The Fostering Network

Fostering... Brighter Futures

Supporting children and families

March 2024

"

We do really love
these children and
want to see them
heal from their past.
That's why we go
into fostering.

"

Foster carer

About this paper

This paper presents an overview of why better support for foster carers is essential, including within the context of key recommendations arising from the review of children's social care services in Northern Ireland.

Reflecting the voice of foster carers and services who participated in a consultation on the review's recommendations, the paper discusses some of the main challenges and offers suggestions for implementation and reform. It also highlights what The Fostering Network is doing via the 'Step Up Step Down' service to demonstrate good practice in early support for families with children on the edge of care.

In the UK:
- every 20 minutes another child comes into care needing a foster family
- every day there are about 70,000 children living with 56,000 foster families

In Northern Ireland:
- there are approximately 2,827 foster families
- 3,155 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2023
- this is 83 per cent of the 3,801 children in care looked after away from home.

Foster carers are recruited to meet the needs of children on behalf of a corporate parent (the local authority / Trust) within a regulated framework. Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs) also recruit foster carers to provide placements for these public bodies. The many different types of foster care include:

- **Short-term foster care -** This can often be for a few days, and the intention may be for children to return to their birth family.

- **Long-term foster care -** Children live with a specific foster family until reaching adulthood or leaving care.

- **Kinship foster care -** Where the carers (relative or friends) have a prior relationship with the children, and will only provide foster care to those children.

- **Short break fostering (respite) -** For foster carers and children in care.

The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. In Northern Ireland we have been influencing policy and practice for over 20 years.

We offer information, advice and support services to foster carers, kinship foster carers, families with children on the edge of care, and others working in the area of fostering.

The Fostering Network's views and recommendations are directly informed by our membership. This includes 2,827 fostering households, with more than 4,000 foster carers and kinship foster carers across all five Health and Social Care Trusts.

1. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/what-fostering
2. Department of Health (2023) Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland, 2022-2023. On 31 March 2023, there were 2,562 HSC Trust registered foster carers and 265 independent sector foster carers.

Introduction

The Fostering Network's vision is to empower, enrich and support the relationships at the heart of the fostering community.

> "
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> **Children come into care for many different reasons. Sometimes it is because of a parent's short-term illness or a temporary problem within the family that requires the children to have alternative care.**
>
> **Some have experienced domestic violence or witnessed drug and alcohol misuse, others have been abused or neglected. For many children and young people fostering is often their first positive experience of family life.**[3]
>
> "

Foster carers provide children and young people from all backgrounds with a safe and loving home when they cannot live with their birth families. They have unique skills, knowledge and expertise that can make a real difference to the daily lives of looked after children, many of whom have multiple and complex needs. Foster carers give children the care, stability and nurture they need to overcome an often difficult start in life, heal from past trauma, and develop meaningful relationships.

It is well established that the social, health and educational outcomes for children in care are lower than their peers. For example, they are more likely to have a statement of special educational needs, and experience poor mental health. Good foster care is a protective factor for the overall wellbeing of children in care. It promotes resilience and helps children to realise their aspirations and full potential, and to transform their lives.

We know from our research and consultation with foster carers that the main reason they foster is to make a difference to the lives of children in their care and see them thrive. Unfortunately, foster carers are not always valued as they should be, and there is scope for improvements in policy and practice to support them in their vital role. The Fostering Network believes that the recent review of children's social care services in Northern Ireland presents an opportunity to explore current challenges and bring about real change.

"We're loving them, helping them grow and develop, and to find their own personalities."

Foster carer

3.   https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/what-fostering.

J's Story

'J' and her husband have been Trust foster carers for over eight years, having considered all the options and deciding that fostering was 'the right path for us, we have space and time and want to give love to children.' They are long-term foster parents for two children placed in their care early in their fostering journey, and also adopted a third child they initially cared for on a respite basis.

The couple support the children to maintain relationships with their birth families where possible, 'We believe it's really important to stay very connected to where they have come from and their birth story, to not cover anything up and be with them along the way. We recognise there are so many layers for these children. They come with their own history, and you are to some extent bringing their family with yours, but that is a positive thing. We didn't go in with rose tinted glasses, we knew there would be a lot of complexities.'
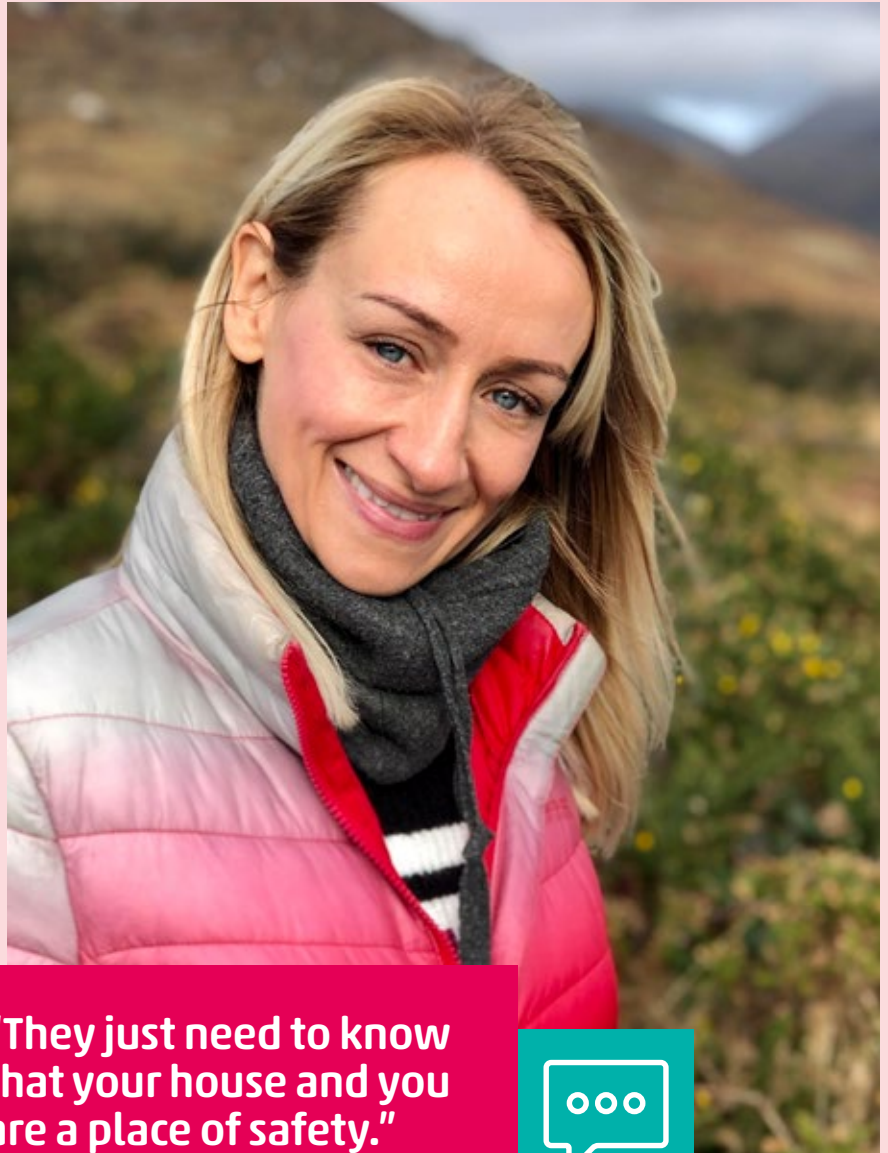
After two years, 'J' undertook an 18 week attachment course which she believes is essential

"They just need to know that your house and you are a place of safety."

to understand and effectively support children coming into care. 'There are experienced social workers who have knowledge of childhood trauma and attachment, but some do not. Foster carers need to be educated about trauma and attachment early on.'
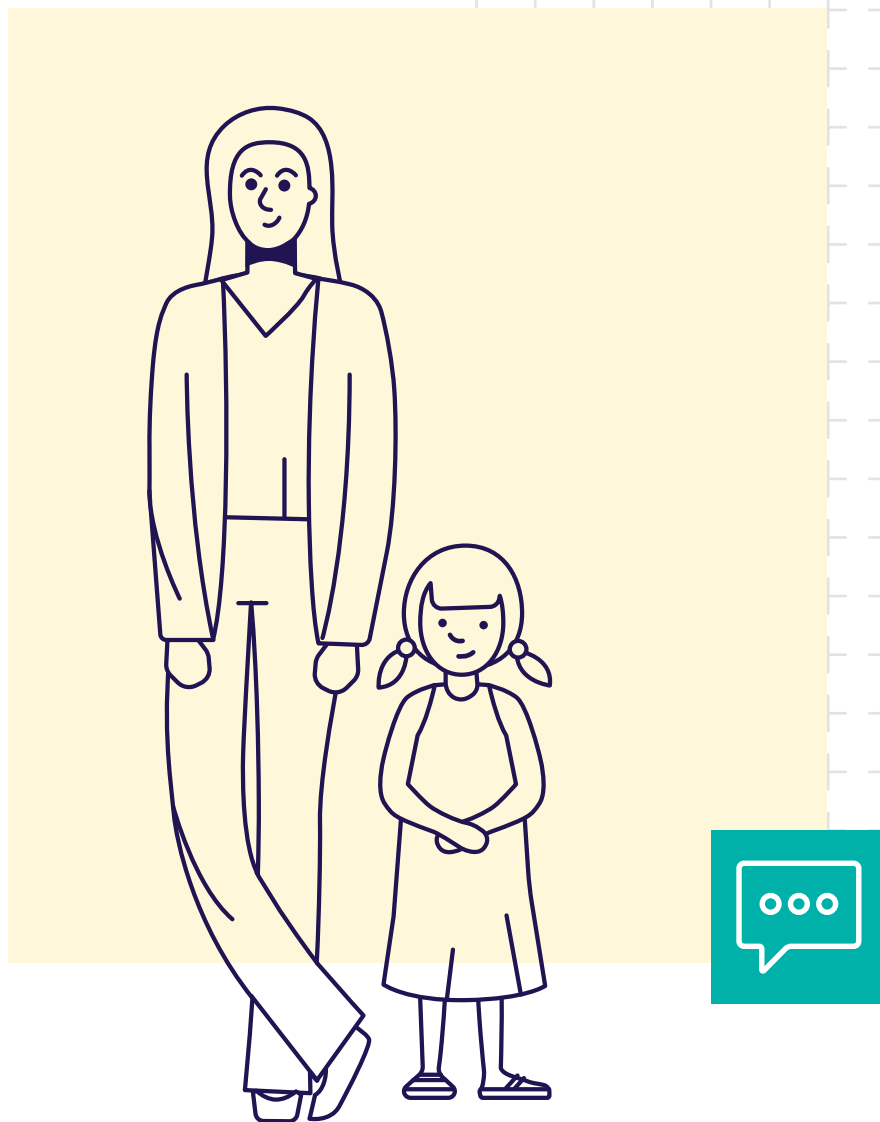
'J' enjoys her role and says that 'When other foster carers ask me for advice... I just say all you need to do is to make them feel safe. They just need to know that your house and you are a place of safety. Fostering is really rewarding; they are really lovely kids. When you see them overcome things and meet milestones it is so rewarding. It is hard work. It can be mentally exhausting. But I wouldn't change a thing. They are fab kids; they are so brave. You are the bravest people I have ever met I tell them.'
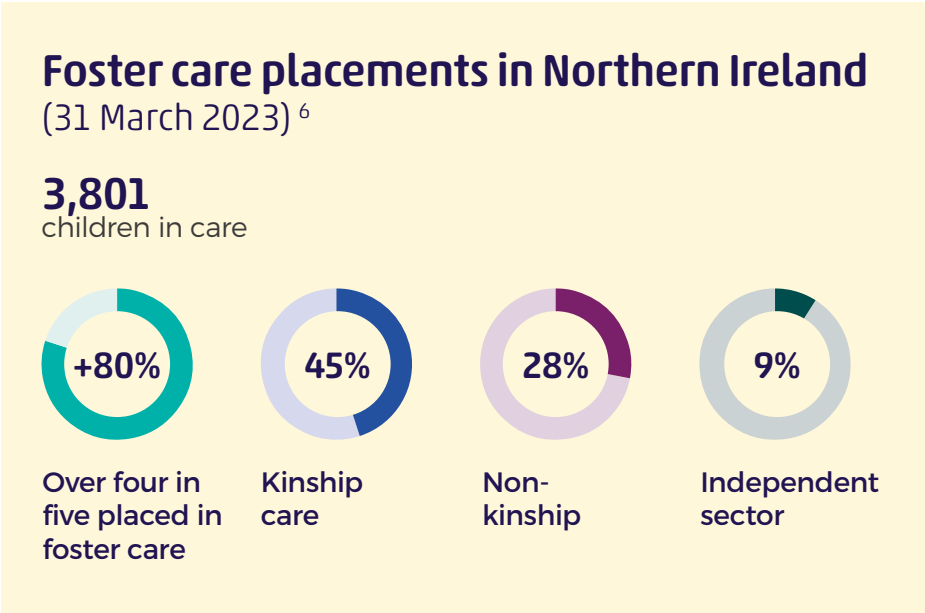
A's Story

her emotional needs better.' A long-term relationship with their current social worker has had a positive impact, 'The last one has been the longest since primary school, and it's been very good to have that consistency for me and for the child who trusts her. She knows her story; she doesn't have to keep telling her story over and over again.'

When 'A' was put in touch with The Fostering Network, she says they made a real difference by providing her with lots of information and support, 'I struggled with her educational needs. I got help with The Fostering Network with tutors which really helped her and gained her confidence, and pushed her and to challenge things in class.'

'A' says that the fostering journey has ups and downs, 'I think [kinship] is different. Others in the family want to chip in, and you have to balance some of those family dynamics which can be challenging sometimes.' However, it has overall been very rewarding, 'I wouldn't change it for the world. I'm a mum now and I hope that wherever life takes her that I've taught her something and she's going to be okay. Her happiness is a priority to see how she can thrive, how she is thriving. She's going to university, she knows where she's going in her life, and she wants to help others.'

'A' became kinship foster carer for a young relative when 'C' was a few years old, and her birth parents were no longer able to look after her, 'She's been with me for fourteen years. At first, I didn't know how long she was going to be there. I was relieved when she was coming to me full time as it would be stable, and she would have consistency in her life. I thought, let's get on with it and make sure the rest of her life is absolutely amazing.'

Support has been mixed in terms of social workers and training, 'I didn't get any training for the first five years, I think it would have been good. I would have known how to handle things better, meet

Policy context

In Northern Ireland, the 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services'[4] highlighted that the rate of children in care here had increased more rapidly in the previous ten years, compared to elsewhere in the UK. It also pointed out that Northern Ireland has higher rates of referrals, children in need, and children with child protection plans.

Foster care placements in Northern Ireland
(31 March 2023) [6]

3,801
children in care

+80%	45%	28%	9%
Over four in five placed in foster care	Kinship care	Non-kinship	Independent sector

Across the UK, current pressures within the care system and a lack of available foster carers means some children will experience multiple moves, impacting on their attachments and development. A recent national survey providing insights into fostering across the UK highlighted the recruitment and retention crisis in foster care, stating that:
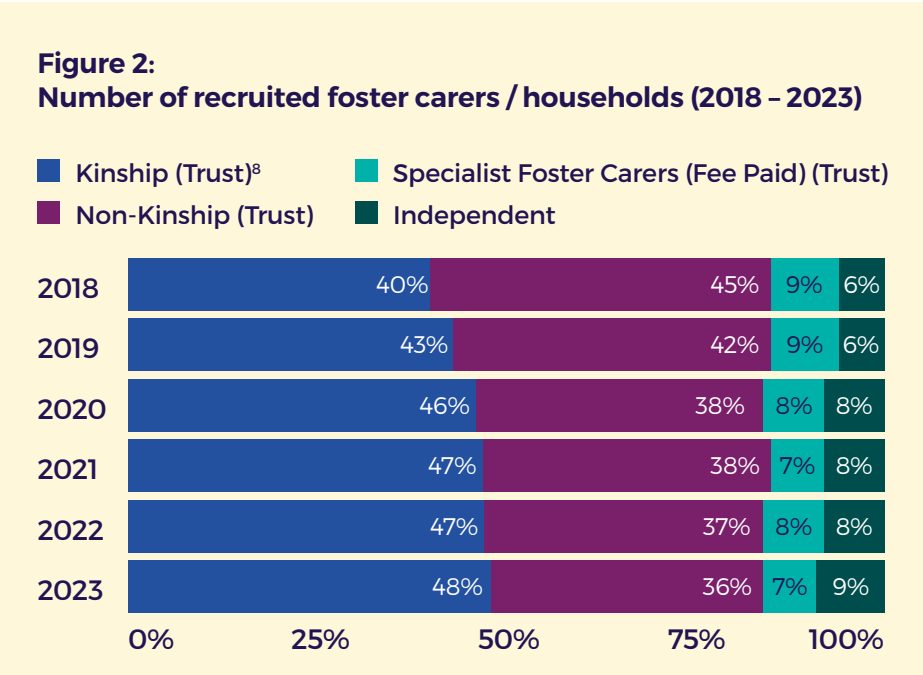
'Recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of committed, competent foster carers, with the skills, capacity, motivation, resilience and support to provide children with what they need to thrive remains a continual and growing challenge for local authorities, trusts and independent fostering services.' [5]

Figure 1: Placement of children in care by Health and Social Care Trust, 31 March 2023

Placement	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Northern Ireland
Residential	7%	4%	8%	5%	7%	6%
Non-kinship	21%	34%	22%	44%	25%	28%
Kinship	49%	46%	42%	34%	53%	45%
Independent (IFPs)	14%	7%	16%	<1%	4%	9%
Placed with parents	7%	5%	8%	10%	6%	7%
Other[7]	1%	3%	5%	6%	5%	4%

4. Professor Ray Jones (2023) The Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services. Children's Social Care Services Northern Ireland. An Independent Review.
5. The Fostering Network (2021, p.2) State of the Nation's Foster Care. (Survey conducted every three years).
6. All statistics are from DOH, 2023. Ibid, n.2.
7. Includes children placed for adoption.

Figure 2:
Number of recruited foster carers / households (2018 – 2023)

■ Kinship (Trust)[8]   ■ Specialist Foster Carers (Fee Paid) (Trust)
■ Non-Kinship (Trust)   ■ Independent

Year	Kinship (Trust)	Non-Kinship (Trust)	Specialist Foster Carers (Fee Paid) (Trust)	Independent
2018	40%	45%	9%	6%
2019	43%	42%	9%	6%
2020	46%	38%	8%	8%
2021	47%	38%	7%	8%
2022	47%	37%	8%	8%
2023	48%	36%	7%	9%

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

- The growing number of children in care (5 per cent more than the previous year; and 35 per cent in the last ten years) has not been matched by requisite investment in foster care.

- A reduction in non-kinship care has coincided with an increase of both kinship and independent sector foster care. Kinship foster care placements increased from 25 per cent to 45 per cent between 2010 and 2023.

- Challenges in the recruitment and retention of foster carers have contributed to an increasing reliance on kinship care, which is not a suitable option for every child. Only one Health and Social Care Trust (Southern) has more children in non-kinship than kinship placements.

- The number of foster carers who deregistered increased by two-thirds (66 per cent) during 2022/23 compared to the previous year.

- While the majority of children in all age groups are in foster care, only 61 per cent of those aged 16 and over are in a foster care placement.

- The Fostering Network estimated that a further 260 foster carers were needed for children currently in care and those who would become looked after in 2022/23.[9]

All these challenges are underpinned by high vacancy rates and turnover of social workers, leading to a lack of support for vulnerable children and families. They also coincide with an increase in the number of asylum-seeking children

requiring skilled and experienced foster carers. The ongoing cost of living crisis and associated poverty may also lead to more children entering the care system. Research shows that changes in the economic conditions of family life alone, without any other factors, impacts on rates of abuse and neglect.[10]

With a greater focus on the need for early intervention and prevention, the **Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services** offers a real opportunity to achieve transformational change in the restructure and reform of children's social care services. It acknowledged the challenges facing the care system, including within fostering provision. While there were a number of relevant cross-cutting recommendations, the Review made three that were specific to foster care:

1. Previous reviews of foster care policies and services should be updated and acted upon now, and not allowed to drift (Recommendation 25).

2. Foster carers should be recognised and positioned as valued members of the children's social care workforce (Recommendation 26).

3. The experience and expertise of foster carers should be harnessed through, for example, the region-wide introduction of the Mockingbird model (Recommendation 27).

8. Includes kinship placements undergoing assessment for approval.
9. The Fostering Network (2022) Briefing for the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in Northern Ireland.
10. Bywaters, P; Skinner, G (2022) The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence - University of Huddersfield. Nuffield Foundation.

Reflections

We believe it is essential to hear the voice of foster carers who will be impacted by the direction of travel set out in the review of children's social care services.

The Fostering Network therefore facilitated engagement with foster carers to inform the initial stages of the review. We also developed a consultation project on behalf of our members and staff team to inform their response to the review's recommendations. In doing so, we engaged with around 100 participants through focus groups, interviews and an online engagement session with Professor Ray Jones. The full response is available on our website,[11] while the following reflections highlight the key issues and ideas raised in the consultation where we believe priority focus should now be given.

"

.... we need foster caring policies, so they should be updated to the here and now for us to get the most relevant support that we need to do what we do effectively.

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Foster carer
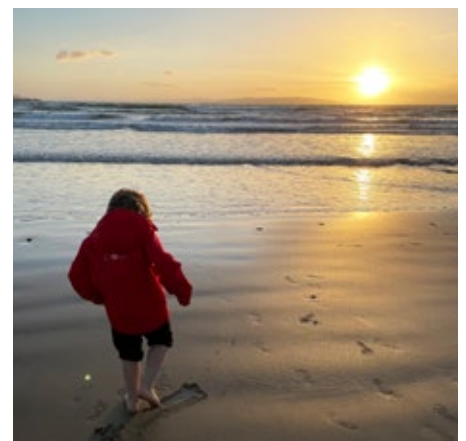
Policy implementation

Previous reviews have advocated key reforms within fostering provision. Despite this, legislative and policy change has been slow, hampered by the absence of a functioning Northern Ireland executive and assembly. Consultees therefore welcomed the recommendation that these review findings must now be acted upon, and suggested it be progressed as an urgent priority in order to improve how children's social care services are delivered.

In addition to prolonged periods without an executive, consultees identified other **key factors** why reviews were never implemented, that need consideration moving forward:

- lack of timebound implementation plans
- lack of associated budget
- lack of accountability
- five trusts, working in silos, with self-interests and five different processes
- work not followed through when senior policy leads move post.

Review of Statutory Fostering Services

The Review of Statutory Fostering Services by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA, 2014) made several recommendations that consultees would now like to see progressed. These relate to support for relationships, social work support, recruitment and retention, foster care allowances, delegated authority, placement stability, increasing levels of complex needs, the role of IFPs, kinship care and the need for fostering regulations and standards.

"You're sitting there with the Adoption and Children Act passed. There are no resources to implement it...."

Service

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11. Fostering Network NI (2023) Membership Response. Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. 'Consultation on the Recommendations.' https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/Independent-Review-CSC-NI

Consistent service provision

Consultees highlighted inconsistencies in children's social care systems and processes across Trust areas. These typically included:

- varying numbers of social workers and levels of social work supervision

- children being fostered within the same family, who each have markedly different levels of contact with a social worker

- social workers with very different levels of information, knowledge and skills

- inequity in access to support services / early intervention

- different safeguarding practices across Trusts

- different recording systems across Trusts.

> "
> There's no learning between the five Trusts. Have you tried this, did it work, did it not work, what would you do differently? I mean all those opportunities are being missed.
> "
>
> **Service**

> "Because we operate across five different Trusts, they all have different ways of doing things. So, there's huge disparity in terms of how looked after children are treated, how foster carers are treated."
>
> **Foster carer**

What needs to happen?

Consultees told us that **new ways of working** are essential to resolve significant issues with poor communication between professionals and different agencies involved in the care of a child. They saw the review of children's social care services as a real opportunity to create a **partnership approach** to support its implementation.

Key areas of discussion included:

Centralised approach:
The potential of a single agency to promote more consistent practice was commonly identified as being the main benefit of the review's proposal to create a new regional **Children and Families Arms-Length Body (ALB)** to replace the current model of service delivery across five separate Health and Social Care Trusts. A central point of contact with overall authority and leadership was also seen as being a key benefit, as it is currently unclear who is accountable for making things happen. Unfortunately, many consultees were sceptical that government departments / agencies had the expertise and vision to deliver the model as envisaged by Professor Jones.

The success of a new regional model is very dependent on strong leadership, appropriate levels of resource, a clear implementation framework in which to co-ordinate the necessary transformation, a commitment to changing culture and practice, a focus on shared learning, and meaningful co-production and collaboration with all relevant sectors, children, young people and families.

"
It is shocking that there is still no regulatory basis for inspection of fostering services in Northern Ireland. This leads to inconsistent levels of support across the service, a lack of accountability to social care teams and the children they look after, especially regarding statutory obligations, and very little opportunity for individuals to challenge poor practice and decision-making.

It is a worry that, depending on whether a carer is registered with the Trust or with an IFP, that they work from a different standards of care baseline and different regulations, with many IFPs in Northern Ireland participating in a UK-wide umbrella organisation and working from different legislation.
"

Service

Implementation of fostering regulations and standards:
Consultees were particularly concerned about the continued absence of fostering regulations and standards, identifying them as important for the wellbeing and safeguarding of children and young people, and in supporting foster carers. They believe their introduction is the key turning point to ensuring a more consistent approach in policies, services and support, as envisaged by the new ALB.

Partnership with the independent fostering sector:
There is a lack of formal engagement from the statutory sector with independent fostering agencies, who seem to be viewed as 'providers rather than partners.' This was seen as a missed opportunity, considering the IFPs operate services which adhere to English regulations, and would therefore have meaningful contributions and learning to share in this area, and as part of a wider fostering team. The IFPs also have considerable regional oversight, with most providing foster placements and receiving referrals from across the five Trusts.

Valuing foster carers

The Fostering Network's State of the Nation's Foster Care survey (2021) showed that both foster carers and fostering services agreed that the one key change that would lead to children's better experience of foster care was improving the status of foster carers in the team around the child. It also highlighted the close link between improving status and the sufficient recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Being undervalued in their roles as 'just a foster carer' was one of the most frequent issues raised by foster and kinship carers in the consultation. They therefore welcomed the review's call to action that foster carers 'should be seen as colleagues and not simply as service users'; and the associated recommendation that they should be recognised and positioned as valued members of the children's social care workforce.

There was some lack of clarity and different interpretations about what being part of the 'workforce' means in this context, and how the recommendation would be translated in practice. Consultees hoped its inclusion as a guiding principle would ensure actual implementation of the recommendation, as opposed to it remaining aspirational in nature.

There was strong consensus that meaningful reform would never be achieved if implementation of this recommendation did not lead to a sea-change in culture, mindset and practice across service provision for looked after children and families. Consultees highlighted challenges, and made suggestions for reform, in three key areas:

1 **Not being heard**
Some foster and kinship carers reported not feeling listened to by Trusts or the courts in care planning, particularly around a child's contact time with the family, and the impact that can have on them. Many consultees described being 'excluded' from meetings as insulting, demeaning, and disempowering, despite the fact that they are providing full-time care.

> **Foster carers are absolutely vital in the team around the child they care for, yet they are often the last to know information, and are often not invited to core group, professional and other meetings related to the child.**
>
> **Service**

Foster carers must be part of key meetings and decision-making

- Routinely included alongside other professionals in all team meetings involving important decision-making about the child.

- Given suitable notice to attend Looked After Child Reviews and core meetings, which should be rescheduled if they are unavailable.

- Provided with a HSCT email address, and included in all 'team' correspondence.

- Included as part of a social worker's appraisal process.

- Consulted on development of Trust and agency policies and protocols.

2 A lack of understanding and awareness amongst professionals

Many consultees felt that a lack of understanding about their role contributed to foster carers sometimes being treated with a lack of respect by professionals. They are not always mindful that foster carers are supporting children with unresolved trauma and attachment issues providing full-time care.

"

We probably all have too many experiences of social workers who are actually the only way I could describe is rude and disrespectful to foster carers. So, you know it totally devalues their role and at a time when we are all struggling for foster carers.

"

Service

Social workers and other professionals involved in the lives of looked after children should have greater awareness about the complexities of the foster carer role

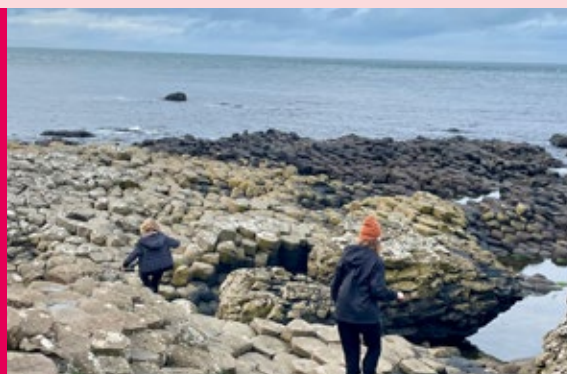**Improved awareness and training**

- Embedded sessions on foster care in the social work curriculum.

- Continuing Professional Development module for social workers.

- Role and value of foster / kinship care; working in partnership.

- ACEs, trauma-informed practice, and attachment disorders.

- Involving birth parents/ benefits of relationships with foster carers.

- Awareness-raising sessions with judges, including opportunities for foster carers to learn about decision-making in the courts.

Introduce a diverse skills-mix in teams around the child

- To include social workers, foster/ kinship carers, parents, teachers and health professionals, and also, depending on a child's particular needs, to have potential access to youth workers, counsellors, mentors; and specialists in trauma, attachment, play therapy, art therapy, and narrative work.

"I think at the end of the day every child that's went into foster care has some kind of trauma .... You take children away from their parents, you put them into foster care and then you back away and let the foster carer figure it all out."

Kinship foster carer

3   **A lack of information and support**
Consultees reported varying levels of contact with social workers, with many saying they did not get enough support via regular meetings. Constant changes in social worker, and having to re-tell their 'story', also left some feeling unsupported. A high turnover of staff means that some social workers arrive with little or no understanding of a child's background or needs.

"

I know the Trusts are struggling, there's lots of social workers off sick. There're gaps everywhere. Some of them are running at like fifty per cent, even lower than that, but still if there's people needing support, they need support.

"

Foster Carer

"

I understand why there's no foster carers out there, because foster carers like me aren't promoting it to anybody because of the stress we are put under.

"

Foster Carer

Foster and kinship carers should receive appropriate levels of ongoing support, and all the information they need to fulfil their role

New information protocols and guidance

- Create an accessible 'Handbook' for foster carers and social workers - for information, and as a tool for use at each meeting.
- Create a 'Roadmap' of what 'kicks in' at 'certain ages and stages' with resource links.
- Every new foster and kinship carer to be given The Fostering Network contact details.

Improved financial support

- Foster carers should be appropriately remunerated to meet the needs of children, with equity of fees and allowances in Northern Ireland.

Support, services and training

- Regular, pre-scheduled and clearly planned-out meetings with a consistent social worker, who has the relevant knowledge, skills and experience.
- Network of experienced foster carers supporting new people.
- A life story co-ordinator in each Trust.
- Therapeutic plans in each child's care plan (to support mental health and unresolved trauma).
- Therapeutic interventions, accessible to fostering families.
- Pathway planning for young people age 15 and over.
- Introduction of a register of approved Foster Carers, under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC).
- More specialist training (e.g., trauma and attachment) for foster carers.
- Trained foster carers as intermediaries between the foster carer and link/ social worker.

Supporting children and families

Consultation on the Mockingbird model (Recommendation 27), led to wider discussions about other programmes, early intervention, family support more generally (Recommendation 22), and advocacy for parents engaged with social care services (Recommendation 36). Consultees discussed this in the context of increasing numbers of children needing support, and the associated impacts of poverty (Recommendation 49).

They frequently expressed concerns about a system that was more 'reactionary' in nature, rather than one which responded more effectively in the local community with practical help and early support for parents struggling with poverty, parenting skills, substance misuse, mental-ill health, and domestic abuse. Consultees highlighted missed opportunities as a result, where some children could have avoided care if their families had been supported earlier.

Given the Review's welcome emphasis on early intervention and family support, most consultees were therefore disappointed at the lack of focus on better utilising this approach to tackle the rising, unsustainable numbers of children in care. Intervening early is essential to support children and young people who are at particular risk of poor outcomes, such as those with a care background. It also has the potential to reduce costs to wider society before issues become embedded and more costly to address through public services.

While most consultees would welcome the Mockingbird Family Programme in Northern Ireland, there was strong consensus that not enough thought had been given in the Review to creating an overall framework of support for foster carers, and children on the edge of care.

More substantive action was needed in the form of a specific recommendation for increased programmes of family support for children on the edge of care.

Mockingbird Family Programme

The Mockingbird Family Programme is delivered by The Fostering Network in partnership with more than 100 fostering services across the UK (except Northern Ireland).

In the model, a network of satellite fostering families are (peer) supported by a more experienced foster carer. The majority of consultees who were already aware of Mockingbird, considered it to be an excellent model of practice. In group discussions about its potential, most foster and kinship carers thought there was currently a gap for embedded support of this kind, and that Mockingbird would be very beneficial for them in their role.

Step Up Step Down

Many consultees suggested that the 'Step Up Step Down' (SUSD) programme, highlighted in the Review as a model of good practice and currently operating in one Trust area (South Eastern), should be more widely available to empower families with children on the edge of care to stay together. Following its successful pilot in the South Eastern Trust, SUSD is now being rolled out in Wales.

Children with a wide range of complex needs are referred to SUSD when they are at risk of being moved into kinship foster care, foster care or residential care. Most children and parents participating in the programme have experienced multiple childhood adversities, often underpinned by inter/intra-generational trauma.

With support from The Fostering Network, the foster carer role is expanded in SUSD to work intensively alongside birth families and build their skills, capacity and networks. A highly trained and experienced family support foster carer (FSFC) can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children.

Programme outcome data and an independent service evaluation[12] found that SUSD is a positive supportive experience for parents and children, and a high proportion of children are considered safe to stay at home. Independent economic research also found the programme to be a cost effective intervention.

- Of the 205 children supported by SUSD between 2016-2023, the majority (95 per cent) remained at home, and out of care.[13]

- It has been estimated that the cost of preventing one child from entering residential care, or supporting one child to return home from residential care (around £250,000) would fund SUSD to support 15-20 families per year. [14]

> **I find that my voice now is getting heard for the first time... If something happens this week, next week, then I know that I have somebody I can turn to like family. And that's what they feel like to me, they're like family, an extended family...**
> Parent

Key features

- ✔ foster carers provide parenting support and respite

- ✔ tailored to support a wide range of needs and circumstances

- ✔ works with birth parents, adoptive parents, kinship carers

- ✔ solution focused - practical strategies and approaches

- ✔ nurturing, empathetic and non-judgemental environment

- ✔ medium to long-term intervention with aftercare support

- ✔ sign-posting and support to access additional services

- ✔ supervision for foster carers from Trust social workers

- ✔ reduces the numbers of children coming into care

- ✔ cost-effective – every £1 invested saves government £1.50[15].

12. Ruth Flood Associates (2020) Evaluation of the Pilot Step Up Step Down Programme.
13. The Fostering Network / SEHSCT (2023) Step Up Step Down: Key outcomes 2016-2023.
14. O'Reilly, Maureen (Independent Economist) (2020) Briefing Paper – Potential Cost Savings to Government through Participation in the Pilot Step Up Step Down Programme.
15. Ibid, n.11.

Support for children

Short breaks
Family respite enabling children to engage in play or learning activities with the foster carer for under 24 hours. Longer respite breaks can also be offered in times of crisis.

Nurture group
A solution focused trauma-informed programme for children who have experienced adversity, to support their learning, regulation and relational skills.

Community inclusion
Children are resourced to participate in social activities of interest in their local community. This includes sport/leisure, youth clubs, and holiday schemes when school is closed.

Support for parents

Mentoring
Home-based support with budgeting, producing healthy meals, establishing routines at key family times; and developing joint learning and play activities between parents and children, positive family relationships and communication.

Training
Evidence-informed parenting programmes such as 'Embrace' and 'Bond'; and tailored awareness courses which cover topics such as ADHD.

Community support
Connected with support and activities in the local community, such as sport/ leisure/art; health agencies; Sure Start; further education and training; and therapeutic services.

Step Up Step Down

Whole family support

While not all children in a family may be referred to SUSD, in recognition that a whole family approach can positively affect change, the service often supports everyone in the family to have meals together, play games, and go on day trips. They may also have a family break via a summer residential which includes fun activities and resilience sessions.

"
I think, you know at the core of 'Step Up Step Down' for me is relationships and communication. And I model that with the families that I visit ... I'm not there to fix them in any way. I'm there to help them to find solutions for themselves.
"

Family support foster carer

N's Story

The SUSD programme supported 'N' and her children through a really challenging time when social services were involved in the family's life. 'N' was struggling due to past trauma and a lack of knowledge about effective parenting, saying 'You don't know what you don't know. There was so much that I didn't know.'

She soon felt at ease with the SUSD service and 'D' her Family Support Foster Carer. 'N' particularly welcomed their encouraging and non-judgemental approach, 'They put their arm around you…. Step Up Step Down saw that I was trying my best and was trying to be the best mother that I could be. 'D' was a foster carer but a mother first and foremost. She wasn't judging, she knew about your bad days, she wasn't looking down on you.'

Short breaks were really beneficial for some of the children to spend individual time with 'D' going on day trips and having fun, 'to feel special and to breathe and be a child, do silly things, have those special moments.'

Training courses also helped 'N' understand the importance of attachment, to learn about child development, and implement positive parenting approaches to manage complex behaviour. This included the 'Bond' programme which helped her build more nurturing and secure relationships with the children. '[The programmes] taught you how to do things completely differently, how to discipline a child, to pull a child closer. It really worked. I saw my behaviour and how my behaviour was filtering on to my kids. My child was talking to me negatively, and I realised that she was replicating me.'

'N' says that when her time on SUSD was ending, she initially 'panicked that my safety net was being taken away', but now appreciates that advice is always there if needed. Since taking part in the programme 'N' is more confident with her parenting, and family life with the children has been completely transformed, 'We have a great relationship. The house is so calm now, it is such a peaceful house, whereas before I lived on my nerves.'

Recommendations

1 A clear and co-ordinated implementation framework to ensure the findings and recommendations from the Review are translated into time-bound action plans which lead to meaningful transformation in the delivery of children's social care services, including foster care provision.

2 A Review implementation framework should include partnership opportunities for all sectors, children, young people, foster carers and others with lived experience, to collaborate and have their voice heard. For example, a representative forum or panel of foster carers with a variety of skills and experiences, or an expansion of the IFP Forum.

3 The introduction of the fostering regulations, currently awaiting scrutiny and Executive approval, and the subsequent development of standards, should be progressed and resourced as a priority action. This is essential to maximise the potential for real reform through consistency in policy, services and support.

4 The role of the Independent Fostering Providers should be recognised through an established partnership process. This would include regular meetings at a regional level between the Managers/Heads of Service of both independent and statutory fostering agencies. This could be facilitated by The Fosterning Network.

5 Plans to ensure foster carers are a valued part of the children's social care workforce should include the development of a workforce recruitment and retention strategy, a skills-based learning and development framework, improved financial support through equity of fees and allowances in Northern Ireland, and the introduction of a register for foster carers.

6 Foster carers should also be recognised as valued members of the team around the child through routine inclusion in core meetings and key decision-making; and by ensuring there is a greater emphasis on fostering, and the complexities of the foster carer role, in social work and professional training.

7 A wider range of programmes (Review Recommendation 27) should be considered for introduction on a region-wide basis as part of a framework of evidence-informed interventions to support (i) foster/kinship carers in their role, and (ii) families with children on the edge of care. This should include an expanded 'Step Up Step Down' programme, which the Review highlighted as a model of good practice with positive outcomes in terms of keeping children on the edge of care safely at home with their family.

8 The further development and deployment of multi-agency professional and multi-agency frontline teams and services to assist children and families (Review Recommendation 16), and plans to further develop a skills mix within children and families frontline services (Review Recommendation 17), should include a specific focus on early intervention and prevention, and best practice in supporting families with children on the edge of care.

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in foster care.

We support foster carers to help transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all children and young people in foster care experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

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