now be in their lives that support their suitability to foster. This would speed up the process as well as enhance the safeguarding.

Fostering services would like stronger guidance on how to mitigate obstacles when they are unable to carry out certain historical checks that may not impact a prospective foster carers ability to foster. They would also like to see innovative ways to streamline processes, such as digital solutions, improved information sharing, and modernised administrative systems, which could significantly speed up assessments.

Panel chairs identified that that delays in fostering and children's services are more often caused by retention issues, high caseloads, and staffing instability than by approval processes themselves. They suggested that improving workforce stability would have the greatest impact on timeliness and quality.

“Careful consideration to be given, is fostering panel the main or real issues causing delay. Consideration to be given to the others areas such as, assessment process, checks during the assessment stage that can cause significant delays. Ie Oversees checks, DBS, delayed medical, Number of references that is requires, Ex partner checks. More attention need to be focused on these areas.” – Fostering service

We strongly believe these improvements should be prioritised instead of removing panels to speed up the approval process.

Recommendations

- **The Fostering Network recommends that the requirement for fostering panels to make recommendations for initial assessment for foster carers and for the one-year annual review process is not removed.**
- **Instead, we recommend that:**
 - **Clear recruitment standards are introduced with defined time scales.**
 - **DBS checks are replaced or enhanced by more time efficient PNC checks.**

- **A national standardised approach to foster carer medicals is created, that allows assessments to be carried out by nurses or nurse practitioners within the GP practice, digitalising the form and reviewing the role of the medical advisor**

Proposal 2: Improving the handling of allegations and standards of care concerns

19.To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to our standards and guidance for providing greater support to children and carers who are experiencing an allegation?

Agree

Our response to this section of the consultation is based on the views of our members which were gathered through a focus group of 38 foster carers and 57 fostering services, as well as findings from a survey we conducted which was completed by 76 foster carers and 33 fostering services.

Overall, 88% of those that responded to our survey, strongly agreed or agreed with the proposed changes to provide greater support to children and foster carers experiencing an allegation. The full breakdown of responses to our survey:

Foster Carers – 50% strongly agree, 34% agree, 12% neither agree nor disagree, 3% disagree, 1% strongly disagree.

Fostering Services – 55% strongly agree, 42% agree, 3% neither agree nor disagree.

Our members agree with the proposed changes that strengthening support for children and foster carers during allegations is vital. We heard directly from foster carers whose experiences with allegations has been incredibly traumatising, leaving some considering leaving fostering completely due to their experience.

“It has ruined me, my mental health, my trust in social services and left me doubting if I could continue in this profession as I’m terrified I could experience this again” – Foster Carer in SotN survey

Importance of independent and legal support

Proposals to increase the emotional and practical support foster carers receive from their supervising social worker and independent support service were highly welcomed by foster carers, as the allegations process has been described as be extremely isolating and distressing. Foster carers consistently emphasised the need for independent support, advocacy, counselling and regular check-ins by their fostering service throughout an investigation and once an allegation has been concluded. Members stressed that support must be individualised and extended to the whole household including the birth children of foster carers, given the significant emotional trauma, disruption and stress allegations often generate.

Several carers noted that while support may technically be available, it is not always accessed early enough. Arrangements and processes for accessing independent support

varies between services; some services have contracts which enable foster carers to self-refer for independent support, advocacy and mediation, whilst others require a referral to be completed by their service. Our State of the Nations survey also backs this up with only 38% of foster carers in England receiving independent support and only 9% specialist counselling support.

"The sense of abandonment by the LA is overwhelming. The slowness of the process and lack of communication exacerbates the stress. Independent and free emotional and legal support should click in straightaway" - Foster carer

Examples of good practice were highlighted, such as one IFA that offers reflective sessions after an allegation to help carers process the experience. Strengthening and guaranteeing access to this type of emotional and practical support is therefore seen as essential to prevent unplanned endings and improve carer retention.

Legal support was also highlighted as crucial given the serious legal implications of allegations that can arise and once the police become involved. In our SotN survey, two thirds of services said they signpost foster carers to The Fostering Network's advice line and legal insurance scheme. However, many foster carers in England do not have access to this critical legal cover as they are not afforded the legal insurance provided by organisations such as TFN. This should be a mandated requirement on all fostering services as minimum requirement.

"All fostering services should offer mandatory independent and legal support to all foster carers. Fostering carers attending voluntary interviews with police and advised to utilise the duty solicitor is inhumane and no regard of the duty of care and responsibility." - Fostering service

Importance of considering children's needs and voices

Allegations have the potential to become a further traumatic event for children and young people who have already experienced significant adversity before entering care. Any resulting changes to their care, routines, relationships or home environment can compound their trauma, affect their sense of safety and belonging, and impact their emotional wellbeing, self-esteem and trust in adults.

Fostering services and foster carers strongly welcomed the proposal to enhance the voice of the child and reinforce their right to advocacy. They emphasised that children of all ages must feel heard, understood, and genuinely included in decisions that affect their lives, and that their wishes must be meaningfully considered.

Careful consideration of removing children from the home

The proposal to adopt a holistic approach when considering the removal of children from their home during an allegation, alongside requiring sign off by a senior safeguarding leader, was highly praised. This approach recognises the substantial and often long lasting trauma that unnecessary moves can inflict on children and young people. For many children in care who have already experienced significant trauma, any move, even one which occurs following an allegation or concern they have raised themselves, can become another deeply damaging event.

In our SoTN survey, a third of foster carers said a child they fostered was removed from their home during their most recent allegation investigation and around a fifth was returned. 3% of

foster carers said a birth child was removed. Nearly three quarters of these said the child was returned. One in ten said they or another adult in the home were asked to leave.

Unnecessary and unplanned moves may contribute to additional trauma, lower self-esteem, poorer mental health, feelings of shame and difficulties forming or sustaining trusting relationships with adults. For children who already have insecure attachments, each move can reinforce a narrative of instability and rejection, which further undermines their sense of belonging and safety.

“The emphasis on holistic risk assessment before removing a child is particularly important. Automatic removal can cause further trauma and disrupt stable attachments. Requiring senior safeguarding leader sign-off adds appropriate oversight and accountability.” – Foster carer

Because of these profound impacts, very careful consideration must be given to both the immediate and longer-term consequences of any move. Decision-making should take into consideration the child’s history, attachment needs, existing vulnerabilities and the likely impact on the child’s emotional wellbeing. Moves should only ever be agreed where it is absolutely necessary to safeguard the child and where no other safe and appropriate alternative is available

“Decisions to remove a child following an allegation should absolutely be taken with great care, using a holistic assessment of risk that considers the full context rather than relying on a single incident or limited information. Having such decisions signed off by a senior safeguarding leader adds appropriate oversight and ensures decisions are measured, consistent, and defensible.” – Fostering service

20.To what extent do you agree with the proposed changes to our standards and guidance for making the allegations process fairer and more transparent?

Agree

Overall, 91% of those that responded to our survey, strongly agreed or agreed with the proposed changes to make the allegations process fairer and more transparent. The breakdown of responses to our survey:

Foster carers – 66% strongly agree, 29% agree, 4% neither agree nor disagree, 1% strongly disagree

Fostering services – 42% strongly agree, 42% agree, 7% neither agree nor disagree, 9% disagree

Independent investigations

Both foster carers and fostering services were particularly supportive of the proposal that states that the supervising social worker should not be the person who carries out the investigations into allegations. Many highlighted the need for the investigation to be completely independent from the supervising social worker whose focus should be on providing support to the foster carer. It is already clear in legislation that any investigation should be undertaken by a suitability qualified and experienced safeguarding practitioner.

“Having another social worker carry out the investigation will ensure that the investigation is fair and impartial.” – Foster carer

"I strongly agree that the supervising social worker should not be the person investigating, I would suggest this needs to be a specialist role that is highly trained in this area, that will investigate in the same way you have complaints officers in a specific role. They could be the independent eye that can speak to children, speak to carer and consult with children's teams and fostering teams and guide decision making." – Fostering service

Clear information and regular updates

Proposals to have a designated person provide foster carers with a written account about the nature of the allegation or concern, along with the increased information sharing about the allegations procedure, scheduled time frames and regular updates even if there is no new information, were highly welcomed by both foster carers and fostering services. Clearer, more frequent and transparent updates reduce the emotional toll and uncertainty caused by long periods without information. Foster carers report that not knowing the details of an allegation for months is devastating, and they want timely explanations of decisions, what can and cannot be shared, if police are being involved and their rights at each stage. Remaining in regular contact, along with written follow-up, and clear signposting to support and opportunities to see and comment on reports helps ensure fairness and prevents foster carers feeling disadvantaged or isolated by the process.

"Providing clear written information about the nature of the allegation, along with expected timescales and weekly updates, would significantly improve transparency. Lack of communication is often one of the most distressing aspects of the process. Regular updates, even when there is no new information, would reduce anxiety and uncertainty." – Foster carer

In our SotN survey, better communication and information sharing, including more information on the specific allegation and the allegations process, and better communication from fostering services in general was the second most popular thing (35%) that foster carers said would improve the allegations process. However, only 7% of fostering services listed this which suggests that there is a potential disconnect around this and more services could do to ensure foster carers understand what is happening.

The exact nature of the allegation should only be shared with the foster carer when the investigation has established enough evidence for analysis to commence. Sharing information about the allegation prematurely could compromise the investigation for the foster carer and prevent a thorough investigation from taking place. There should still be good transparent, regular communication about the stage and process of the allegation.

Timescales

Another proposal which foster carers and fostering services are supportive of is the focus on resolving cases in a timely manner. Foster carers consistently report that lengthy investigations increase stress, uncertainty and perceptions of unfairness, particularly when they are left without information for extended periods. In our SotN survey, the most common duration of allegations investigations was up to one month (33%). Concerningly, one in six respondents (17%) said their latest investigation took six months to one year, and one in ten said the investigation took over a year.

Fostering services expressed how they support a clear and agreed timescale across all agencies to ensure that allegations are handled proportionally and without unnecessary prolonging of the emotional and traumatic impact on families.

"Timely response from all professionals involved with the process. Making them accountable in any investigations, ie clear time frame for police to respond, update and for LA to respond to the provider with update." - Fostering service

In particular the length of time for the police to respond was highlighted as one of the areas lengthening the process the most and being the most unclear for foster carers. This was also echoed in our SotN survey.

"The length of time between the allegation and police investigation is outside the control of services and means that carers can sit for many months in limbo." - Foster Carer – SotN survey

Educating and addressing the impact of poor police input during the process should be critical concern for the government to address.

Financial support

Foster carers and fostering services are also pleased to see the proposal that would ensure foster carers continue receiving their fee throughout the full period of an allegation investigation. Many explained that, under current arrangements, they often have to rely on personal savings or borrowing money from friends and family. The resulting financial insecurity significantly intensifies the stress of an already traumatic process. However as there is no national fee framework and obligation to pay fees 52 weeks a week, we would encourage the Government to do this as a priority first so that fees can therefore be paid during an allegation.

In our SotN survey only 39%% said they received their usual level of foster carer fees during the allegation investigation. 43% said payment of fees (whether full or partial) continued throughout the entire investigation. In comparison, two thirds (67%) of fostering services said they continue to pay foster carers fees for the full duration of the investigation (35%) or part of the investigation (32%).

"Continuing to pay foster carers during the full period of investigation is essential. Allegations can take time to resolve, and removing financial stability during that period adds unnecessary stress and may drive good carers out of the system." – Foster carer

With many investigations lasting several months, and in some cases over a year, carers can be left in highly vulnerable financial situations. It is important to stress that when foster carers are not given financial security during this period, many are forced to seek alternative forms of employment, and some subsequently feel unable or lack the availability to return to fostering at all.

"It's positive that the government will provide funding so that foster carers continue to be paid throughout any investigation which reduces the worry and stress they may feel" – Fostering service

This loss of experienced carers not only impacts individual children but also reduces the amount of available foster places for children overall. Ensuring financial stability during investigations is therefore critical both for retention and for the wellbeing of carers undergoing what is often an emotionally exhausting and unsettling process.

"Ensuring that foster parents continue to receive their fee throughout the full period of an allegation investigation is vital; investigations can take weeks or months, and stopping

payments creates unnecessary financial hardship, stigma, and emotional strain at a time when carers most need stability and support” – Fostering service

Training

Foster carers and fostering services strongly support the proposals that outline expectations for foster services to provide specific training on allegations. Information about allegations, standards of care concerns, and complaint processes should be provided and discussed at the beginning of the foster carers' journey, during preparation training for prospective foster carers, and as part of the assessment process. It should then be revisited through comprehensive post-approval training early in the fostering career, and then reinforced through ongoing learning and development, within supervision and annual foster home reviews. This would provide a significantly more robust approach to foster carer knowledge about allegations.

Embedding this learning early and maintaining it throughout the fostering journey helps carers feel better equipped, less vulnerable and more confident should an allegation arise. Therefore it should be a priority post approval.

Foster carers emphasise that clear, accessible training helps them understand why allegations occur, how to reduce risks, and what to expect if an allegation arises, which in turn reduces fear and uncertainty. They noted that allegations training is essential but can easily fade over time, so it should be regularly refreshed and kept “live” through ongoing supervision discussions.

“Training fostering families on allegations is also important so they understand procedures and expectations from the outset.” – Foster carer

21.Do you have any additional suggestions to improve the allegations process?

While members agreed that the current proposals to change standards and guidance they believe there is still some areas missing.

Consistency

Foster carers and fostering services repeatedly emphasised the need for much greater consistency in the allegations process. They reported that processes vary widely between fostering services leading to confusion and inconsistencies in how foster carers are treated. There are currently differences in terminology, thresholds, and working practices across services that create unnecessary challenges. Guidance needs to include processes that are clear, transparent and include explicit protections for foster carers that fostering services are made to be aware of and can follow.

Foster carers expressed that while having clear procedures cannot remove the emotional impact of being subject to an allegation, consistent and transparent processes can help foster carers feel more informed, respected, and reassured.

Proportionate response

Foster carers highlighted that the majority of issues raised in fostering households do not constitute safeguarding allegations and should not automatically be escalated as such and were actually more often standards of care concerns. They felt that disproportionate responses cause avoidable distress and can damage the relationship

between foster carers, services and the children in their care. Therefore the proposals to more clearly differentiate between allegations and other concerns were very welcome.

Both foster carers and fostering services agreed that early consultation with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) would prevent inappropriate or premature referrals, ensuring proportionate decision making, and would protect foster carers when patterns emerge. Training for LADOs to improve their awareness of foster care and increase skills and understanding is also an area that should be given focus.

Workforce training and improved joint working

Foster carers and fostering services emphasised that along with training for foster carers on allegations, social workers and other members of the foster team also need training, as well as the police in particular. Foster carers felt that social workers can, including those in senior positions, lack a clear understanding of the fostering role, along with trauma-informed practice, and the realities of caring for children with complex needs. They described situations where professionals appeared confused or anxious when allegations occurred because they were not sufficiently familiar with the fostering context or the formal process.

Foster carers also highlighted the importance of social workers maintaining respectful and supportive relationships with them, particularly during stressful and emotionally difficult periods. They stressed that the social care workforce and the police should receive specific training on fostering, allegations procedures, and the impact on carers as well as the need for and benefits of independent support and the arrangements within their fostering service for foster carers to access this, e.g. arrangements and processes for making a referral.

Support and fairness for foster carers

Although the current proposals look to increase support given to foster carers through the allegations process, members outlined how vital stronger support is and some did not believe they went far enough. Many foster carers highlighted that allegations can be an extremely traumatic experience. The nature of the safeguarding process where the information shared by a child must be believed leads them to feel like they are being presumed as guilty. They raised the importance of being treated with fairness, respect, and empathy and receiving transparent communication.

They felt it is important that foster carers should be entitled to independent support straight away, treated with respect, and be supported by social workers that can be empathetic and understand the far reaching impact allegations have on them and their family. There should be more training in relation to professional curiosity and how we support foster carers through allegations.

<i>“The process should be carried out with care instead of being made to feel like a criminal or that you are guilty before and during investigations” – Foster carer</i>
--

They also raised the need for better and more consistent out-of-hours support as when urgent issues occur outside of office hours, they can feel isolated, uncertain, and without clear guidance. Foster carers do not stop at 5pm and yet the system around them often does, this is outdated practice and we would suggest it is reviewed urgently.

Support for children

Foster carers and fostering services believe there needs to be a clear focus on thoughtful support for children during an allegations process outlined in standards and guidance. The experience can heighten feelings of insecurity, particularly if court proceedings are

involved. It is essential that they receive clear, honest, and appropriate explanations about what is happening, why decisions are being made, how long the process may take, and whether they can maintain contact with their foster carers. It will be important that advice given to children should take into account their presenting needs, level of understanding and trauma history. Awareness of the potential of the process to trigger previous experiences of trauma should be an important consideration.

Foster carers expressed concern about how allegations are currently framed and explained to children, emphasising the need for child friendly communication that does not leave children feeling responsible. While foster carers and social workers play an essential role in advocating for the children and young people they support, it is equally important that children have access to independent advocacy. Independent advocates can help ensure that the child's voice is not overshadowed by the perspectives of practitioners or household dynamics, particularly during an allegation when emotions, fears and uncertainties may be heightened. As part of the allegations process, children should be clearly informed about their right to advocacy, supported to access it, and reminded of this right throughout the process.

Children should also be regularly reminded of their broader rights under the UNCRC, including their rights:

- to express their views and be heard (Articles 12 and 13)
- to receive special protection and assistance when they cannot live with their families (Article 20)
- to recovery and support when they have experienced trauma (Article 39)

These rights should form the foundation of all decision making and communication with children during any allegations process.

Therapeutic support is also crucial to help children process the emotional impact and to ensure their voice is heard throughout. Once an allegation is untrue or unsubstantiated, children also need opportunities for supported repair work to help rebuild relationships and make sense of the experience, yet this is often lacking. More proactive preparation is required too, as children are rarely given information about what an allegation or complaints process involves. Ensuring children have understanding, reassurance, and emotional support throughout the process is vital to reduce harm and promote their long term wellbeing.

Post investigation reflective session

A post investigation reflective review should be offered in all cases, regardless of the outcome of the allegation, to help rebuild and stabilise the professional relationships affected by the process. It would create a safe and facilitated space for everyone involved to explore what happened, share perspectives, acknowledge the emotional impact, and identify any misunderstandings that arose. It would also allow for collective learning, enabling agencies to review what worked well, what could have been done differently, and how procedures might be improved for future cases. It is also important to have an independent chair for the review and to offer advocacy/ mediation support where the carers wish to take this up.

<i>“Regardless of outcome, a structured meeting to rebuild professional relationships and reflect on learning would support retention and trust.” – Foster carer</i>

Recommendations

- **The Fostering Network recommends that the Governments should:**
 - **Increase awareness and understanding of the impact of allegations in foster families among partners in justice, health, education and children's services, to reduce avoidable delay and improve outcomes for children through training and improved joint working processes.**
 - **Fund services to continue paying foster carer fees during vacancies, including when these are due to allegation investigations.**
 - **Fund independent support services and legal protection for foster carers experiencing an allegation.**
 - **Rewrite the NMS to make clear expectations for services in relation to the recommendations below to ensure there is consistency and high quality across all services.**
- **Fostering services should:**
 - **Distinguish between allegations, complaints and standard of care concerns.**
 - **Provide all foster carers subject to an allegation with access to independent support, legal support, specialist counselling support, and support for their wider families. Ensure foster carers are aware of the support available to them, including from external sources.**
 - **Improve communication around allegations in line with safeguarding legislation so foster carers are informed verbally and in writing, every step of the way.**
 - **Increase efforts to keep children in the home when an allegation has been made, where it is safe to do so.**
 - **Ensure children and young people have access to advocacy.**
 - **Offer a post investigation reflective review in all cases.**