



State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016

Impact report

June 2018

1. Introduction

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice.

We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be.

2. Background

The Fostering Network conducts a biennial survey of foster carers throughout the UK and we publish our State of the Nation report based on the survey findings. The last survey, in 2016, covered key workforce and practice issues such as training and support for carers, status and authority of the workforce, matching and placement stability. In 2016 we received a record 2,530 responses which has given us a unique insight into the issues facing foster carers across the UK. Since publishing the report in February 2017 we have been using the survey findings to influence the fostering agenda and to create change by bringing the survey to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers.

This impact report provides a summary of the progress we have made in advocating for the State of the Nation's recommendations to be implemented. It is vitally important that we both listen to foster carers and then act on what we hear in order to influence and shape fostering policy and practice with the aim of ensuring that all fostered children receive the best possible care.

3. Policy context

In 2017 foster care was under the political spotlight. The Westminster Government undertook a fostering stocktake in England (the final report was published as 'Foster Care in England', but we will use its original name of the 'fostering stocktake' throughout this report) and published its findings and recommendations in February 2018, while the Education Committee embarked on a fostering inquiry which reported in December 2017. The Scottish Government began a three-year long 'root and branch' review of care, while there is currently a consultation in Northern Ireland on a looked after children's strategy. Among other things this strategy proposes to put the post-18 scheme (Going the Extra Mile) on a statutory footing and open it to young people in all types of foster placement. In Wales the National Fostering Framework project is currently in phase three of implementation.

The Fostering Network has worked closely with all the review and inquiry teams over the course of the year, as well as linking the review teams directly with foster carers and fostering services through our regional conferences, focus groups and meetings. In addition, we engaged a large number of young people in the fostering stocktake to ensure their voices were heard, while our fostering young champions have been heavily involved with the care review in Scotland. We provided written and oral evidence to the fostering stocktake and fostering inquiry in England, the Welsh Government's Public Accounts Committee inquiry into care experienced children and young people, and the care review in Scotland. We have also arranged numerous meetings with government ministers and civil servants across the UK on the issues raised in the survey. The report itself was cited on numerous occasions in the Department for Education's evidence review prior to the fostering stocktake.

4. State of the Nation 2016: key recommendations and impact

In this, the main section, we start by listing key findings from the 2016 survey in each area, before summarising our recommendations. We then discuss how we have worked to influence the policy agenda, led by example in pioneering best practice, and supported foster carers to deliver improvements in these areas.

4.1 Foster carer workforce

4.1.1 Training and support

Foster carers work within a tightly regulated service and are increasingly being required to have a thorough understanding of child development and the legislative system within which they work. Depending on the needs and age of the children they are looking after, foster carers also require an understanding of many areas including the education and health systems, mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency, child sexual exploitation and the asylum system.

As well as being equipped with the right training, foster carers need adequate ongoing support tailored to their development and the changing needs of the children in their care. Fostering is an immensely rewarding role but it can often also be challenging. Therefore the support foster carers receive from their fostering service and their peers is crucial and often makes a big difference to their resilience and therefore the stability and success of placements.

What foster carers told us:

- 49 per cent of foster carers did not have an agreed training plan for the next year.
- While only 14 per cent of foster carers had, at some point, moved to another service, 12 per cent had wanted to but had not. Moving fostering service usually requires the foster carer to go through the entire application and approval process again, which can be very time consuming.
- Where it was in place locally, nine out of 10 foster carers said that their peer support was either “essential” or “useful”. However 25 percent said that a foster care association – an important model of peer support – was not available to them.

What needs to change (training):

- **A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training.**
- **The support and training for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and matched to the developmental stages of the child.**

What we achieved:

We were encouraged that the Westminster Education Committee’s fostering inquiry report acknowledged our concerns over the standard, amount and content of training currently on offer to

foster carers in England. The committee recommended that the Government works with experts and organisations in the sector to develop high-quality training resources for foster carers and make them available nationwide¹. Disappointingly however, the stocktake did not recommend a learning and development framework.

The Welsh Government established the National Fostering Framework in 2015 to ensure that the best quality foster care placements are available to all children and young people, and that foster carers are valued, supported and receive excellent training. The National Fostering Framework has identified inconsistency in the quality and quantity of training, and the need for standardisation across Wales. As part of this work The Fostering Network and the Association for Fostering and Adoption Cymru were commissioned to consult and report back to the Government on developing a draft post-approval national training framework for foster carers. The report was submitted in March 2018 and we await next steps.

The Scottish Government commissioned the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to develop a national learning and development framework for foster carers, now known as the Standard for Foster Care. The SSSC consulted on the Standard in 2016 and in 2017, and published a summary of responses and the final Standard on its website². In 2017, the Scottish Government undertook to work with stakeholders to plan out the new learning and development Standard for foster care, which will be launched “in due course” according to the Minister for Childcare and Early Years in May 2018. We have been advised by the Scottish Government that implementation of the Standard is on hold while they give consideration to the progress and findings of the independent review of care currently underway and any implications there may be for the learning and development of foster carers.

The Fostering Achievement programme in Northern Ireland has provided workshops to foster carers and kinship carers on education (over a 10 year period this amounted to provision of training to 1,773 foster carers, and more than 2,000 received home visits from development workers). The Fostering Network was recently awarded a contract by the Health and Social Care Board to deliver a new programme which will enable us to continue delivering services directly to children and young people and foster carers to help improve educational outcomes for at least another three years. In addition we welcome the high priority the looked after children strategy proposes to give to foster carer training and support. The strategy is currently out for public consultation.

The Welsh Government has funded The Fostering Network to deliver the Fostering Wellbeing programme in the Cwm Taf region in Wales. This innovative pilot programme, taking learning from our successful Head, Heart, Hands and London Fostering Achievement programmes, is designed to test and evaluate social pedagogy principles in a foster care environment. As part of this work foster carer champions, who are experienced foster carers, will be providing one-to-one support to other foster carers around education and wellbeing and co-facilitating training for foster carers and other professionals.

¹ House of Commons Education Committee, Fostering 2017, paragraph 75

² <http://www.sssc.uk.com/about-the-sssc/multimedia-library/publications?task=document.viewdoc&id=3406>

The Fostering Potential programme in England aims to raise the educational outcomes of fostered children by increasing foster carers' knowledge and confidence in their role as 'first educators'. This programme builds on the successful London Fostering Achievement programme and will use experienced foster carers as education champions in the participating local authorities.

As well as working with governments to introduce a standardised learning and development framework across the UK, The Fostering Network continues to lead the way in foster carer training. To ensure foster carers are as up to date with new developments as possible and to respond to local needs as necessary, we have developed and delivered a number of new training packages since 2016 to 326 foster carers in Scotland, 346 carers in England, and 910 in Wales. This training has included issues such as long-term fostering, fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking children, running a foster carer support group, supporting young people staying after reaching 18 and on into independence, and joint training for foster carers and supervising social workers.

What needs to change (support):

- **Peer support opportunities should be enabled and promoted at a local level.**

What we achieved:

Since 2015, The Fostering Network has been leading good practice in this area. Our **Mockingbird programme**, which uses an extended family model to provide respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities, is currently being implemented in 18 fostering services across England. This programme uses the evidence-based US Mockingbird Family Model and translates it into a UK context. The project is funded in England by the Department for Education, and is included as a funding priority in Northern Ireland as outlined in the Executive Office's Outcomes for Government. The Mockingbird programme is due to be operating in all four nations of the UK by the end of 2019.

This innovative model is already showing results in improving placement stability and strengthening peer support. In England, the stocktake recommended that "*all Fostering Services should consider introducing structured peer support for carers*", and cited the Mockingbird Family Model as an example of good practice³.

Our evidence to the stocktake in England was strengthened with contribution from Mockingbird programme carers and young people on peer support, and we also gave separate oral evidence to the Education Committee's inquiry from a Mockingbird programme perspective.

The foster carers' charter in Wales, approved by the Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru, and delivered to every fostering service in the country, contains a commitment from every fostering service that they will "ensure that there is a local group, recognised by the fostering service, where you and your family can find support and share experiences with other fostering families." The same wording is also in the UK-wide charter, which has been distributed to every fostering service in the UK.

³ Narey, Sir M., and Owers, M. (2018) *Foster Care in England*, p.43.

In Wales our foster carer ambassadors are hosting and speaking at events, showcasing fostering achievements, and providing peer support to other carers. The Confidence in Care project is also providing 125 support groups for foster carers.

In Scotland we are delivering peer support opportunities through our Big Lottery-funded foster carer champions project, in which 16 experienced foster carers are available to provide ongoing support and advice to other carers across the country, particularly those who are new to fostering.

4.1.2 Status and authority

A foster carer is a key member of the team around the child and often, as the person who lives with and looks after the child on a day-to-day basis, the one who knows and understands them best. Sadly, however, it is common that they are not treated as such, nor given the appropriate decision-making authority to enable their fostered children to experience as normal a family life as possible without being singled out by their peers for being 'different'.

We believe that foster carers should be treated as equal members of the team around the child.

This issue of foster carer status has really come to the fore over the past two years, not least due a court case in Scotland and two forthcoming cases in England related to foster carer worker status, and the increasing prominence of two foster carer unions and an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on foster care workers' rights.

What foster carers told us:

- 32 per cent of foster carers felt that children's social workers did not treat them as an equal.
- 33 per cent of short-term placement carers felt that they were allowed to make appropriate decisions only 'some of the time', 'rarely' or even 'never'.

What needs to change (decision making):

- **Social workers should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process. This includes giving foster carers the authority to make everyday decisions – where this is stated in the care plan.**

What we achieved:

On delegated authority for decision making in England, the stocktake recommended that the Department for Education remind all local authorities that delegation of total authority for all category one decisions should apply automatically to foster carers – and to those looking after voluntarily accommodated children as well.⁴

Meanwhile the Education Committee reported that delegated authority was 'patchy, too infrequent, too limited and incoherent'⁵, and that foster carers hold greatest knowledge on the child – therefore any decision that doesn't include the carer is incomplete.

We welcomed the recommendations from the Education Committee. However we did not agree with the stocktake that a current lack of adherence to guidance can be addressed merely by the Department for Education reminding all local authorities of the guidance. Currently there is no recourse if local authorities are not adhering to this guidance and therefore we have informed the Government that this needs to go further: delegated authority must be integrated into Ofsted's regulatory framework. We await the Government's response to the stocktake and Education Committee report, due to be published in the summer of 2018.

⁴ Narey, Sir M., and Owers, M. (2018) *Foster Care in England*, pp 30-31.

⁵ House of Commons Education Committee (2017) *Fostering, First Report of Session 2017–19*, p 24.

In Scotland we have facilitated foster carers' input to guidance on decision making, which was then published as draft guidance by the Scottish Government. We are now pushing for this guidance to become formalised so that foster carers and the children they look after across Scotland can truly benefit from this new approach.

What needs to change (foster carer status):

- **Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.**

What we achieved:

This recommendation really is at the heart of the work that we do, cutting as it does across many of the other issues on which we made recommendations in 2016. This is because in any move towards improving foster care, the first step must always be to respect foster carers as the child care experts that they are.

We have therefore led on generating a national debate in this area in recent years, and have ensured that all of our submissions to policy initiatives have focused on this as a key issue, for example the fostering stocktake in England in 2017 and the Scottish care review in January 2018.

Our foster carers' charter campaign is calling for a charter to be adopted in every fostering service in the UK. Charters are documents agreed by the fostering service and foster carers, setting out each others' roles and responsibilities, and signed off by lead council members.

Charters help foster carers to get the recognition they both deserve and need, in order to provide children with the best possible care. Charters represent an important step, along with fees, improved status and authority, and better training, towards foster carers being treated and respected as the professionals that they are required to be. In Wales the charter programme has been boosted with a dedicated implementation toolkit for fostering services and foster carers.

We have seen a steady increase in the number of fostering services with active charters – there are now at least 63 in England alone – and we continue to push for them to be universally adopted.

The stocktake in England firmly stated that it believed foster carers are *not* professionals, but that they should be treated professionally. The only stocktake recommendation to improve status was that statutory guidance (Children Act 1989: Fostering Services, Volume 4 July 2015) be amended to list foster carers as people who must be involved in reviews – while we would of course agree with this, we are disappointed that the stocktake had little else to offer in this area.

The stocktake did make reference to the recent and forthcoming court cases around foster carer employment status (whereby foster carers have been applying for recognition of “worker” status under employment law, as opposed to self-employed status), but said that were it to be obtained it would radically and negatively affect the heart of fostering, and not be in the interests of children in care. The report encouraged the Government and local authorities to resist such change. We have publically questioned this assertion, because it is not evidence based. For example the

unsubstantiated claim that foster carers cannot play an equal role alongside ‘dispassionate professionals’⁶ could reinforce why social workers might – wrongly – choose not to involve foster carers in decisions about the children in their care.

We have also been concerned that, following the stocktake report and the change in minister, the Westminster Government has started to refer to foster carers in England as “foster parents”, further diminishing their status. We have been pushing back against this in the media through blog posts and articles from our Chief Executive, and the social media campaign #morethanaparent.

The Fostering Network has been awarded a grant for a 12-month project to explore the impact of exit interviews on retention rates, and find out which themes and reasons contribute to the desire to leave the profession.

We aim to discover excellence in practice within the exit interview arena and create a toolkit – a collection of easily accessible, customisable processes, templates and policies – to support the introduction, implementation and sustainability of a robust exit interview standard. It is our intention that this project leads to processes that enhance foster carer recruitment and retention strategies. We plan to explore whether specific ideas can be implemented that support those carers who may be considering leaving foster care and, ultimately, to enhance placement stability for looked after children by improving retention figures and maximising matching capabilities.

What needs to change (foster carer status):

- **Registers (centrally held lists) of approved foster carers should be created in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.**

A national register would serve a number of purposes and is the first step towards improving foster carer status. It will lead to increased portability of the workforce, enabling foster carers to transfer providers more easily and not have to go through the assessment process again. It will support the creation of a standardised pre- and post-approval training framework linked to the register. It will improve safeguarding of children and young people, as currently there is no way of knowing that an applicant previously fostered elsewhere if the carer chooses to withhold the information. Finally it will improve the formal status of foster carers to allow the role to be more recognised and valued within the sector and by the general public.

What we achieved:

The fostering inquiry provided a forum to debate the pros and cons of a centrally held register for foster carers in England. The inquiry heard from many organisations that felt a centrally held register could improve conditions for the foster care workforce. The committee accepted our recommendations that a central list would improve safeguarding and support increased portability of the workforce as well ‘centralising training and development resources’. They felt that the benefits of this list would outweigh the bureaucratic effort involved in developing and maintaining a central list⁷. The stocktake said that there was merit in the idea of a register for vacancy management purposes.

⁶ Narey, Sir M., and Owers, M. (2018) *Foster Care in England*, p.42.

⁷ House of Commons Education Committee, *Fostering 2017*, paragraph 82

We continue to progress the idea of a national register with governments across the UK as well as national organisations such as unions and regulatory bodies. For example in Wales and Scotland we have been clear in our responses to policy initiatives such as the Public Accounts Committee and care review that national registers are required in all countries across the UK.

4.1.3 Finances: allowances and fees

All parts of the UK except Scotland have national minimum allowances that should be given to foster carers to meet the cost of looking after a child. In contrast, there is no minimum recommended fee for a foster carer's time and skills in any country of the UK, nor even a requirement for fees to be paid by fostering services.

What foster carers told us:

- Only 42 per cent of foster carers felt that their allowance met the full cost of looking after fostered children
- 57 per cent of foster carers reported that they received a fee
- 74 per cent described retainer fees as 'could be better' or 'poor'.

What needs to change (allowances):

- **Governments should revisit the minimum levels of fostering allowances to ensure they are sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a fostered child and the Scottish Government must introduce minimum recommended allowances.**

What we achieved:

Following our research into allowances since 2016, the payment of allowances for former foster carers looking after care leavers has emerged as an issue, with many fostering services reducing payments to foster carers once the young person reaches 18. This can lead to a foster carer being unable to afford to continue to provide them with a home. **Therefore we are additionally calling for post-18 minimum allowances for foster carers to be introduced across the UK (post-16 in Scotland), with such an allowance being sufficient to cover the cost of looking after a young person.**

There was clear evidence in State of the Nation 2016 that the current allowance levels were not meeting the full cost of looking after fostered children; only 42 per cent of respondents felt the allowance met the cost compared with 80 per cent in 2014.

We undertook our usual comprehensive allowances survey throughout the UK which once again provided a detailed benchmark of allowances. In England we found that 22 local authorities paid allowances below the Department for Education minimum recommended allowance levels in one or more age bands. As a result of this work in 2017/18 we were pleased that eight local authorities in England then pledged to bring their allowances in line with the minimum.

We were also pleased to see the information we provided on allowances cited in the Education Committee's inquiry report and for the committee to echo our recommendation that the Government should: "Consult on national minimum allowance levels, to investigate the level of funding needed to match rises in living costs and allow carers to meet the needs of those they are

caring for”⁸ In contrast, the stocktake report did not support the need for a review of foster carer allowances.

Our campaigning work in Scotland led to the national minimum allowances being considered outside the scope of the current care review. This is good news because we were concerned that if the issue of allowances were to be considered as part of the care review, which is due to report in 2020, it could lead to further delay.

Instead a separate allowance review group has been set up, which we sit on, and this summer it will make recommendations to the Scottish Government around fostering, kinship and adoption allowances. We have expressed disappointment that this review is not taking the opportunity to specify a national minimum allowance for continuing care (when care leavers continue to live with former foster carers), and have encouraged all foster carers in Scotland to lobby for the inclusion of this important safeguard for care leavers’ stability.

In Wales we undertook a comprehensive survey of fees and allowances, which formed the key evidence for the National Fostering Framework’s 2017 recommendations to streamline fees and allowances. A National Fostering Framework working group has now been established, with representation from each Welsh region to develop a plan as to how greater harmonisation can be achieved.

We are continuing our critique of allowances levels throughout the UK with our annual surveys, and have arranged meetings with foster carers and relevant ministers so that they could hear directly about the impact on the children of financial pressures on foster families.

What needs to change (fees):

- **Foster care must be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills, preferably via tiered payment scheme.**

What we achieved:

Following the State of the Nation in 2016, we undertook **a more in-depth survey** of foster carers about pay in 2017, with almost 2,000 responses in total. Nearly all (98 per cent) respondents said that they think foster carers should get paid, but only 58 per cent of foster carers said they receive a fee which is separate from the allowance.

As well as asking foster carers themselves, in 2017 we surveyed all local authority fostering services in England, Scotland, and Wales about fees for their foster carers. **This survey** found that, for example, nearly all (94 per cent) of foster carers in England are paid at a rate below the national living wage for a notional 40 hour week (£300), and that over half (53 per cent) of local authority fostering services in England paid no fee at all to foster carers on the lowest band. This survey also highlighted the alarming disparity in pay depending on where a foster carer happens to live. For example, one scenario we considered showed an annual difference of £23,367.24

⁸ House of Commons Education Committee, Fostering 2017, paragraph 57

between carers living in two different English local authorities. The pattern was similar in Wales and Scotland.

Both the stocktake and the Education Committee did not think pay was an issue in England. The Education Committee was silent on the matter, while the stocktake believed current payments to carers were adequate and presented no obstacle to recruitment or retention. The stocktake went as far as to say: “Many new carers, those looking after children in the 0-4 age bracket and without complex needs, as well as kinship or family and friends foster carers, will – understandably – not receive a fee.”⁹ We were very disappointed with these responses, which run so clearly contrary to the opinions of the vast majority of foster carers.

While the stocktake report did agree with us that a tiered approach to paying fees is to be recommended, we have made it very clear in our response to Government that we firmly disagree with any notion of some foster carers being undeserving of pay. We will continue to campaign for all foster carers to be paid. It is a matter of social justice: they are the only part of the children’s workforce who routinely work without pay.

⁹ Narey, Sir M., and Owers, M. (2018) *Foster Care in England*, p.44.

4.2 Foster care practice

Children in care still experience too many unnecessary moves, which impacts upon their ability to feel settled. There are many reasons for unnecessary moves, including a lack of allegations support for foster carers, financial considerations, poor information sharing, and slow progress in getting children into the right placement first time. When moves do happen, contact can be denied between the young person and their former foster carer, which can cause feelings of abandonment and loss.

4.2.1 Moving placements

What foster carers told us:

- Just under half of foster carers (49 per cent) said they had experienced a placement ending when they felt it was not in the child's best interests.
- For the majority of these (61 per cent), the ending had not been preceded by a review.
- Around a quarter of foster carers rarely or never keep in contact with former fostered children.
- Only four in 10 foster carers always or usually keep in contact with former fostered children.

What needs to change (placement endings):

- **Responsible authorities in England and Wales should adhere to existing regulations that a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held.**

What we achieved:

The Education Committee said that placement breakdowns should be prevented by encouraging foster care providers to resolve issues earlier and offer support to build a family environment.

The stocktake recommended that independent reviewing officers (IROs) should be abolished. We publically opposed this recommendation, joining forces with a number of other charities under the Together for Children banner. IROs play a role in placement stability: they are crucial in advocating for the child's interests in their journey through the care system, and they are responsible for chairing end of placement reviews to ensure the placement is ending in the child's best interests.

Our evidence to the Wales Public Accounts Committee inquiry into looked after children, and to the education consultation commissioned by the Welsh Government, also both made the case for there to be reviews before the end of a placement to ensure the reasons for ending the placement were in the child's best interests.

What needs to change (relationships):

- **A much higher value must be placed on the relationships a child has throughout their lives, including those with former foster carers, and these relationships must be protected and nurtured.**

What we achieved:

The England stocktake report stated that when children move placement they should routinely be consulted about the adults and children who are important to them and, unless it is not in their interests, contact with those adults and children should be encouraged and facilitated.

The Education Committee agreed that contact with former foster carers must be enabled, but stated this only in reference to care leavers.

We agree with both of these suggestions, but believe more robust action is necessary. Therefore our **Keep Connected campaign** has been calling on the UK's governments to introduce guidance and regulations to help fostering services support the bond between foster carer and child as they move to another home. As part of this campaign we have facilitated our campaigners to lobby their MPs to improve guidance in this area.

4.2.2 Information sharing

It is crucial that foster carers receive all of the relevant information about children as soon as possible prior to the placement beginning. Better information sharing leads to improved matching, which in turn can assist with stability of placement. For example, we have found through The Fostering Network's Muslim Fostering Project that a child's identity is not consistently being explored to the fullest at the care planning stage, which is placing additional strain on foster carers as they then have to undertake self-directed research to be able better to meet the religious needs of the children in their care.

What foster carers told us:

- A third (31 per cent) of foster carers reported that they were "rarely" or "never" given all the information about their fostered child prior to placement

What needs to change:

- **Foster carers should always be given all of the available information they need about a child.**

What we achieved:

The England stocktake felt that information sharing was a two-way process, and the child should be better prepared with information about their new home as well as vice versa. The report cautioned that when sharing information about a child with a prospective carer, local authorities must be careful not to 'demonise' the child by over-emphasising negative aspects of their background. We were pleased that the Education Committee also recommended better information sharing.

4.2.3 Allegations

Unfortunately, facing an allegation is something that many foster carers will experience during their fostering career. For example in 2016/2017, there were 2,525 allegations made against foster carers in England alone. Just under two-thirds of these (1,665) were made by fostered children. The majority of these required no further action¹⁰.

Once an allegation has been made it is inevitably a distressing time for the foster carer, and often carers and their families are left with little support or information about the process, leaving them feeling isolated from their fostering services and other foster carers.

What foster carers told us:

- A third (33 per cent) of foster carers had experienced an allegation, and of these:
 - 21 per cent felt it was not easy to access independent support
 - 47 per cent were not offered support for the children in their household
 - 42 per cent were unsupported financially
 - 55 per cent were unclear on timescales
 - 28 per cent of foster carers had fostered children removed during the investigation.

What needs to change:

- **A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations, and ensuring adherence to timescales.**
- **Foster carers must be made aware of their entitlement to independent support and should have access to independent support when needed.**

What we achieved:

The stocktake report felt that Department for Education guidance on allegations did not need to be changed, but local authorities should ensure it is followed in all cases, with carers made to feel confident that they would be supported properly through the process. We felt that this was quite a dismissive attitude towards the seriousness of the issues around allegations, the practical and emotional impact facing an allegation has on foster carers, and the stability of placements for children and young people in care.

Meanwhile the Education Committee said that the Public Interest Disclosure Act should be extended to cover foster carers, so that they are protected during proceedings or when raising concerns of their own and safeguarded from the consequences of malicious or unfounded accusations.

While we agreed with the Education Committee that foster carers should be within scope of the Public Interest Disclosure Act for whistleblowing purposes, we do not believe this will help in terms of allegations.

¹⁰ source: [Ofsted Fostering in England 2016 to 2017](#)

Over the past two years we have regularly raised the issue of poor allegations support both with decision makers and in the media, including blogs and articles from our chief executive highlighting that children are removed from their foster homes before usual child protection thresholds have been met.

We also continue to provide our own support to members on allegations through our helplines in every country, the Fostering Community Champions project in Scotland, and independent advice and support services to foster carers. The independent support service is available to foster carers in England and Wales, and it specifically supports foster carers who are subject to an allegation. The number of cases since 2016 has increased, as more and more foster carers realise this support is something they should be provided with. In the last independent support service reporting year (April 2016 to March 2017), of the 600 foster carers receiving support 45 per cent of cases were linked directly to an allegation.

We have been delivering masterclasses and workshops in Wales on how to deal with the allegations process. These courses have been delivered to 80 foster carers, 10 independent fostering providers and seven local authority fostering services.

In Scotland, we also continue to deliver our Managing Allegations Against Foster Carers training course. From April 2017 to March 2018, the training course was delivered to 38 foster carers.

In addition to supporting our members through the allegations process, we are also launching a new UK initiative in May 2018 to explore current practice in supporting allegations. We are best placed to bring together best practice, identify common challenges and produce resources to support the management of allegations across the UK fostering community. The task group leading this work comprises representatives from the four nations and a wide range of different roles from the team around the child. The group is due to report back and publish any support materials in April 2019.

5. Conclusion

This report has summed up how 2016's State of the Nation's Foster Care survey has directed our work over the past two years – in terms of lobbying decision makers to improve foster care at government level, supporting foster carers directly, and developing and implementing innovative new projects.

The detailed insight into fostering that the State of the Nation survey provides is invaluable for The Fostering Network. We are an organisation that is at the forefront of creating positive change to foster care and without listening to – and acting upon – the voices of foster carers across the UK we cannot hope to be genuine advocates of this vital workforce that improves children's lives every day.

So, while 2017 saw significant policy and political focus on fostering, it was ultimately a year of review, introspection and discussion, and in 2018 we look forward to the governments of the UK responding to the reviews by developing and implementing a framework for reform and improvement of the fostering system.

The State of the Nation is a biennial survey and the next one will be launched in summer 2018. This will be an opportunity to track progress and changes in attitudes on key fostering issues. Themes covered within the 2018 survey will include foster carer finance, status and authority, access to mental health provision and allegations. As with every survey, the results will underpin our policy and campaigning work over the coming years.

Kate Lawson and Robert Cann

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