The needs of children in foster care must be prioritise when they transition back to school

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. 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
Across Wales there are nearly 7,170 children in care. Although every child is different, due to the trauma, emotional and attachment difficulties they may have experienced, children in care generally have poor educational and wellbeing outcomes compared to their peers not in care. For example, in 2019, educational achievement of children looked after compared with all pupils in Wales at Foundation Phase and Key Stages was recorded to be between 18 and 37 per cent behind for all age groups[1].

70 per cent of children in care in Wales live with foster families. Foster care is broadly seen as a protective factor for children's education and while children in foster care have the same aspirations as other children, it is evidenced that they can face challenges in relation to education. This is why the vast majority of looked after children are considered vulnerable or disadvantaged in relation to their education and receive additional support to make sure they reach their potential including: personalised education plans, priority admissions to schools, and funding allocated to better their educational development.

This briefing outlines why Welsh Government should prioritise the needs of looked after children when schools begin to reopen from February 2021 onwards.

Lockdown: the impact on foster families and their experiences
Back in June 2020 The Fostering Network launched a survey asking foster carers, fostering services and children in foster care about their experiences of education during the pandemic and feelings about transitioning back to school. The survey received 487 foster carer responses representing the educational experiences of 870 children and young people in foster care from across the UK, 48 responses from fostering service members of staff, as well as the thoughts and feelings of a group of children and young people. The survey findings are published here and some key findings are below.

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[1] Welsh Government Wales Children Receiving Care and Support Census, 2019 (experimental statistics).

- 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.
- 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 evidence showed that while some children have thrived from more one to one support and the removal of some external pressures, others have experienced increased anxiety and other mental health problems, and some others were excluded before being given the chance to attend educational provisions. Foster carers' experiences of educating during lockdown also brought to the fore the need for more individualised education plans for looked after children.

While this survey focused on the educational provision given to children in foster care during the first lockdown, children's other needs, such as their mental health needs, were seen as inextricably linked to the support required to help children catch-up when transitioning back to school. In addition to this evidence, Barnardo's Northern Ireland's survey of 167 educational professionals in June 2020, found that more than 90 per cent of respondents agreed that Covid-19 has impacted on their school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

Studies have tried to capture the extent of the educational 'catch-up' required due to the disturbances caused by the pandemic to ensure that no child gets left behind. The Juniper Education National Dataset is one of these studies. Their report based on teacher assessment data taken from more than 6,000 primary schools representing over 1.47 million pupils found that certain groups have been disproportionately affected by the disruption to their learning with disadvantaged pupils and those with additional learning needs (ALN) showing greater gaps than their peers. They also found that during the short period most children were back in school regularly (September to December 2020), children with ALN and disadvantaged groups, recovered at a much slower pace than their peers.

It is also important to think about the impact on older children. Due to the disturbances of the past year, we can only predict that the attainment gap between children and their peers will not have begun to close again. It is more important than ever to stop the gap widening even more. In addition, ONS data shows that those aged 18 to 24 have made up the bulk of job losses throughout the pandemic. It is important to consider the experiences of those who have left school, college or university in the past year, may now be struggling and require support to find work, training or plan their next steps in life.

Transitioning back to school from February 2021
Since the publication of our report in July 2020, schools have re-opened in September 2020 before closing to the majority of children in January 2021. The disruptions to education caused by the pandemic have spanned two academic years.

Across the UK, different governments have taken different approaches to 'vulnerable' children attending school but spaces have been made available in all countries for those who may have been in need. In Wales, we believe the majority of children in foster care remained at home during the

school closures. It therefore follows that the majority of children in foster care did not return to school in January 2021 and will be transitioning back to school from February onwards.

When schools return they will continue to be very different to what they were a year ago. The needs of children in foster care must be assessed on a case-by-case basis when returning to school and their new and emerging needs will need to be catered for with an emphasis on trauma informed practice. One such approach that could be taken is detailed by Carpenter and Carpenter in their [recovery curriculum](#).

Conclusion

The evidence provided above about the impact of lockdown on children in care's educational and mental health needs must be listened to as schools and children prepare to transition back to face-to-face schooling once again. It also needs to be considered that children's education may be continually disjointed due to localised outbreaks. A flexible, supportive approach should be taken which prioritises children and young people's wellbeing and mental health.

The role of the foster carer in the team around the child will be more important than ever when schools return. Foster carers will know best the child's needs and feelings and it will be essential that they are involved in the dialogue with schools and other professionals as the majority have been educating their children at home throughout this time. It is also important that the child is consulted with and given the opportunity to feed into their own education plans.

We welcome the funding already announced by Welsh Government to support children, particularly disadvantaged children, as they return to school. Schools' and children's funding requirements should be reviewed as children transition back to school and additional funding provided as required. However, as well as funding 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.

Recommendations for Government

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

2. Mental health support will need to be reviewed for those children with a history of trauma as they transition back to school and deal with the impact of the pandemic.

3. Governments must ensure all schools have adequate funds, guidance and resources to:

- put mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of transition planning
- increase one to one and small group learning support
- increase provision for children with additional learning needs
- respond flexibly to individual children's needs when making transition arrangements
- address disadvantaged children's lack of digital access and needs to support their education.

Recommendations for education departments in government

4. To provide specific guidance for schools on supporting looked after children and those with additional learning needs. This could help towards addressing the variability in provision

experienced by children in foster care during lockdown.

5. Guide and fund schools to make tailored transition arrangements for children in foster care 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.

6. 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.

Recommendations for schools

7. 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. Disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils are more likely to have poorer mental health than their peers and be more greatly affected by the instability caused by the transition. While public health needs to be a priority at this time, schools should adopt a restorative rather than punitive approach to behaviour to take into account feelings of instability and any emerging mental health issues.

8. Each school should review children in foster care's educational, emotional and social needs prior to the transition back to school full-time, or early in the transition process, to ensure that resources are in place to meet existing as well as new needs. The foster carer needs to be fully involved in any review of the child's educational needs to ensure their views and expertise can be fed in. The child's existing education allowances should not be used to meet additional needs related to Covid-19.

9. Schools must recognise the importance of the foster carer role in the team around the child and consult with foster carers fully about the child as they are well placed to assess their needs.

10. Create tailored transition plans for children in foster care where appropriate.

11. The school's looked after children's governor should reflect on the needs of looked after children, including their mental health and social needs as well as their potential educational catch-up, and ensure that the school is meeting these needs. In addition, each school setting should have a member of staff available for looked after children. This staff member should be available to support children during the school day and provide a link between home, school and the child's social worker and anyone else involved in supporting the child.

12. Schools should consult and engage with children on local levels about their experiences of Covid-19, lockdown and accessing education. Feedback can be used to inform recovery planning and new ways of working.

Recommendations for Looked After Children in Education (LACE) co-ordinators

13. Local authority LACE co-ordinators need to fully engage with all the children they are responsible for. Their role will be vital in the transition back to school and beyond.

Recommendation for fostering services

14. To support foster carers to ensure their views and educational experience of lockdown are heard by all those involved in the team around a child to allow the best transition for each looked after child to be developed.

Recommendations for foster carers

15. To ensure clear communication between themselves, the school and the children's social worker and their full involvement in the transition planning for the child(ren) in their care.

16. To promote the positives about returning to school to the children in their care, such as seeing their friends. Children will have mixed emotions about returning to school. Foster carers should communicate positively with children whilst acknowledging their anxieties and reach out to others for support if necessary.

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