

## **The Fostering Network's response to The Independent Review of Children's Social Care's Call for Ideas, December 2021**

**Our big idea: To provide greater national leadership and funding for the neglected fostering sector to stimulate a more agile local market in fostering, with the ultimate aim of meeting the needs of every child in foster care and supporting them to thrive by supporting the foster carers who care for them.**

We have submitted eight specific ideas which would enable this big idea to become a reality.

1. Foster carers to be considered key members in the team around the child, part of the workforce, with allowances, pay and support which recognises their contribution.
2. Long-term foster care as a form of permanence.
3. A National Leadership Board for Fostering to provide national leadership and tackle the recruitment and retention crisis.
4. A full cross-departmental review of Staying Put to remove barriers to successful implementation.
5. A national register of foster carers to enable portability of foster carer approval, improve safeguarding and improve the status of foster carers.
6. All fostering services to introduce and embed a Foster Carers' Charter.
7. Implementation of the Mockingbird programme in every local authority area.
8. Greater use of support care across England, for example the Step Up Step Down programme currently in place in Northern Ireland.

By implementing the above ideas we hope the following impact will be achieved:

- children who thrive in foster care, have their needs met, reach their full potentials, are secure and prepared for adulthood;
- foster carers who feel recognised and rewarded for achieving this, with all foster carers fostering for as long as they are able;
- a consistently high standard and quality of foster care across England, although implementation and innovations may look very different area by area;
- in the short-term, to meet the shortfall of 7,300 foster carers; and
- in the long-term, for each local area to have foster carers with the skills and experience to match the needs of children who need care.
- Widespread use of evidence-based programmes which improve outcomes for children in or on the edge of care.

## **1. Foster carers should 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.... 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

We hear 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.

Our State of the Nation survey found foster carers and fostering services united in their message that it is increasingly difficult to support children well when they do not have the tools that they need or the status that they deserve.

- 38 per cent of foster carers said that their allowances do not meet the full cost of looking after a child.
- Just nine per cent reported receiving more than the National Living Wage per calendar month.
- Nearly a third of foster carers said they did not get the support they needed from the child’s social worker.
- Nearly half reported that their own mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated as a result of the pandemic.
- 26 per cent of foster carers in England reported not having an agreed annual learning and development plan.

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

Improved status, terms and conditions would have a huge impact on the recruitment of foster carers, enabling children to be placed with families who can meet their needs and help them to thrive.

In addition, existing foster carers would:

- have the status and tools that they need to provide skilled and loving care to meet the needs of children
- receive payment for their time, skills and expertise
- benefit from robust, standardised support and training.

This would also increase retention as foster carers would feel valued, supported and reduce financial pressures on foster families. It would also result in better outcomes for children as well-supported, competent and confident carers can provide better care.

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

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.

There has been a legal definition of long-term foster care in England since 2015, which is welcome, but we now need to consider how long-term foster care sits in the broader permanence framework. All decisions to grant or end a long-term foster care placements sit within local authority children’s services departments. This results in vulnerability to the placement and a lack of independent scrutiny when ending a long-term foster care placement.

With fostering, children who are unable to return home are offered a protective and nurturing environment in a family setting, where they can remain in contact with their birth family, and are afforded entitlements to therapeutic services, access to social work support (as well as for their foster carer), and care leaver entitlements.

Our State of the Nation survey found that 72 per cent of the foster carer respondents were caring for a child that they expected to remain with them on a long-term basis but 12 per cent of foster carers who expected a child to stay with them on a long-term basis were not confident that stability would be maintained.

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

For children:

- A system centred on meeting children's needs, with the best decision being made for each individual child.
- Legally protected stability for children with less disruption to placements.
- Long-term fostering relationships to be respected, valued and seen as permanent, as adoption and special guardianship placements are.

For foster carers (so they can provide the care that children need):

- More direct funding for foster families to provide therapeutic care and support to the children they look after.
- Schemes and funding similar to the adoption support fund available to long-term fostering households.
- Confidence that the child in their care will be able to remain for as long as they need to.

### **3. A National Leadership Board for Fostering to provide national leadership and to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis.**

The Fostering Network is calling for the creation of a National Leadership Board for Fostering to sit alongside the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB). There are currently 80,850 children in care in England. The vast majority of these children, 57,404, live with foster families.

The number of fostering households and foster carers in England is at the highest ever levels, and yet the increases are not keeping up with demand in the sector. As Ofsted stated recently, 'a continued lack of capacity in the foster care sector is leading to vulnerable children missing out on the care and support they need'. A leadership board for fostering would provide a strategic focus to tackle the current issues in the sector, to drive performance improvements, identify and mainstream innovative practice and measure the impact and outcomes of fostering.

Key aims would be of the board would be:

- collect, share and analyse data and evidence on system performance
- continually monitor and report performance
- provide expert policy advice to government
- provide visible leadership
- establish the activities which can take place at a national, regional and local level in the fostering sector and put in place the right structures and tools.

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

- The right placement for each child moving into foster care; in the area they know; maintaining relationships, education and community links and improving overall stability.
- A good match for each local authority area between their foster carers and the needs of children moving into care.
- To meet the shortfall of 7,300 foster carers in England; to diversify the workforce and to recruit younger foster carers who will be retained.

### **4. The government should carry out a full cross-departmental review of how Staying Put has been implemented.**

This should involve young people and all key stakeholders and include:

- how it has been funded
- clarity of responsibility
- the status of arrangements
- the training provided to foster carers and staff
- what policies are currently in place
- when the schemes are discussed in the care planning process.

Despite widespread acceptance that Staying Put is in young people's best interests, implementation has resulted in variability in local policy and practice and up-take has not increased across the UK since 2018.

In Staying Put, children's placing authorities are legally required to provide advice, assistance and support to the care leaver and their carer. Yet, there are funding issues which result in former foster carers experiencing a decrease in financial support which, in turn, can have a detrimental effect on uptake of the schemes. Our findings show a high proportion of former foster carers experiencing a drop in financial support when supporting young people to 21.

Young people Staying Put are no longer considered looked after. If the foster carer has no other children in foster care living with them, their fostering service may remove their approval status meaning foster carers can no longer foster unless they complete the approval process again (which can take many months). Our survey findings show that some fostering services are not ensuring their foster carers maintain their approval, even when it is their intention to return to fostering.

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

- More young people being able to stay in a protective and nurturing environment until 21, allowing them longer to transition to independence and improving their outcomes.
- Foster carers are appropriately supported in Staying Put arrangements and maintain their approval if they wish to return to fostering.

### **5. A national register of foster carers**

We believe that a national register of foster carers is an essential first step to achieving an improvement in foster carer terms and conditions through allowing increased portability of the workforce, creating greater public recognition of the role and increasing public protection by having a central list of all who meet, and continue to meet, the requirements of being an approved foster carer, as well as those who were deemed unsuitable to foster. Improving foster carers' terms and conditions

will also lead to better care and outcomes for children as foster carers will feel more supported, valued and confident in their roles.

To be clear, we are not talking about placement matching or fostering recruitment registers, both of which we believe are local activities and are best carried out by local authorities and fostering services.

There are a number of ways in which a register could be set up and delivered, with a range of activities in or out of its remit. The Fostering Network's preferred model is that of a centrally held list of all approved foster carers, with registration renewed each year by the fostering service. This means that assessment and review of foster carers would still be carried out locally by fostering services according to a set of national criteria and accredited training. Applications for registration would be made to the central body which could include medical criteria and signing up to a code of conduct/practice.

Read our full position [here](#).

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

It would increase the status of foster carers in the team around the child as foster carers would have to sign up to a code of practice and hold the right knowledge, skills and training to be a foster carer.

It would allow for more robust safeguarding measures as, currently, due to the lack of a national register for foster carers, prospective applicants must self-declare whether they have previously fostered and if so, why they left a particular service. This creates a safeguarding gap as services are unable to complete an evidenced based assessment without an evidence source. This information is not stored centrally. These checks therefore rely on self-declaration and honesty.

Finally, if a foster carer wanted to move to a different provider they could do so without having to re-do the assessment and approval process. This would make the process of transferring more streamlined, easier for foster carers and avoid the repetition of assessments, saving agencies time and money. It could also consequently drive up standards for foster carers as fostering services would have to improve their offers in order to retain foster carers who previously may have been deterred from moving due to the lengthy re-approval process.

## **6. All fostering services to introduce and embed a Foster Carers' Charter**

The Foster Carers' Charter represents a commitment on behalf of the placing authority in its role as the corporate parent, the fostering service and the foster carer to work in partnership in the best interests of the children for whom they care. It is a promise, owned by everybody involved, to always strive for best practice.

The Charter sets out clear expectations for how foster carers should be treated, trained and supported. It can also include commitments to maintain important relationships for children in care, including with their former foster carers. It is important that Charters are properly embedded and regularly reviewed to be most effective.

Read The Fostering Network's Foster Carers' Charter [here](#).

## **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

Having a Foster Carers' Charter would help to build understanding between children's placing authorities, fostering services and foster carers as it clearly outlines each party's role and responsibilities. This in turn would allow for better working relationships which are vital in improving outcomes for children.

In addition, a well-implemented Charter should lead to increased status of foster carers. Improving foster carer status would have a huge impact on recruitment, enabling children to be placed with families who can meet their needs and help them to thrive.

Improved status of foster carers would also increase retention as foster carers would feel valued. It would also result in better outcomes for children as respected and confident carers can provide better care. The Charter also can help improve working relationships meaning that all the members of the team around the child are working cohesively with children's best interest at heart.

## **7. The Mockingbird Family Model to be made available in every local authority area in England**

We believe the Mockingbird Family Model should be available in every local authority area in England as a key support model for looked after children.

Mockingbird is an innovative, award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK, with support from the Department for Education. Mockingbird delivers sustainable foster care structured around the support and relationships of an extended family.

The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community of six to ten satellite families called a constellation. Each constellation is led by a hub home carer and a liaison worker, offering vital peer support and guidance, alongside learning and development opportunities, social activities, and sleepovers to strengthen relationships and permanence.

"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. You'd get opportunities. You'd become part of a family really."  
– Foster child, age 15

## **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

There is a strong evidence base from the 82 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. Evidence shows that between May 2018 and March 2020 an estimated 20 per cent of placements would have broken down if they had not been supported by the Mockingbird programme.

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.

Therefore, Mockingbird has, most importantly, a strong evidence base of improvements for children and young people in foster care, as well as the foster carers looking after them, but also significant cost savings for the care system.

## **8. Greater use of support care across England, for example the Step Up Step Down programme currently in place in Northern Ireland.**

Step Up Step Down (SUSD) is a project run by The Fostering Network in Northern Ireland and has been operational since April 2016. It focuses on a support care model which utilises the unique skills and experience of foster carers to provide support to families on the edge of care, with the overall aim of keeping families together.

Trained Family Support Foster Carers provide holistic, tailored, wrap around, intensive, consistent support to the families, over at least 12-15 months using a non-judgemental supportive approach. As foster carers do not hold statutory responsibility for family outcomes, they are able to build trusting relationships with families, and encourage the parents to build confidence, self-efficacy and capacity, understanding their children better and be better equipped with a range of strategies to address key issues, which in turn enables greater safety and resilience for the child and the whole family.

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.

### **What impact do you hope this will achieve?**

Independent research showed that SUSD was successful in reducing the number of children coming into care, and of the 28 families who have completed the programme, 19 (approximately two-thirds) required a lesser degree of social services involvement and were at lesser risk of significant harm and eight (roughly one-third) of the families could be removed from social services involvement altogether.

SUSD has also been successful in:

- 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.

Evidence shows the benefit to cost ratio for the group of children who have completed the SUSD programme is at least estimated at £1.50: £1. This means that, for every £1 invested through the SUSD programme, including the statutory social services costs that form part of social services supports to children, leads to cost savings of £1.50 for the government, largely through the removal of the risk to children being referred to residential care.

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