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Dear Mr Zahawi

## **Fostering Stocktake**

After careful thought, I have concluded that in my capacity as chief executive of the UK's leading fostering charity it is my duty to write to you about the recently published report of the fostering stocktake commissioned by your department. Writing this letter gives me no pleasure, but the more I read the report and talk to others, the more I realise someone needs to ensure you are aware of the disappointment felt across the sector. The report and its recommendations were keenly anticipated, but the overwhelming feeling following publication is one of a huge opportunity wasted.

We know that good foster care works, and foster carers make a huge difference to tens of thousands of children's lives every day. But the overall system and culture make their jobs so much more difficult, rather than enabling and supporting them to carry out their vital task. We had hoped that the stocktake report would tackle the systemic and cultural issues that are widely recognised by those who work in this field.

The stocktake team received 300 pieces of evidence and met with hundreds of social workers, foster carers and others within the sector over several months. We ourselves submitted an official response and accompanying reports, as well as sharing all the findings of our State of the Nation's foster care report (based on a survey of over 2,500 foster carers). We also held a specially convened session on staying put at the team's request, and invited them to meet our members at a number of our conferences. And yet the report fails to demonstrate how it has drawn on any of the evidence collected, nor does it reflect the comprehensive literature review commissioned by the department. It also appears to give too much weight to personal opinions and bases its recommendations on the views of a very small number of people.

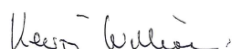


The voice of the foster carer is woefully absent throughout, while the number of children and young people consulted is frankly appalling. In particular, the authors show very little understanding of the complex nature of fostering and its different roles for different children, and – insultingly – effectively dismiss long-term fostering as a permanence option by suggesting children should be moved on to SGOs and adoption to avoid the problems of staying put. Hardly a child-centred approach. There are also sweeping statements backed by little or no evidence, such as saying that “understandably” foster carers of young children and those with no complex needs are not paid. Understandable to whom, and why? Other unsubstantiated sentences include “Carers overwhelmingly see fostering as a vocation, and see themselves primarily as substitute parents”. Phrases such as “many”, “often” or “too few” are used with no reference to real data, when the findings of the State of the Nation – representing 2,500 foster carers’ views – are not referred to at all.

Overall, the report has no vision for foster care, instead seeming to view fostering as a stepping stone to adoption or SGOs. It fails to address key issues that the sector is currently experiencing – not least how foster carers are viewed and treated, but also commissioning and placement disruption. While we agree with a number of the recommendations, they are largely superficial and will only scratch the surface – the report makes almost no recommendations that we believe will actually have any significant impact on transforming foster care. There is nothing radical or brave within the report, nor anything that your department did not know about before the stocktake. It is a missed opportunity and we fail to see how this is value for taxpayers’ money nor a good use of our and the wider sector’s time over the past year.

We are not alone in this view. The outcry in the sector has been significant, as you may know, and there are very few who think this report is worthy of the time and effort put into it. Going forward, we are extremely concerned that any plans built around this stocktake will once again just tinker around the edges and fail to make any demonstrable difference to the lives of children and the families that dedicate themselves to looking after them. We urge you to ensure that this is not the case and that the Government’s response to this report looks beyond its recommendations, setting out a long-term and ambitious plan to make foster care the very best it can be.

Yours sincerely



Kevin Williams  
Chief Executive