

# The Fostering Network's manifesto

The number of children in care is continuing to rise each year.

98,584 children were in the care system in the UK in 2022, that is one child coming into care every 20 minutes. Most of these children live in a foster family – 70 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

Foster carers offer children and young people a safe, loving and nurturing home when they can't live with their birth families. This means they have a unique chance to make a real difference to a child's life.

As a society we have a huge opportunity to improve the lives of care experienced children, to tackle the inequalities that exist for these young people and to harness their potential to ensure they can flourish and have the childhood they deserve.

But the crisis in foster care recruitment and retention is impacting our young people every day, sadly more foster carers are leaving than joining.

The Fostering Network is calling on all political parties to commit to taking bold, urgent action to address the instability and poor outcomes which exist for care experienced children so our care system can provide stable, loving homes close to children's communities.

## We are calling on all political parties to:

**1 Focus on care experienced children and young people**

**2 Support the foster carer workforce**

**3 Invest and reform in the wider system supporting care experienced children and young people**

1. Based on a total of 2022 official data collections across the UK: Department for Education (DfE) 'Children looked after in England including adoptions' (2022); Scottish Government 'Children's social care statistics' (2022); Department of Health 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland' (2022); 'Stats Wales Children Looked After' (2022).

## FOCUS

### on care experienced children and young people

It is paramount that all care experienced children have the care, systems and long-lasting relationships in place that will provide them with stability, security and protection they need to be able to thrive throughout their childhood and beyond.

#### The problem

In England alone, 21 per cent of children were moved over 20 miles from home, 37 per cent were separated from their siblings, and one third of children in residential care had foster care on their care plan when they came into care.<sup>2</sup> This means that many children are living somewhere that does not meet all of their needs.

Children and young people coming into care want to maintain relationships with their families and communities. We need enough highly skilled foster families locally that can care for children where they need them.

#### What your political party can do about it:

- Ensure there is a **diverse, locally based pool of foster carers** to enable all children to be placed with foster carers that meet their needs.
- Commit to **stop children being placed miles from home** (unless in their best interests) and develop and publish national and local strategies to increase the supply of appropriate local options.
- Provide investment for children and young people in foster care so children can grow up in financial security and experience a childhood full of opportunities. This can be achieved by **increasing the national minimum foster care allowance** in line with our recommended rates so they meet the full cost of raising a child.
- Ensure every child and young person in foster care has security and stability in their foster home and **is supported to stay until they are 25**.
- Introduce measures to ensure every child can **nurture and maintain positive, lifelong, trusting relationships with their family and others** who are important to them, including foster carers, in line with our 'Keep Connected Principles'.
- Ensure all children in foster care have a **voice that is heard in decisions** that affect them.

## Support

### the foster carer workforce

To support children to thrive, our vision is that all foster carers should be part of the children's social care workforce and equal and valued members of the team around the child. Their skills, knowledge and expertise should be respected and valued.

2. Based on 2023 DfE 'Children looked after in England including adoption statistics' on the locality of placements; Children's Commissioner 'Siblings in Care' (2023); Ofsted study 'Why do children go into children's homes' (2022)

## The problem

Foster carers have a unique role within the children's sector - they are the only members of the workforce who work with children in their own homes, 24-hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and welcome them as part of their families.

But we do not have enough. For example, in England, since 2019 the number of fostering households has decreased by two per cent while the number of children in care has risen by seven per cent. This is 1,045 less fostering households than in 2019 but 5,690 more children in care.<sup>3</sup> Every year there are more foster carers leaving than joining. Foster carers are leaving the sector for various reasons but they centre around three key themes:

- a lack of sufficient support
- feeling their role is under-valued and not respected in the team around the child and their expertise is not being heard
- an inadequacy of financial support to recognise their time, skills and expertise (both their allowances and fees).

Foster carers are considered self-employed for tax purposes, but they do not enjoy any of the other benefits of self-employed status. Foster carers work within regulatory framework and are expected to undertake training and ongoing professional development.

## What your political party can do about it:

- Develop a **UK-wide workforce recruitment and retention strategy** for foster carers to ensure they are a key part of the children's social care workforce, the reasons they are leaving are addressed and that:
  - They are provided with a **skills-based learning and development framework**.
  - Foster carers are all provided with **regular fee payments** in line with the national living wage for a 40-hour week, as a minimum.
  - Foster Carers who work alongside their fostering role should be entitled to an additional statutory **minimum of 5 days paid leave**.
- Introduce a **register for foster carers** in all nations of the UK to address:
  - The need to increase the status of foster carers in the team around the child.
  - The difficulty of foster carers moving from one service to another.
  - The need for more robust safeguarding measures in the fostering sector.

# Invest & reform

## in the wider system supporting care experienced children and young people

For foster carers to be able to provide young people the best support they can, we need a well-funded children's social care system that truly values foster care and can support families at the point of need before their needs escalate.

3. Based on a comparison between 2019 and 2023 data from Department for Education (DfE) 'Children looked after in England including adoptions' (2023) and Ofsted 'Fostering in England' (2023).

## The problem

The children's social care system is in crisis. More children than ever are coming into care and at the same time early intervention funding has been cut over the last decade. Children are coming into care later, and with more complex needs meaning they need more specialised support from foster carers. The social care system that should be able to support foster carers is at breaking point with social worker caseloads and turnover high.

On top of this, care experienced children and young people still experience stigma, discrimination and barriers to achieving their full potential from the wider systems in our society.

## What your political party can do about it:

- Carry out wholesale reform of children's social care backed by significant **investment in early intervention services** to reduce the number of children who need to enter the care system and to achieve better outcomes for those who do, such as our Step Up Step Down model.
- Introduce measures to **address social worker turnover and caseloads** which affects the consistency and support for foster families such as the introduction of case load legislation, shift pattern to replace 9-5, a review of social worker qualification frameworks and newly qualified rotational systems.
- Ensure increased **emphasis on fostering and the role of foster carers in social worker training** to ensure social workers have a sound understanding of foster care.
- **Extend corporate parenting responsibilities to government departments and relevant public bodies** supporting children in care, such as education, health and mental health services. This will ensure that policies and services that affect care experienced children and young people take account of the challenges they face, remove barriers and provide opportunities for them to thrive.
- Introduce **measures to reduce the stigma and discrimination** faced by care experienced young people and make care experience a protected characteristic.
- All statutory, independent and third sector providers should **sign up to our Foster Carers Charter**, to demonstrate their commitment as corporate parents to work in partnership in the best interests of children they care for.

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