

# Summary: Consultation with foster carers

Draft Minimum Standards  
for Fostering Services in  
Northern Ireland

**“ Foster care in Northern Ireland is good, but with some small, meaningful changes it could be outstanding. Perfection may not be realistic, but progress is. I genuinely believe that with improved communication and more streamlined processes, more families would be willing to step into the role of fostering. ”** (Foster carer, Survey)

## Introduction

The government intends to introduce new Minimum Standards for Fostering Services in Northern Ireland, which will apply to all fostering service providers, in both the statutory and independent sectors. Together with The Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations (NI) 2025, when made, they will form the basis of the new assessment framework for the conduct of fostering services. The Standards have been developed to align with the requirements of the new 2025 regulations and are the minimum provisions below which no provider is expected to deliver.

**The Fostering Network** (TFN) is the UK's leading fostering charity. In Northern Ireland 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. TFN's views are directly informed by our membership. This includes 4000 foster carers and kinship foster carers in NI across all Health and Social Care Trusts, and Independent Fostering Providers.

## About the consultation

This paper summarises the findings of an independent consultation with foster carers to hear their views on the draft Minimum Standards, issued by the Department of Health for public consultation in June 2025.<sup>1</sup> Given their size and scope, our consultation was limited to specific areas of the Standards, based on issues frequently raised by members of the Fostering Network.

[1] The independent consultation was conducted by Mary Anne Webb. The full report is available on The Fostering Network's website.

## We engaged with 175 consultation participants

**166**

Foster carers  
Online survey

**81%** Non-kinship foster carers

**19%** Kinship foster carers

**74%** Health and Social Care Trust (Trust)

**26%** Independent Fostering Provider (IFP)

**9** people

**2** x Focus groups

**6** Foster Carers

**3** TFN Staff

## Views about the Standards / proposed framework

Foster carers indicated that the Department should proceed with the introduction of Minimum Standards for Fostering Services, and broadly agreed with the proposed Standards and framework for delivery.

However, concern was expressed that the Standards will remain aspirational without the consistent approach, cultural shift and increased investment needed for effective implementation. Foster carers welcomed the therapeutic framework to deliver trauma informed practice, but were sceptical that resources will be in place to bring it to life.

### Barriers to implementation

- Slow pace of change
- Lack of leadership and accountability
- Lack of investment
- Silo-working: different processes across services
- Lack of shared budgets
- Resistance to change: embedded culture / attitudes

**Very excited to see the requirement of Standards coming to fostering. I do hope this means fostering services will get a move on with reform, involve and include us as foster carers and improve how we are treated by social workers.**

(Foster carer, Survey)

**Some of this is about better practice, better training, better advice, better information, but none of that is cost neutral, there are some things that will require investment.**

(Staff, Focus Group)

**It's good to set goals and targets to aim towards and aspire to but without the correct funding across the board whether for social workers, extra staff and extra foster carers it is going to be really difficult to achieve.**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

## Gaps in standards

### Matching process:

While Standard 2.1b references children being 'carefully matched' to a foster placement taking account of carers 'ability' to meet their needs, foster carers expressed disappointment that matching was not given more emphasis overall. For example, they thought an association with good quality matching should be specifically included within Standard 1.3c related to information-sharing.

**“ The new fostering Standards say next to nothing about matching. We have been asked to take children and young people who are clearly not a match for our family. ”**

(Foster carer, Survey)

**“ Social workers are no longer bothering to match foster carers to children purely because they don't have enough foster carers.... ”**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

### Young people post-18:

Pathways planning for post-18 transitions is too often last minute which leads to stress and uncertainty for young people and foster carers about the foster placement being maintained. Given these challenges, it was disappointing that specific actions weren't included for this group within Standard 1.1 which requires appropriate arrangements be in place to facilitate collaborative assessment, planning and delivery of support for children in foster placements.

### Access to specialist interventions:

Foster carers were concerned that Standard 11 is 'vague' in relation to children receiving the high-quality specialist care they need in a timely manner (11.2). They suggested that without meaningful targets, this Standard cannot be effectively delivered against. Reference was made to a 'broken system' amid long waiting lists for key children's health / mental health and education services, a lack of joined up working across the different interventions a child needs, and under- funding. Additional investment in mental health and wellbeing support was regarded as fundamental to effectively delivering a trauma-informed approach.

**“ How is this going to work? Because I have a wee one waiting two years on a cognitive assessment. ”**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

**“ The children need social services to be more involved in ensuring that they get the best possible treatment within a reasonable timeframe. ”**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

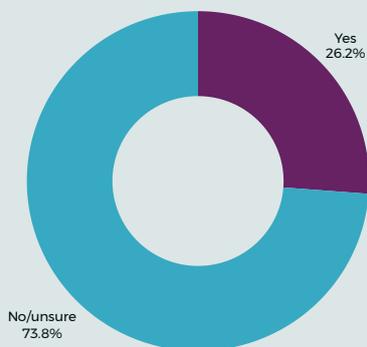
## Priority issues (Survey results)

The foster carer survey highlighted gaps in current practice, indicating that considerable work is required to ensure full implementation of the Standards. For example:

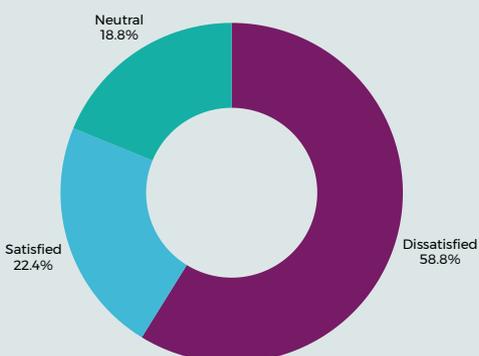
### Standard 3: Foster parents, staff and other caregivers have the right skills and support to care for children

- Over half (51.9%) disagreed that foster carers are treated fairly, without prejudice, openly and with respect at all times, including during recruitment, assessment, and review processes, while only 37.9% agreed. (3.2b)
- Views were evenly split, with 49.4% disagreeing and 50.6% agreeing that foster carers have a clear understanding about the rationale for all checks into their personal lives; and that these are explained respectfully and sensitively.
- Only one in three (32.5%) agreed that there were effective policies, procedures and operational arrangements in place for identifying prospective foster carers known to the child. Most seemed unsure (39.8% neutral) or thought these measures were lacking (27.7%). (3.2d)

Foster carers who have a personal development plan



Access to breaks from foster caring



- Only 1 in 4 foster carers (26.2%) had a Personal Development Plan (PDP), of which almost two thirds were in IFPs (65.1%), compared to Trusts (34.9%). (3.3g)
- Slightly more were dissatisfied (46%) than satisfied (43%) with the amount of training and development they received; with foster carers in Trusts more than twice as likely to be dissatisfied than those in IFPs.
- Only 1 in 5 foster carers were satisfied with access to breaks. 58.8% expressed dissatisfaction, compared to 22.4% who were satisfied. (3.4f)
- The majority (80.2%) would avail of breaks from fostering if more frequent opportunities were available, including planned breaks specifically tailored to children's needs.

**“ The short break provision is not really going to work if they don't have the recruitment and retention of foster carers because there's nowhere for children to go for a short break. ”**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

- Over half (53%) disagreed that foster carers receive enough information and support to make routine day-to-day decisions without seeking approval, or that satisfactory timely approval processes are in place. Only one in four (25%) agreed. (3.5b)

### Delegated authority

While they broadly welcomed Standard 3.5b, many foster carers thought it was light on detail and did not go far enough in ensuring they have freedom to make daily decisions. They suggested that delegated authority by default is the best way forward unless there is a clear reason not to, rather than needing constant approval.

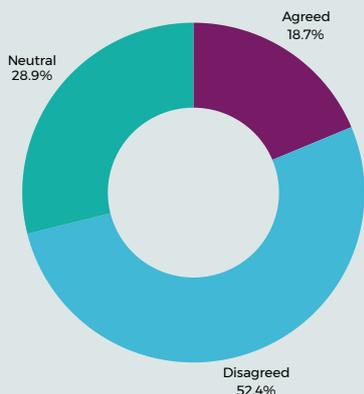
- More disagreed (43%) than agreed (38%) that the fostering service ensures the foster carer clearly understands the circumstances when approval is required.

**“ I have to basically beg if I could have a phone call with the dentist, with the paediatrician, just so I can get my points across as well because he lives with me full-time but yet I don't have delegated authority for any of that. ”**

(Foster carer, Focus group)

## Standard 6: Children and their foster parents and carers are meaningfully involved

Suitable arrangements are in place to support resolution of complaints



- Over half (52.4%) disagreed that the fostering service has in place suitable arrangements to support the resolution of complaints, while only 18.7% agreed. (6.4c)
- An independent advocate was identified as being most helpful to support foster carers in the resolution of complaints, followed by a key contact in the fostering service.

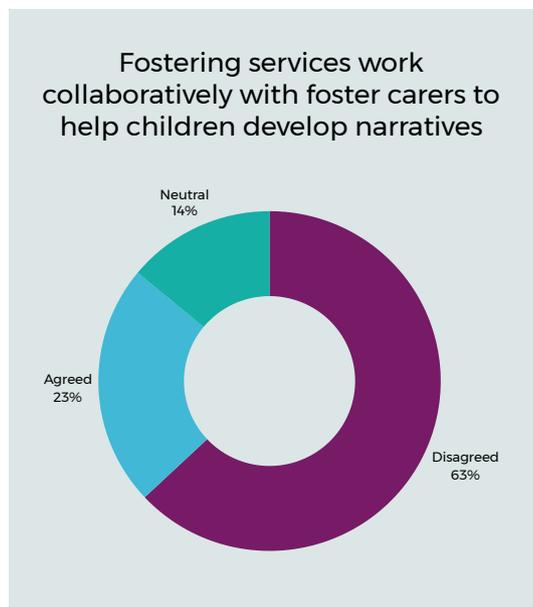
**“ Complaints need to be effective and result in change, not result in carers being labelled as difficult and then ignored. ”**

(Foster carer, Survey)



## Standard 7: The intrinsic worth of each child in foster care is valued and promoted

- Views were evenly split: 40.6% of foster carers agreed and 40.6% disagreed that they receive training or guidance on the use of language, word choice, and descriptive labels to promote inclusion. (7.1c)



- While 44.5% had a strong understanding of when it is necessary and legal to share a child's personal information, 32.3% indicated only moderate understanding, and nearly one in four (23.2%) reported little to no awareness. (7.2d)
- The majority (63%) disagreed that their fostering service works collaboratively with foster carers to help children develop narratives about their family history and care background; fewer than one in four (23%) agreed. (7.3f)
- More than half (58.4%) indicated potential support needs in developing narratives, while 41.6% reported no need for support in this area.

## Standard 8: The unique experiences of each child in foster care are recognised and responded to with tailored support that acknowledges and addresses adversity and trauma

- 44.6% of foster carers had little or no awareness about how to access professional support on providing trauma informed care to children. In contrast, 27.1% reported high awareness, and 28.3% moderate awareness. (8.3c)
- More than half (52.1%) the foster carers reported needing or possibly needing professional support in providing trauma-informed care.

## Standard 9: Children benefit from relationships with foster parents, birth families and people important to them

- Almost half (49.1%) had little or no awareness about the practical support available for them to assist with family time between a child and those important to them. In contrast, 23% reported high awareness, and 27.9% moderate awareness. (9.2d)
- Over half (51.5%) expressed a need for further information about available support to assist a child with family time, or were uncertain. 48.5% reported no such need.



## Fees and allowances (Standard 3.4j-n):

Survey respondents commented on the need for consistency in fees and allowances as key for retention. Many expressed concern that the Standards do not resolve this issue, particularly for kinship foster carers; and are unclear about what the Standards mean for them with regards fees and allowances.

**“ I think all foster carers should be treated equally regardless of Trust or agency. We should have same pay, same allowances, same expenses, same access to planned rest breaks. ”**

(Foster carer, Survey)

**“ I am disillusioned with the Trust. I have lost trust and faith in their ability to treat carers fairly and with respect. They obviously have a two tier system between kinship and non-kinship so I don't understand how Standards will change this. ”**

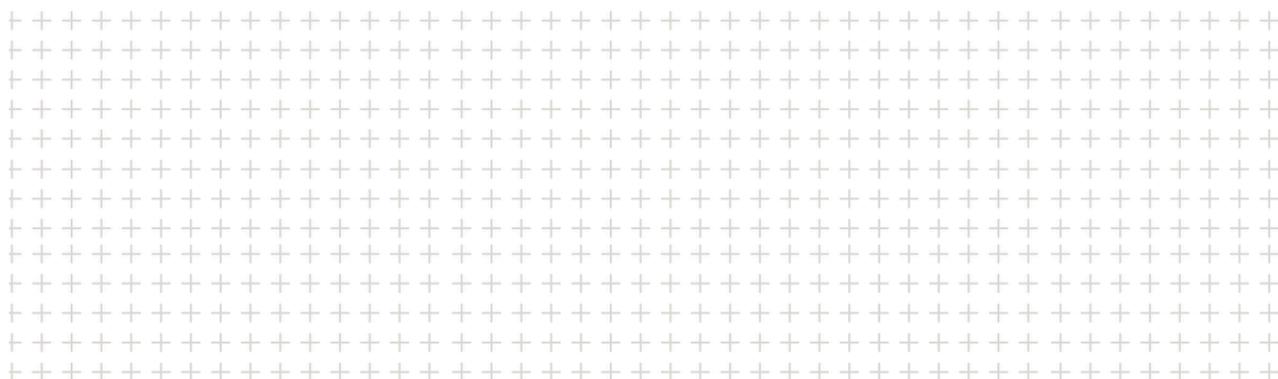
(Foster carer, Survey)

### Variations were evident across fostering services / foster carers:

The survey results indicated inconsistencies in practice based on the type of foster carer and fostering service. Foster carers in Trusts (in comparison with IFPs) and kinship carers (compared to non-kinship carers) were generally less satisfied with, for example, recruitment, assessment and review processes; training and development opportunities; approvals for children's daily arrangements; and provision to support the resolution of complaints. They were also less aware about how to access professional support on providing trauma informed care to children.

**“ What is needed the most is that if you foster in Northern Ireland you have a similar experience to the other person in the Trust next to you. ”**

(Foster carer, Survey)



## Foster carer recommendations include:

The introduction of Minimum Standards for Fostering Services must be underpinned by a long-term implementation plan with specific targets and milestones to be achieved within a set timeframe; and supported by clear leadership, accountability, cross-departmental collaboration and increased investment.

- The Standards should be reviewed overall to reflect the importance of good quality matching, for example, within the context of information sharing, long-term placements, training, supporting children's range of needs, and addressing trauma.
- Standard 1.1 should include arrangements for timely post-18 care planning and collaborative working with receiving adult services.
- Standard 1.3(c) should specify the use of standardised information sharing tools across all fostering services to promote a consistent approach and ensure this indicator is achieved. Shared tools may include a shorter profile for matching and a detailed chronological profile once a child is placed (online access / password protected). Foster carers should also have access to previous LAC review minutes to gain a more holistic understanding of a child's background and needs.
- Standard 1.3(e) should be strengthened with detail about what constitutes a 'clear process to promptly inform change'. For example, initiating contact with the foster carer as soon as a decision to make a change is made, providing information about the reason for the change, introducing the new social worker, and establishing an ongoing plan with regards communication and support.
- Standard 2.2(g) should be strengthened to reflect the need for joined up-working within the children's team to avoid potential delays in care.
- The fostering approval process should include an optimal timeframe for assessments and panel reviews to ensure consistent practice (Standard 3.2).
- Standard 3.3(g) should be strengthened to state that Personal Development Plans include opportunities for both personal growth and professional development, recognising foster carers' integral role in the team around the child.
- Foster carers should have access to a comprehensive suite of training options which includes more opportunities for specialist training tailored to their individual needs, and accessible to suit differing work patterns, family commitments and availability.
- Mechanisms to support the regular review of practice and guidance on delegated authority should be considered within the Northern Ireland Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme [Fostering Workstream]. (Standard 3.5b)
- Standard 8 should include that foster carers are supported to complete training in trauma-informed care during their first year of fostering.
- A review of the current indicators within Standard 11.2 is needed to strengthen their clarity and usefulness, to ensure they are measurable and reflect delivery.