

# The Fostering Network's manifesto

## Senedd elections 2026

The number of children in care in Wales is continuing to rise each year. 7,200 children were in the care system in Wales in 2024<sup>1</sup> and around two thirds are living in foster care.

Foster carers offer babies, 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.

As a society we have a huge opportunity to improve the lives of care experienced children, to tackle the inequalities that exist for these young people and to harness their potential to ensure they can flourish and have the childhood they deserve. But the crisis in foster care recruitment and retention is impacting our young people every day, sadly more foster carers are leaving than joining.

The Fostering Network is calling on all political parties to commit to taking bold, urgent action to address the instability and poor outcomes which exist for care experienced children so our care system can provide stable, loving homes close to children's communities.

### **We are calling on all political parties to:**

**1**

**Focus on care experienced children and young people**

**2**

**Support foster carers**

**3**

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

# FOCUS

## on care experienced children and young people

### The problem

In Wales, our 2024 State of the Nations' survey<sup>2</sup> found that only 43% of foster carers felt they were in a good location for the child they were most recently matched with to stay at the same school, and 73% felt they were in a good location for the child to maintain links with family and friends. Both of these figures were down from our last survey in 2021. This means that many babies, children and young people are living somewhere that does not meet their needs.

Babies, children and young people coming into care want to maintain relationships with their families and communities. We need enough highly skilled foster families locally that can care for children where they need them.

### What your political party can do about it:

- **Ensure there is a diverse, locally based pool of foster carers** to enable all babies, children and young people to be placed with foster carers that meet their needs.
- **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.
- **Invest in children's mental health services and additional support for learning.**
- **Ensure every baby, child and young person in foster care has security and stability in their foster home** and provide funding to ensure they are supported to stay until they are 25 (regardless of being in education or employment).
- **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'.
- **Ensure all children in foster care have a voice that is heard** in decisions that affect them.
- **Adopt 'Bil Pob Plentyn'<sup>3</sup>** into your manifesto to ensure that every child in Wales has a legal right to be heard, protected and supported.

# Support

## foster carers

To support babies, children and young people to thrive, our vision is that all foster carers should be regarded as equal and valued members of the team around the child. Their skills, knowledge and expertise should be respected and valued.

## The problem

Foster carers have a unique role within the children's sector – they are the only ones who support children in their own homes, 24-hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and welcome them as part of their families.

But we do not have enough. Each year the number of fostering households is decreasing, while the number of children coming into care is going up. We have estimated that 300 more fostering households are needed in Wales. In particular foster families who can support sibling groups are needed to ensure children can be cared for together and don't lose their connections to their family.

Sadly, foster carers are leaving the sector for various reasons centred around three key themes:

### **I. A Lack of sufficient support**

The Health and Social Care Act 2025 legislates for the removal of profit from children's social care, ensuring that the charitable sector is a key part of supporting foster carers, and so it must be recognised and funded alongside local authority services.

In our State of the Nations survey, we asked foster carers to rate different support for their fostering. In Wales, out of hours support was rated the least highly, with only 38% saying it was excellent or good, down from 47% in 2021. Additionally, 63% found support from other foster carers to be excellent or good, down from 67% in 2021.

### **II. Feeling their role is under-valued and not respected in the team around the child and their expertise not being heard**

Our 2024 State of the Nations' survey found that only 58% of foster carers in Wales felt always or usually treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by the children's social workers.

We believe one way of elevating the status of foster carers in the team around the child, as well as improving matching, placement sufficiency and the safeguarding of children is to introduce a national register for foster carers as exists for social workers. 74% of foster carers in Wales felt positively or neutral about the introduction of a national register.

### **III. An inadequacy of financial support to recognise their time, skills and expertise (both their allowances and fees)**

Foster carers receive an allowance to cover the costs of looking after a child and a fee for their time, skills and expertise. Our survey found that only 25% of foster carers in Wales felt the fostering allowance and any expenses they can claim, meet the full costs of looking after the children they foster, down from 53% in 2021. Only 13% of foster carers said they feel their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs. Three quarters of foster carers said the Government should introduce a national fee framework like there is for allowances.

Additionally, due to their self-employed status, foster carers do not receive a pension and most foster carers in Wales are aged between 55-64, putting their long-term financial security at risk.

## What your political party can do about it:

- **Fund services to deliver improved support for foster carers**, including therapeutic, peer, and out-of-hours support. Ensure all foster carers have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for the children they foster.
- **Fund innovative fostering programmes** that focus on **retention and peer to peer support** such as Fostering Wellbeing<sup>4</sup> and Mockingbird<sup>5</sup>.
- **Create a national recruitment and retention strategy** for foster care, and fund national foster care recruitment campaigns, encompassing the third sector, to align with The Health and Social Care Act 2025 to increase the pool of available foster carers.
- **Introduce a register for foster carers in Wales.**
- **Improve financial support** including harmonisations of allowances, a national recommended fee framework paid 52 weeks a year, a council tax exemption for foster carers and a national pension scheme for foster carers across Wales.
- **Introduce a additional statutory minimum of 5 days paid leave for foster carers** who work alongside their fostering role, as recommended by our Fostering Friendly<sup>6</sup> Employer policy.

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

For foster carers to be able to provide young people the best support they can, we need a well-funded children's social care system that truly values foster care and can support families at the point of need before their needs escalate.

## The problem

The children's social care system is in crisis. More children than ever are coming into care and at the same time early intervention funding has been cut over the last decade.

Children are coming into care later, and with more complex needs meaning they need more specialised support from foster carers. The social care system that should be able to support foster carers is at breaking point with social worker caseloads and turnover high.

On top of this, care experienced children and young people still experience stigma, discrimination and barriers to achieving their full potential from the wider systems in our society.

## What your political party can do about it:

- **Carry out wholesale reform** of children's social care backed by **significant investment in early intervention services**, such as investing in rolling out our preventative Step Up Step Down<sup>7</sup> service to all local authorities across Wales, following a pilot in Pembrokeshire and Powys.
  - **Introduce new measures to address social worker turnover and caseloads** for foster families such as the introduction of case load legislation, shift patterns to replace 9-5, a review of social worker qualification frameworks and newly qualified rotational systems.
  - **Make the Corporate Parenting Charter mandatory** which would ensure all government departments and relevant public bodies supporting care experienced children, (such as education, health and mental health services) adhere to and are held to account on their corporate parenting responsibilities.
  - **Make care experience a protected characteristic** which would help address the stigma and discrimination faced by care experienced young people throughout their lifetime.
  - **Reestablish the National Fostering Board in Welsh Government** to maintain essential oversight and progress in respect of improvements to fostering provision in Wales.
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1. Welsh Government (2025) [Children looked after at 31 March by local authority and placement type](#)
2. Covell. T, Ellis. S and Williams.N (2025) [State of the Nations' Foster Care Spotlight on Wales Report 2024](#). The Fostering Network
3. [Bil Pob Plenty](#) is a legislative proposal for an Act that would benefit every child in Wales.
4. [Fostering Wellbeing](#) aims to improve wellbeing outcomes for children and young people, and promotes an equality of status for everyone involved in the 'team around the child'.
5. [Mockingbird](#) is an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides.
6. [The Fostering Network's Fostering Friendly Employers scheme](#) offers businesses of any size a chance to make a difference for foster carers and the children they care for in their local communities while improving support for their own employees.
7. [Step Up Step Down \(SUSD\)](#) is a pioneering approach to supporting families on the edge of care, which reduces the number of children coming into care and improves outcomes for children and families.

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

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