

## Foster Care: Four Recommendations for a Firm Foundation

“Foster care is the bedrock of the care system.... we need foster carers who are able to create the loving homes we know that children need and deserve” – the Case for Change, 2021

We want all children to have safe, stable, loving homes but for some children this is not possible within their family or even their extended family; we must make sure that ambitions for these children remain high. Almost three quarters of children in care are in foster care. Foster carers provide care to 56,000 children in England, often without the resources, support and recognition that their vital role warrants. Foster carers and the system in which they work are under immense and increasing pressure.

This short paper sets out four recommendations The Fostering Network would like the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in England to endorse to address systemic issues in the care system. These recommendations are based on evidence and lived experience, informed by our 55,000 foster carer and 370 fostering service members, as well as through research. They have been carefully explored and developed and provide solutions which will not just paper over the cracks but which will help to provide a long-term firm foundation of skilled and well supported foster carers to improve outcomes for children and young people for the future.

### **Recommendation 1: Foster carers to be recognised as a key member in the team around the child and as part of the social care workforce**

“I became a foster carer because I wanted to make a difference for children; to give them a loving, caring home when they most need it. Everyone knows you need two pairs of hands to care for children. But sometimes it feels like, rather than offer me the helping hand I need, the system makes me care for children with one hand tied behind my back” – foster carer

Foster carers who responded to the Case for Change made it clear that they should be more involved in the decisions that affect the lives of children in their care and that improved status, terms and conditions could have a huge impact on both recruitment and retention. This reflects the views we hear directly from our members. We have heard examples of decisions being made by a meeting of professionals none of whom have met the child in question, while the person who cares for that child on a daily basis is excluded from the meeting. In our engagement events foster carers told us they often had to “shout” and “fight” to be heard.

Foster carers must complete pre-approval training and take on a wide range of duties alongside the personalised care and support of the children they foster, for example: writing reports, completing assessments, attending meetings or court hearings and managing contact arrangements with birth family members. This list of tasks increases where children have complex health, emotional, learning or behavioural needs where liaison with other agencies is required.

These tasks take time, skills and expertise. The current context exacerbates the foster carer role, with almost half of foster carers surveyed saying their mental health and wellbeing has worsened as a result of the pandemic. It is concerning that the issues recognised by the Case for Change as risk factors impacting on parenting (financial insecurity, stress, mental health problems) are present in many fostering households. This does not need to be the case.

Foster carers must have their hands freed up to provide the skilled and loving care required and this means: equal status in the team around the child; payment for time, skills and expertise and robust, standardised support and training.

## **Recommendation 2: Long-term foster care as a form of permanence**

“The care system must build, not break, relationships” – the Case for Change, 2021

The Fostering Network supports the focus on stability in the Case for Change. Stability should be the aim for all children in care and we believe the form that stability takes should be decided according to what is best for each individual child.

Many children and young people are in stable, long-term relationships with their foster carers with both parties wanting the arrangement to continue long term. However, foster carers tell us that placements can end, not in the best interests of the child but rather for financial reasons, or lack of support, or a difficult relationship between the carer and the social worker and other reasons that would likely not be accepted if a court were involved.

Long-term foster care should have the same legal protections as adoption or special guardianship orders, so children in long-term foster care have legal as well as emotional stability.

## **Recommendation 3: The Mockingbird Family Model to be made available in every local authority area in England**

“Mockingbird is a place where you can belong. Mockingbird is a place where you will make new friends that you will have for life really” – young person, age 15

Mockingbird provides support and relationships in a model best understood as replicating the stability and love of an extended family. Six to ten families form a constellation with a hub home carer and a liaison worker providing peer support, guidance, learning and development, social activities and sleepovers. Hub home carers are experienced foster carers who fulfil the role often undertaken by grandparents in an extended family.



There is a strong evidence base from the 74 constellations currently in place across England showing that Mockingbird delivers improved wellbeing for looked after children and young people and better outcomes including; placement stability; sibling connections; family relationships and cultural identity. Mockingbird also increases rates of foster carer recruitment and retention, makes better use of available placements and foster carers report improved status as part of the team around the child. The evidence is compelling even before

considering the financial evidence which demonstrates that once it is established and self-sustaining,

Mockingbird provides significant cost savings for the care system. Our modelling suggests that embedding Mockingbird in a further 100 local authorities over the next three years would result in savings of £28m for an investment of just £4.4m.

“All [of the foster carers in the constellation] care about us and I have so many aunts and uncles, LOL! Wish I had always had Mockingbird throughout my life in care” – young person, age 14

#### **Recommendation 4: Pilot support care models such as Step Up, Step Down**

Support care uses foster carers' unique skills and expertise to support children and families on the edge of care to stay together. Step Up, Step Down has been operational in Northern Ireland since April 2016. It provides support over 12-15 months to build parents confidence and self-efficacy, enabling them to address key issues in the home. As foster carers do not hold statutory responsibility for family outcomes they are able to build trusting relationships with families.

To date, Step Up, Step Down has supported 65 families comprising 149 children and 88 adults. Independent evaluation of 28 of those households has found that it has been successful in: reducing the number of children coming into care; providing parents with the capacity, skills and knowledge to overcome adversity; creating safe, stable family relationships; connecting families to their communities and increasing the capacity of families to learn and grow together.

Data collected by The Fostering Network indicates that there are very few support services of this kind in England. We believe this model supports the ambitions set out in the Case for Change, has the potential to transform the lives of families on the edge of care and should be piloted much more widely across England.

#### **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.

Our full response to the Case for Change, with detailed evidence and further recommendations to strengthen foster care, can be found at on our [website](#).