Our future Wales' post-Covid recovery and reconstruction in Wales: Response from The Fostering Network, July 2020

About The Fostering Network
The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people, and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK.

In Wales we have a strong membership base with over 5,400 foster carers, all 22 local authority fostering services and the majority of independent fostering agencies. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research, in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

Introduction
At The Fostering Network we have continued to support and work closely with foster families and fostering services across Wales throughout the pandemic by providing online training and events, through Fosterline Wales (run by The Fostering Network and funded by the Welsh Government) and by creating a hub of useful information and resources on our website.

Foster carers look after some of the most vulnerable children in our society, maintaining relationships, providing stable family homes and keeping children safe. Foster families and the fostering sector had to adapt quickly to unprecedented changes as a result of the pandemic – home educating, moving face to face contact arrangements online as well as fostering panels, and stopping short break provisions (apart from in particular circumstances). This has had an impact, both positive and negative, on the fostering sector as a whole and foster families' experiences need to be considered moving forward.

Like the Children, Young People and Education Committee in Wales[1], we think it is imperative that children are at the heart of Wales' post-Covid recovery and reconstruction. That is why we, along with 150+ organisations, and counting, are calling on the Welsh Government to put children at the heart of the recovery process[2]. Of particular focus should be:

- the educational experience of fostered children during lockdown and transitioning back to school;
- supporting foster families' health and wellbeing; and
- ensuring the capacity of the looked after children's sector.

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[1] Children, Young People and Education Committee [Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people](#) 8 July 2020
[2] National Children's Bureau [Putting children at the heart of recovery](#) 30 June 2020

1. **The educational experience of fostered children during lockdown and the transition back to school**

Children in foster care have the same aspirations as other children, however it is well documented that looked after children and young people can face particular challenges in relation to education and, on average, have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to others of the same age[3].

Throughout lockdown we believe the majority of children in foster care in Wales did not attend school and were at home with their foster carers, in accordance with Welsh Government guidance on school attendance for vulnerable children. From the 29 June 2020 some children, including children in foster care, started to return to school settings before the summer holidays, where a blended learning approach was adopted to prepare for a full return in September.

To understand more about fostered children's experience of education during the pandemic The Fostering Network launched a rapid response survey for foster carers and fostering services across the UK. The survey results have helped provide an understanding about both the educational experience of fostered children during lockdown and their needs as they transition back to school. We have summarised the key findings and recommendations from the report below. The full version is available on [The Fostering Network's website](#).

Key findings from the report[4]

- 487 foster carers, representing 870 fostered children and young people, and 48 fostering service members of staff from across the UK responded to the survey;
- Foster carers reported that 78 per cent of their children were not attending school when schools were open to key worker and vulnerable children only;
- The frequency of contact from educational providers about individual children's needs varied. While carers told us that 32 per cent of children's educational providers contacted them once a week, 14 per cent had not contacted carers at all;
- 74 per cent of foster carers said they were unaware of any special arrangements in place to support looked after children when they return to school; and
- We asked foster carers what they thought were the top three most important forms of support needed for all children when they return to school. They chose:
    - Extra tuition including one to one tuition (selected by 58 per cent of respondents).
    - Flexible and individualised transition arrangements (selected by 39 per cent of respondents).
    - Mental health support (selected by 38 per cent of respondents).

The following recommendations will be necessary to support the transition back to school and beyond as the impact of Covid-19 on children's education will be much more long-term.

Recommendations:

- The Fostering Network welcomes the additional education funding announced by the Welsh Government to address the impact of Covid-19 on education but, as children transition back to school, their new and emerging needs will have to be assessed and additional funding and support allocated if necessary. It is vital that this funding covers any new or emerging needs of

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[3] Sebba J Luke N [The educational progress and outcomes of children in care: editorial](#) *Oxford Review of Education* 45, 4 (2019), 435 – 442
[4] NB these results are based on UK data

looked after children or those previously looked after. Existing funding should not be used to meet these new needs.

- The Welsh Government must ensure all schools have adequate funds, guidance and resources to:
  - o put mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of transition planning
  - o increase one to one and small group learning support
  - o increase provision for children with special and additional learning needs
  - o respond flexibly to individual children's needs when making transition arrangements
- Guide and fund schools to make tailored transition arrangements for fostered children on their return to school. There may also need to be a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs during the transition period and beyond.
- Offer clear direction to schools on approach to behaviour policies in the public health context. While public health needs to be a priority at this time to ensure children, staff and families are kept as safe as possible, schools need to be encouraged to adopt a restorative rather than punitive approach to behaviour.
- Schools should consider a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs to engage all children in the transition back to school.
- Schools must recognise the importance of the foster carer role in the team around child and consult with foster carers fully in the transition planning and beyond for their child as they are well placed to assess their needs.
- Ensure there is no delay in accessing specialist support that has been delayed, or put on hold, due to Covid-19.
- Create tailored transition plans for fostered children where appropriate.
- The primary focus of re-engagement should be on children's mental health and wellbeing. This will support their academic re-engagement.
- Virtual schools, or other similar local authority body with oversight of the statutory duty to promote the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are or who have been in care, need to fully engage with all the children they are responsible for. Their role will be vital in the transition back to school.
- Every looked after child needs to have a consistent and transparent offer from their virtual school or body with similar responsibility. This is essential to try and overcome the postcode lottery of support for looked after children experienced during the pandemic.

2. Foster families' health and wellbeing

Foster carers have adjusted to the unprecedented changes to their family life to ensure the wellbeing of the children and young people in their care (and in many cases their own birth children too) is protected while also ensuring the restrictions are maintained and providing care around the clock.

The National survey for Wales' latest results since May 2020[5] show that 41 per cent of people have experienced anxiety during the pandemic. Mental health issues are therefore being exacerbated at a time where both formal (such as face-to-face social worker visits) and informal (from peers) modes of support have decreased. It is important that foster families feel properly emotionally supported and do not feel isolated during this time. We have heard through Fosterline Wales reports of foster carer exhaustion and high stress levels.

[5] Welsh Government National Survey for Wales: Latest survey results 25 June 2020

Recommendations:

• Funding, guidance and resources should be provided to local authorities to support foster families' mental health and wellbeing.

3. Capacity of the sector

In Wales, the most recent statistics state that the majority of referrals to children's social care come from local authorities (38 per cent), police (17 per cent) and primary or community health (16 per cent)[6]. It is therefore predicted that when lockdown rules are relaxed, face to face meetings and routine health appointments resume, referrals will go up and there will be an increased demand for all different types of looked after children's provisions. Given that 71 per cent of all children looked after in Wales live with foster families, we can expect the demand for foster placements specifically to be particularly high. In addition, families that rely on short-break foster carers, and those who previously did not but would now benefit from a short break, will need this support urgently when movement between homes and overnight stays are advised again.

Recruitment activity will need to ensure the right kinds of foster families are recruited to match the needs of the local looked after children population. It is also equally important to focus on the retention of foster carers to maintain the foster carer population.

Conclusion

It is essential that children and their needs are at the heart of recovery planning in Wales. All children have missed out on essential school provision that they will never be able to get back. Particularly, however, looked after children whose outcomes are generally lower than their peers, will feel this education disruption even more. We welcome the funding already announced by the Welsh Government to support children in schools to recover from the impact of Covid-19 but this needs to be reviewed as children transition back to school and additional funding provided as required. Existing funds should not be used to address any new or emerging needs.

As well as funding there may also need to be a change in approach to prioritise meeting children and families' emotional and social needs during the transition period out of lockdown and beyond to aid a holistic recovery.

In preparation of a predicted rise in children's social care referrals, it is important that recruitment of foster carers, with a wealth of skills and expertise needed in the months to come, is given just as much attention as recruitment campaigns to target the right foster carers to match the needs of the local looked after children population.

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[6] Stats Wales Children in need by local authority and source of most recent referral 2016

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