

The Fostering Network

What is needed to enable looked after children to achieve in education?

A Report of a consultation to identify what foster carers in Wales say they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education.

August 2015

EVERY CHILD • EVERY CARER • EVERY DAY

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About the authors

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Alain Thomas is the principal consultant at Alain Thomas Consultancy Ltd which was established to provide support to organisations involved in community development and social welfare. Alain Thomas delivers research, evaluation, organisational development and training services to public and third sector organisations in Wales, other parts of Europe and the developing world. Alain, as an associate of The Fostering Network, and has facilitated numerous fostering focus groups to review, strategic plan & evaluate fostering initiatives.

Acknowledgements

This report has involved many foster carers from across Wales who have been both generous with their time and expertise. We would like to extend our thanks and gratitude to them, as this report is grounded in, and informed by, the everyday experiences of foster carers.

Executive Summary

This report of a consultation carried out for Welsh Government by The Fostering Network Wales during July 2015, aims to identify what foster carers in Wales say they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education.

Two focus groups were carried out, one in North Wales and one in the South, involving a total of 20 foster carers. The focus groups were complemented by a structured survey completed by a further 70 foster carers.

The findings of the survey mainly supported those of the focus groups and the report was able to make some clear recommendations for action.

Foster carers believed additional funding was needed and that they should be more involved in deciding how the existing Pupil Deprivation Grant was used. Extra tutoring, professional support for emotional issues, and access to activities should be available to looked after children in all schools and provided flexibly to avoid stigmatising the child.

Some training is available to foster carers on a range of issues but there is probably insufficient provision and more foster carers need to be encouraged to access this training and other forms of support which might include peer support. More training about the needs of looked after children is required for education professionals who should also be encouraged to take up existing opportunities to better understand the needs of looked after children for example attending activities run by local foster care support groups, foster carer associations and activities led by third sector organisations such as The Fostering Network.

Many foster carers want to be more involved in their children's education. The report suggests ways in which this might be achieved including ensuring all foster carers are involved in determining the use of the pupil deprivation grant and in formulating their child's personal education plan.

The impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school, and respite care provision.

Foster carers can contribute to these actions in many different ways but the fundamental point is that they have specialist knowledge of their foster children which should be given more recognition. This expertise needs to be engaged to the benefit of professionals, the services they provide, and the children themselves. The registration of foster carers, for example, with the Care Council Wales would be a positive step to this end.

Finally, recognising the status and authority of foster carers within the children's workforce needs to be recognised and supported. In order for children to achieve academically and, foster carers must be regarded as partners in the team around the child and they must be granted greater decision making powers on everyday education issues, with a presumption that they can make decisions regarding the children they foster. The Fostering Network wants a society that values the important role of foster carers by recognising their status, giving them the authority they require, meeting their learning, development and support needs and ensuring they are properly remunerated.

In order for this to be achieved, the Fostering Network has long argued that the role of the foster carer must be seen as a professional one. It requires skill, knowledge, expertise, self-awareness, commitment, the ability to work as part of a team, to maintain standards, and to provide a high quality, effective service to children and young people who most need it. Foster carers must be key partners in the team that works together to secure the best possible outcomes for a child in care.

1.0. Introduction

1.1 About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network Wales welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Welsh Government's consultation on raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales

The Fostering Network was established in 1974 and is the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in fostering, bringing together all those who provide, plan and deliver foster care.

Our UK membership includes almost all local authorities and registered providers of foster care. We have a strong membership base in Wales with over 5,400 foster carers, all local authorities fostering services and the majority of independent fostering agencies.

The Fostering Network is the leading charity in Wales representing the voice of foster carers, their families, looked after children and care leavers. In Wales, we have a strong track record of delivering real improvements for looked after children and those who care for them.

All of our work is designed to improve the lives of children and young people in foster care. We advocate strongly for improved support for children and young people in care, specifically to support their emotional wellbeing, recognising their complex and difficult backgrounds. We provide an extensive range of publications, training, information and advice on all fostering issues. We work with our members to implement good practice, informed by our research and experience, to ensure foster care is improved for children. We campaign to improve the support that foster

carers receive and work with fostering services to address the shortage of foster carers. We also ensure that the voices of fostered children are heard at the heart of the foster care system.

Our staff includes foster carers, registered social workers and other experts from across the spectrum of foster care, including those that have been fostered themselves. Together we have many years' experience and unrivalled expertise. That is why we are the voice of foster care.

In terms of organisational expertise, user consultation consistently shows our support, advice and training are highly valued:

- We manage the Welsh Government funded Fosterline Wales.
- Our *The Skills to Foster*, the definitive pre-approval training for foster carers is used by the vast majority of fostering services using our *Train the Trainers* approach and ethos around co-delivery by foster carers and fostering service representatives.
- Our range of projects include Fostering Communities (Big Lottery funded) brought together over 5,000 foster carers across Wales to improve their skills and confidence in caring for children, and developed effective and sustainable support groups. This project excelled in engaging 'hard to reach' groups including male foster carers, and we gained unrivalled insight into issues facing foster families in Wales today and potential solutions to the challenges they face.
- The Fostering Network is leading the Confidence in Care consortium of six charities and academic bodies which was been awarded £4.75 million from the Big Lottery Fund to deliver a five- year programme aiming to improve the life chances of looked after children across Wales. This programme will primarily be achieved through the training of 1,500 foster, kinship and residential carers using the Fostering Changes Programme.

We have the expertise and track record for engaging and working with some of Wales' most vulnerable children, and foster carers in Wales. We have a long history and extensive experience of fostering community engagement, consultation, capacity-building, building consensus and action planning through participatory appraisal and event facilitation. Successful engagement with stakeholders is a pre-requisite for much of the planning work we do.

As the leading charity supporting foster carers across the UK, The Fostering Network has unrivalled expertise in consulting with, engaging with and representing the views and ideas of foster carers. We are able assist Welsh Government by:

- Organising and leading on stakeholder workshops and events.

- Presentation of technical information.
- Facilitation of group discussions.
- Recording and reporting.
- Community engagement- drop-in events, focus groups, visioning exercises.
- Preparation of consultation documents.
- Bespoke consultancy and advice.
- Training for practitioners, foster carers and other stakeholders.

The Fostering Network Wales has an impressive track record of introducing and rolling out transformational programmes and services across Wales. We lead the fostering agenda, influencing and shaping policy practice at every level. We also develop and pilot new approaches to delivering foster care and training and support to foster carers. This means we are constantly improving our expertise and knowledge, and so our advice, information and support are always up to date and available to Welsh Government.

1.2. About this Report

This is a report of a consultation with foster carers in Wales carried out for the Welsh Government by The Fostering Network Wales during July 2015.

Looked-after children mostly come from a very disadvantaged population and many have had disrupted schooling before they became into care. In the past, this has been used as an 'excuse' as to why looked-after children have such poor levels of attainment. Increasingly, it is being recognised that the public care system may itself be contributing to these poor outcomes. Even when this is not the case, it is unarguable that the public care system is not doing enough to ensure that looked-after children achieve their potential or indeed support foster carers to help them achieve this.

The consultation aims to identify what foster carers in Wales say what they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education. The report aims to identify what practical action can be taken and how foster carers can contribute to achieving the outcomes of improved ambition and educational outcomes for looked after children in Wales.

1.3. Methodology

Two focus groups were carried out, one in North Wales and one in the South, involving a total of 20 foster carers. The focus groups were structured by a topic guide (appendix one). The seven broad themes of the topic guide were drawn from research and consultations that have been carried out previously. The themes were deliberately very broad in order to capture views about a wide range of issues. A

screening question also invited foster carers to add any other comments they wished.

The focus groups were complemented by a structured survey based around the seven broad themes used by the topic guide. A total of 70 foster carers from across Wales responded to the survey and these were different to the foster carers who took part in the focus groups.

The main research objectives as outlined by Welsh Government guided the design of the focus group discussion guides and online questionnaire.

The interviews and focus groups were structured so that the following questions could be answered:

- Finance – would extra financial support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so what should this extra financial support be for?
- Support – Would additional (non-financial) support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so, what kinds of support would help?
- Training – would additional training either for foster carers or for other professionals help them improve educational outcomes for foster children? If so what kind of training and who should be trained?
- Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and foster children. Are the hopes and expectations that people have for foster children's education, and those that foster children have for themselves the same as for other children?
- Involvement in Education. How much are you involved in your foster children's' education?
- Relationships between schools and foster carers. Does the nature of the relationship between schools and foster carers affect educational outcomes for foster children?
- Stability. Do current arrangements offer enough stability to foster children, or do changes of placement or changes of school have an impact on their education?
- Anything else – is there anything else you want to add that we have not already covered?

The findings of the survey mainly supported those of the focus groups which increases confidence in the validity of the findings and allows the report to make clear recommendations for action. Where the survey and focus group findings diverge the report makes more tentative recommendations.

2.0. Findings

2.1. Finance

Would extra financial support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so what should this extra financial support be for?

70% of survey respondents said that extra financial support would help them, or their foster children with their education.

Many participants were unclear about what, if any, additional financial support was currently available.

Several participants provided information to the groups that extra funding was given to schools by Welsh Government to benefit looked after children and others (The Pupil Deprivation Grant).

The discussion showed there was a general perception amongst foster carers that how this grant was used varied widely across local authority areas and between individual schools.

The general view was that the grant should be used to benefit individual children. Participants also said that they, as foster carers, should be involved by the school in deciding how this funding should be used. Some participants said they were currently involved in this way.

“The school came to me and asked how we can spend this money. It’s £900 and it has to be spent specifically on that child. Some schools don’t do that”.

One participant from North Wales was familiar with arrangements in Cheshire where the amount allocated to each child was higher and where they had been involved in deciding how their child’s “pupil premium” should be used.

“In (Cheshire) a pupil premium (of approximately £1900) is paid to schools per year. This can be used for educational things including private tuition. They are also given a lap top etc. It’s more strict than it was but having access to this type of money would make a real difference”.

These examples of good practice contrasted with the experience of other participants. Specific examples were provided of one school imposing restrictions on what additional funding could be spent on and of another using the pupil deprivation grant as part of their general spend.

“The school told me this money can’t be used for tutoring, there were loads of things we couldn’t spend the money on, the school said tutoring was definitely out”.

“Our school spent the money on a school trip and getting a computer”.

Some participants said that they did not know how the additional funding had been used in their area.

“(My local authority) has taken it and I don’t know what they have done with it”

“If some money were allocated to schools under the heading ‘looked after children’ then more consultation and accountability would exist.

Several participants said that they believed there was no extra funding available for looked after children in their area.

“Our council is not funding anything extra”.

It is clear that although most foster carers were aware that some extra funding was available for looked after children they were not aware of exactly how much, nor of how this Pupil Deprivation Grant allocated. Most foster carers had not been involved in deciding the use of the grant in relation to their child.

A key theme in the discussions was the impact of the budget cuts to local authority services. There was a general view that overall view that spending constraints had adversely affected services for looked after children. Foster carers felt that, this would result in additional costs for statutory services in the longer term. One participant presented the argument very clearly:

“You might have a court directive that the child needs some kind of therapy, which is ignored, because there is not enough money in the budget. The social workers try to do good, but the social services do not give them the money. It needs a change at the government level to decide how important this problem is and how much money they will resource it with. It would be cheaper in the long run, because if these kids turn to crime and doing drugs it is a continual cost to the state”.

2.1.2 What actions need to be taken?

There is a clear recommendation from foster carers that there needs to be funding available to looked after children that is tailored towards their individual needs.

Much of the foster carer's discussion was focused around the Pupil Deprivation Grant. However, The Fostering Network believes that educational funding should offer directly practical and financial support to foster families and that foster carers should have say in how it is allocated. Such funding should recognise the crucial role that foster carers play in encouraging and supporting children and young people in foster care to gain a sense of achievement and to reach their potential.

Foster carers believed that additional funding should be made available to benefit individual looked after children in a consistent manner across all local authorities in Wales and that Foster Carers should be able to influence how this funding is used in relation to their child. Examples of good practice in using the pupil deprivation grant and involving foster carers in this should be identified and lessons drawn from these. Steps should be taken to increase the understanding foster carers have of the pupil deprivation grant, and what it may be used for.

The Fostering Network recognises that the Pupil Deprivation Grant enables regional consortia, working with schools and looked after children in education coordinators, to determine more strategic and effective ways in which the education of looked after children can be supported. However, foster carers are very clear that funding should be made available where children and young people in foster care can reach their potential and gain a sense of achievement in terms of academic achievement, personal development, interests and hobbies – and that foster carers as 'first educators' of the children in their care should be part of this process.

2.1.3 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers would be able to participate in discussions with teachers and other professionals to help decide the best use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant for their child.

2.2. Support

2.2.1 Would additional (non-financial) support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so, what kinds of support would help?

64% of survey respondents believed that additional support would help foster children with their education.

Foster carers said they would welcome three broad types of support during the focus group discussions: access to more activities to help build self-esteem and self-confidence; additional tutoring, and professional support for emotional issues.

Foster Carers, in this consultation, regarded themselves very much as supporting children but in turn receiving little support from educational practitioners

themselves. Participants said they would like help and advice so they could support children with their education at home; they felt this could be combined with specialist help when they needed it.

There was widespread recognition in both groups, of the many factors that may cause looked after children to fall behind with their education: instability including changes of school, placement or support workers, emotional issues, and poor attendance or exclusion from school.

All participants appeared to be in agreement that additional educational input, provided in a flexible way to suit the needs of each child, was necessary to help compensate for the educational disadvantage experienced by many looked after children. This support should be provided in a timely manner when needed in order to avoid compounding the problem.

“My child was excluded from school for 9 months while they tried to find him a placement. The money could have been used for tuition during that period to stop him falling so far behind”.

“Our child is at a behaviour centre now. Having a tutor would have been so helpful early on but he’s years behind now”.

“In reading he’s four or five years behind but he missed 18 months off school at an early age. I found out he could get extra input just before his GCSE’s. If he could have had it earlier he could have really benefited”.

An additional consideration was that looked after children did not want to be seen as different to their peers and that in order to avoid this it may be necessary to provide additional support outside of the school, including during the evenings, at weekends or during school holidays. Children and young people in care, more than anything, wanted to ‘fit in’ and not appear to be different in any way.

A similar argument was presented by foster carers concerning the importance of professional support to address the emotional needs of looked after children. The background of looked after children make it more likely they will experience emotional difficulties. Additional and timely professional support was felt to be important to address those difficulties at an early stage. Such early intervention would help the child and avoid additional burdens on support services later.

There was much discussion around the role of CAMHS in supporting the looked after child. Attendees detailed numerous areas where the service had been found to be lacking in its provision of early intervention therapeutic care for looked-after children. These included failures focussed on not being accessible, responsive or child-centred.

'CAMHS has always been dire. It's hard to get them involved. The thresholds are too high; they won't see a child unless it's something life-threatening. The waiting lists are too long'

"If only I could go back to the beginning. (M) came when she was four. She sat there, said nothing, she wasn't a problem but she was severely damaged. It would have been really useful to have professional support to help with the neglect and damage received at an early age. If input and therapy was earlier it would really have helped sort her later behaviour problems".

Foster carers argued that activities to build self-esteem and self-confidence were highly valuable. Participants presented many compelling examples of how such activities, outside of a school setting, had helped young people in their care to develop.

"My two boys joined the army cadets, one loves it, it's like someone has flipped a switch in him. We need free access to outside activity centres".

"Our two girls love dancing after trying it out. We now pay £30 per week per child ourselves for them to go. It's made such a difference to their self-esteem and confidence. It's been invaluable in many ways, it's even meant they can now sustain friendships in school".

Fostering Achievements Programme, Northern Ireland Managed by The Fostering Network

In 2006 as part of the Children and Young people's funding Package, the Government provided a £1.04 million grant to a partnership of two charitable voluntary organizations, the Fostering Network and Include Youth, to set up and manage the Fostering Achievement project.

Since April 2009 Fostering Network has been the sole managers of the Fostering Achievement Scheme. The current funding package for Fostering Achievement is approximately 1.4 million a year, with the Health and Social Care Board being the main funder, with additional funding from the Department of Education.

This is an innovative and practical project, having the aim of equipping and supporting foster carers in Northern Ireland, so that they are better placed to help those children and young people in their care to:

- gain a sense of achievement
- realise their potential
- realise ambition- the scheme provides equipment such as computers, sports equipment and musical instruments and tuition for a particular subject, dance or driving lessons.

This aim is being achieved on a daily basis throughout Northern Ireland with children and young people learning new skills, developing and enhancing natural talents, pursuing new interests, improving learning and gaining a real sense of self-worth and achievement.

Fostering Achievement views education in its broadest sense and hence promotes learning and development in a variety of ways including fun based activities.

To view a report on this scheme please visit :

http://www.fosteringachievement.net/fs/doc/FA%20Annual%20Report%202010_2011.pdf

Two examples of discounted activity schemes accessible to looked after children were provided by participants. The Conwy “FIT card” scheme (The Conwy Fit Membership scheme is open to all Conwy residents, Conwy Fostering Service pays the subscription for fostering families. It includes access to Fitness Suites, Swimming Pools, over fitness Classes and Leisure Centres A similar scheme in Flint was cited- the Flint “Activate” scheme. Foster carers said such schemes they had helped their foster children.

“It’s a great help as instead of paying £4.50 per session it’s free and it’s flexible when they go too. This definitely contributes to the children’s well-being”.

“My child liked archery which would have been £10 per session. It’s great as they can try things out and find what they like. All the family are included in the scheme too”.

2.2.2 What actions need to be taken?

Early intervention and timely assessments

The Fostering Network recommends that that all children in care should have prompt and high quality, holistic assessments of their physical, emotional and mental health needs and regular reviews. It is important that CAMHS deliver effectiveness to ensure that children requiring early help and those who have specialist needs have access to timely, child centred assessment. Looked after children, have complex social and educational needs, require the co-ordination of different agencies.

A child who is happy will achieve improved educational outcomes.

The funding of children’s and young people’s extracurricular activities

As the Fostering Network has already stated in our previous education consultation response in May 2015-‘Success breeds success’- it is essential that fostered children have access to a range of extracurricular activities as these can make a significant contribution to children’s development.

For some children, attending a local youth provision may be what is required; others may want to attend a dance class or music lessons. Some activities may not require any funding, others will. Obtaining funding for looked-after children to participate in extracurricular activities is at the discretion of the children’s social worker or supervising social worker. Foster carers report that such discretion is exercised variably, and can be subject to significant financial constraints. It is demeaning; time consuming and counterproductive to have to ‘beg’ for a resource that the foster carer believes will contribute positively to a child’s self-esteem and wellbeing. Foster carers are in the best position to know the children they foster and they also know the availability of local and community resources. Foster carers must be empowered and enabled to make use of their knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the children they look after.

Fostering services should make available a sum of money that can be drawn down by a foster carer who purchases a supplementary activity for a child. Within agreed financial limits, foster carers should be entitled to this funding on ‘proof of purchase’ of a legitimate supplementary activity. Consideration should be given to this budget being held and administered by a separate body from the local authority, possibly a local voluntary organisation, local foster care association, or indeed the Fostering Network Wales who have proven capabilities in this managing such schemes.

2.2.4 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers as ‘first educators’ can help identify the learning and emotional needs of their children. They need to be more involved by professionals so that they are better able to complement the tutoring and professional support their children receive.

The Fostering Network as already stated in our May 2015 education consultation response to WG that there must be funding for remedial and supplementary education/coaching. Some local authorities have provided supplementary funding to schools, recognising the additional input that may be required because a child is looked after. Such funding is welcome and should be available to all schools, for all looked-after children. In addition, we believe it is essential that fostering services have the ability to provide immediate educational support to foster carers and immediate supplementary educational input to fostered children. Children would not need to be on a school roll to secure such help and they would not need to wait until the school had assessed that extra input was required. All fostering services need to have the ability to provide immediate and/or supplementary education and coaching for any looked-after child who could benefit from this.

Foster carers must be given a clear mandate to represent the child's need to the school and/or to other educational professionals.

The Welsh Government should issue guidance on the standing of foster carers with regard to schools. Such guidance should clarify the relative authority of the education laws and laws governing parental responsibility.

Foster carers can help identify the kind of activities which would most benefit their children. They can encourage their children to sample different activities and enable them to attend those that work for them.

2.3. Training

2.3.1. Would additional training either for foster carers or for other professionals help them improve educational outcomes for foster children? If so what kind of training and who should be trained?

Participants strongly believed that most teachers were not able to recognise nor respond effectively to the particular needs of looked after children. This was one of the most forcefully made points during the focus group discussions generated many comments along the lines of the following:

"Teachers cannot cope with behavioural problems. They just exclude the children. They almost say it's your problem, you sort it out because we can't"

"... the teachers need better training. You are not taught about attachment issues, vital stuff that teachers need to know about. If you are aware that a child is a LAC child then you should be aware that that child has extra needs and needs attention and care".

"Teachers are busy but they may not know about foster caring. It might help if they understood more what the role was".

All participants appeared to agree upon the need for further training or awareness raising about looked after children for teachers.

Many participants also argued that training or awareness raising was needed for a wide range of professionals who interacted with looked after children. Such training should raise awareness of specific issues such as promoting a better understanding of attachment and it should also aim to promote a better understanding of the role of the foster carer.

"All professionals involved, including teachers, secretaries, dinner ladies, escorts, lolly pop persons etc., need to be involved and understand what's going on for these kids.

He used to get shouted at lots at school and he used to spend nights in floods of tears. He had a major food issue but they didn't understand and thought he was just making trouble. If they had understood they could have avoided adding to his problems and had less behaviour issues on their hands".

"I was asked recently to talk to some teaching students about my role as a foster carer and how difficult some of the children I work with find school. I was amazed that they don't actually get taught about foster children and the difficulties they have within schools and how they are often perceived as naughty. Perhaps this would be a good place to start, for if these educators actually had some understanding of why maybe our children would feel a little more accepted instead of rejected".

Several examples were provided of information being offered to professionals not being accepted or taken up. One participant reported that their Foster Care Forum offered training for all involved with looked after children but professionals did not attend. Another described how information they had prepared about their foster child had been rejected.

"We do put on talks but they never come".

"I prepared a report detailing my child's background, triggers, and all about behaviour strategies. I was told by the headmaster that all that the teacher needed to know was that the child was from a challenging background".

The survey found that 37% of foster carers had never received any training about the education of children in their care. A further 14% had received training over three years ago, 19% had received training within the last three years and 30% had received training during the last three years.

Q5 Have you previously had training on education for children in your care?

Answered: 71 Skipped: 2

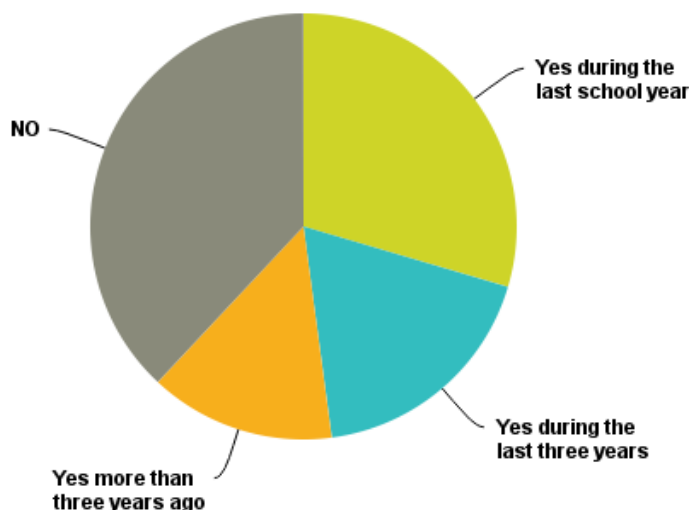


Table 1: Foster Carer's training focussing on the education of the looked after child

The training that had been provided to foster carers covered a wide range of topics including attachment and behaviour issues, the needs of looked after children, online safety, legislative guidance, interaction between carers and school and many others. The scope of the training available is therefore very wide. However, over one third of foster carers do not receive any training and some probably receive very little. Steps are therefore needed to increase uptake of training among foster carers.

The issue of training for foster carers resulted in a wide ranging discussion in the focus groups. In general, participants believed that additional training or information would be useful or even critical around several issues.

From the online survey results, the number of foster carers receiving training for was low (see below). There is a current absence of a Wales- wide tailored core training package available to foster carers, teaching professionals and open to other stakeholders such as social workers and learning support assistants. There is a clear need to develop a programme of work where stakeholders can work and learn together to raise attainment, their understanding the education system, roles, responsibilities, delegated authority and identify sources of support. Happy children learn- a programme of training would need to focus on strategies to support emotional wellbeing and the readiness to learn.

Q6 If you have received training, did it cover any of the following?

Answered: 53 Skipped: 20

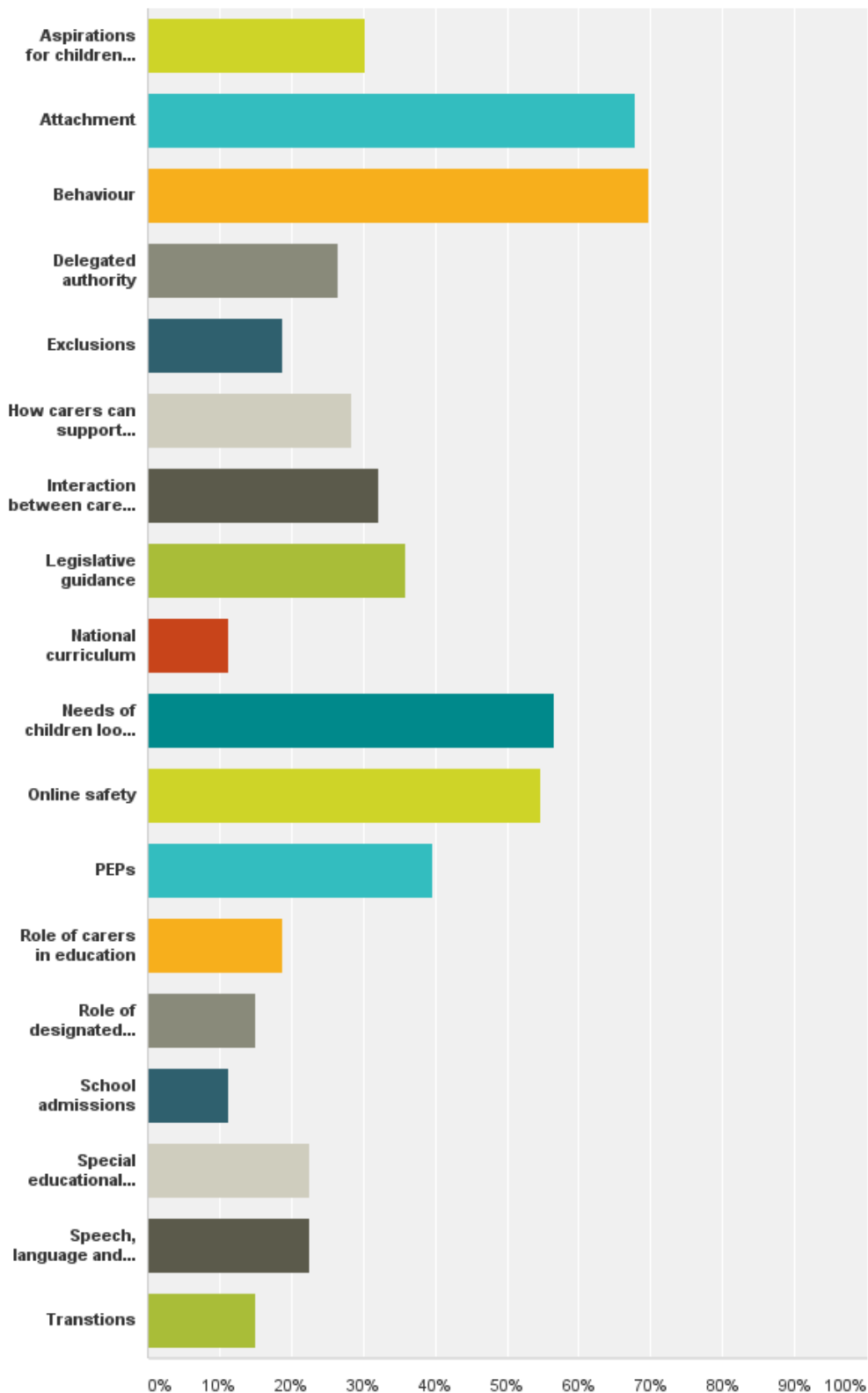


Table 2 above: Training courses attended by respondents

The Fostering Network believes that foster carers should be recognised as ‘first educators’ of the child or young person in their care. Foster carers must be trained, supported and empowered to proactively support children to achieve their potential. Accredited foster care training would give Foster Carers and the professionals with whom they work more confidence in their ability. This principle has been validated by the successful outcomes of the London Fostering Achievement programme.

Many participants strongly believed that they needed more information about the support available to them. The discussion revealed that many foster carers did not know about some important resources. For example, one participant described a payment they had heard of which was allocated to a school, but they had been unable to trace it nor find out how it had been used. Another participant said this was called a “Deprivation Grant”. The first foster carer replied that they had never heard of it and several other participants agreed.

Another participant contributed the information that foster carers could refer their children themselves. A quick poll revealed that half of the participants in the group did not know this.

It is clear that some foster carers would need information for example about their rights and responsibilities for their child’s education as foster carers, and also information about how the school works, what support is available etc.

The discussion also showed that some foster carers would benefit from training or support which would help them achieve better relationships with schools. This could include confidence building or assertiveness training to enable them to communicate with professionals more effectively. There is a need to empower foster carers to have these conversations as not everyone feels comfortable having them at present.

One foster carer said that therapy would be helpful to foster carers citing their own experience through their fostering agency: *“It really does help”*.

It was pointed out that even if training and support were available not all foster carers would make use of it.

“All foster carers should be involved in training. But some foster carers will not take training from social workers.... Foster carers have different expectations some see themselves as just babysitters, others are really committed”.

Some argued for mandatory training for foster carers but not everyone endorsed this. One foster carer said it would make a difference if they had educational ‘support’.

Some participants said that foster carers themselves could offer peer support to other foster carers.

An argument was presented that collective action by foster carers could help bring about better relationships with schools. An organisation like Fostering Network Wales could help co-ordinate such action.

An example was provided of a local Foster Carer Association trying to influence their local authority and how a national network could fulfil a similar role in relation to Welsh Government. Participants felt this could be a role for Fostering Network Wales to support foster carers as fostering ambassadors in education. Foster carers and care leavers should be recruited, trained and supported to act as inspirational ambassadors for the education of the looked after child.

The London Fostering Achievement programme, managed by the Fostering Network operates on such a basis. Here, foster carer education champions share information and learning from the wider programme and work alongside local support groups to help foster carers feel more confident in supporting the educational needs of children and young people in their care.

2.3.1 What actions need to be taken?

The content of training provided to teachers and others who interact with looked after children through the education system should be checked to identify whether and how far it addresses the issues particularly affecting looked after children and the role of the foster carer. Steps should be taken to address any gaps.

The Fostering Network believes that the Welsh Government should consider joint and collaborative training in all local authorities. There should be joint training in all local authorities between social workers, foster carers and teachers that focuses on responsibilities, rights and expectations with regard to looked-after children. This training should be built into annual training plans and become part of an ongoing rolling programme.

Fostering Achievements – The Greater London Authority

London Fostering Achievement is delivered by The Fostering Network in partnership with Achievement for All.

It is a programme of activity that aims to improve educational outcomes for fostered children in London. This is achieved by bringing together leaders, foster carers, teachers, young people and the wider professional network to take part in training workshops, masterclasses and much more.

To date, the programme has:

- Worked with 32 local authorities to set up half-day education training sessions to bring together foster carers with social workers, educational professionals and other members of the team around the child. Each training session is co-delivered by a foster carer and covers roles and responsibilities, how to maximise the impact of a personal education plan and practical ways for foster carers to support learning.
- Recruited 10 foster carers to be Education Champions in five pilot areas, providing informal one to one peer support to other foster carers to boost their knowledge and confidence around education. The Education Champions are also working with fostering services and Virtual Schools to help shape and advise on local provision. For example, two Champions have worked with their school improvement service to offer foster carers taster courses in phonics and maths.
- Targeted working directly with 27 schools through Achievement for All, The Fostering Network's delivery partner on the programme. Achievement for All is an educational charity with a significant track record of increasing achievement across their established programme. For London Fostering Achievement, they have adapted their evidence-based framework to tailor it to meet the needs of children looked after. Achievement for All promote a whole school approach, boost child and carer engagement through structured conversations and encourage schools to undertake a STEEP analysis to identify barriers to education and potential solutions for this group.

The early indications from participant feedback indicates that London Fostering Achievement is having a positive impact. The programme is being externally evaluated by the Rees Centre at Oxford University and the Centre for Child and Family Research at Loughborough University. The final report will be issued towards the end of 2015.

Education professionals should also be encouraged to take up existing opportunities better to understand the needs of looked after children for example attending activities run by local foster carer groups and making use of information provided by foster carers.

It is important that we all recognise, and indeed develop and expand the role of foster carers in improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people.

The Fostering Network believes that foster carers are pivotal in ensuring that all looked-after children achieve their potential. At the heart of any approach to

transforming educational outcomes for looked-after children must be a set of measures designed to increase the authority, expectations and skills of foster carers. These measures should will include the national registration of foster carers; increased training; a clear mandate to represent children's needs; sufficient resources to make decisions regarding supplementary activities for looked-after children and the right to support for young people to remain with them as 'when I'm Ready ' carers.

Further information, support (including peer support) or training should be offered to foster carers. Topics should include their rights and responsibilities in relation to their child's education, how a school works, the support available to them, confidence building and assertiveness.

All foster carers should be encouraged to take up the training or support available.

More co-ordinated collective action could help improve relationships with schools.

2.3.2 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers can contribute in schools e.g. information and understanding.

Organisations of foster carers such as special interest groups and support groups facilitated by the Fostering Network can provide information through talks, discussions, and training.

Some foster carers would be able to deliver training to professionals if they received "train the trainer" tuition themselves.

Some foster carers would be willing to provide peer support or act as mentors to others.

Foster carers could support each other in improving relationships with school for example by doing more collectively through organisations such as the Fostering Network Wales.

2.4. Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and foster children.

Are the hopes and expectations that people have for foster children's education, and those that foster children have for themselves the same as for other children?

The survey produced a clear response to this question. 66% of respondents believed that the hopes and expectations professionals had for looked after children's education were not the same as for other children. Most respondents explained

their answer and these qualitative comments showed that the vast majority of the 66% felt that professionals had lower expectations of looked after children.

“Their expectations are lower and in some cases even expect them to fail”.

Conversely 70% of respondents said that it was very important to them that their foster child performed well academically, with 27% saying it was ‘quite important’ and just 3% saying ‘not so important’. No-one ticked the option ‘not at all important’.

Q8 How important is it to you, as a foster carer, that your foster child performs well educationally?

Answered: 72 Skipped: 1

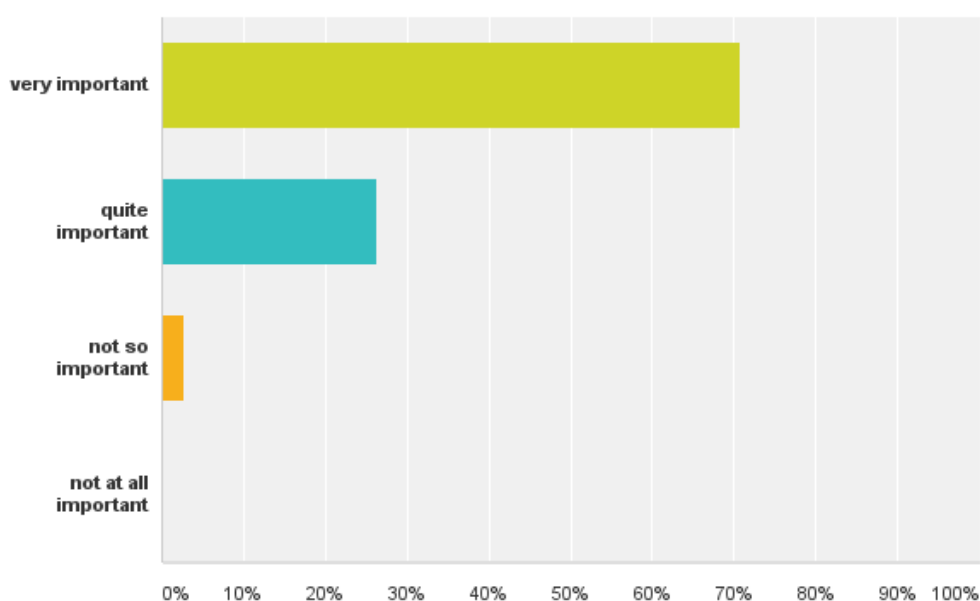


Table 3: How foster carers regard the importance of a child in their care performing well educationally.

However the responses to this question in the focus groups were much more varied.

Some foster carers felt that teachers’ expectations of looked after children were lower than for other children. For example, a participant said:

“I spoke with one teacher who said we have to accept this child is two years behind and will not be going to university. Well I want them to give him more support, some one-to-one, and then we can help him get to university. It’s a real battle”.

There was general agreement with this statement which probably represents the view of most focus group participants.

Many participants agreed that there was a stigma attached to being a looked after child and that this could lead some teachers to pre-judge them and sanction difficult behaviour more readily than they would in the case of other children.

However, some participants also said that some teachers had unrealistically high expectations which did not make allowances for the impact of the child's background difficulties and this too gained general agreement.

Some foster carers were said to be "not very good at raising children's expectations". However, participants in the groups felt they had high expectations of their own foster children.

A further point was that looked after children should be treated as individuals.

"We need to stop the 'we expect x of every child coming out of care'. We need to sit down with other professionals to review what the outcome for each child could be now, and in the longer term".

The personal education plan (PEP) was seen as a good mechanism to this end but participants stressed the importance of involving foster carers in developing and informing the plan. Participants did not feel that they were sufficiently involved in the Personal Educational Plans and although they felt involved with their Foster child's education Indeed, some members of the focus group were not aware what a either PEP or IEP was

Recommendations for this section are more general in nature because of the divergence between the survey and focus group findings.

2.4.1 What actions need to be taken?

The Fostering Network believes that there is generally a lack of ambition for looked after children. Fostering services have traditionally seen the main function of foster care as providing care for children with little emphasis on ensuring children achieve their educational potential. Individual foster carers and social workers do champion the needs of the children they care for, but they often do not find this easy and come up against bureaucratic obstacles which make educational success much harder.

Although there is now a greater focus on the educational attainment of looked-after children, our ambitions for looked after children are still not high enough. The evidence from these discussion groups is that there are still far too many problems put in the path of children and young people succeeding educationally.

Everyone involved with looked-after children must be ambitious for them and must work with others to help achieve their potential. This requires a cultural shift that

will lead to far greater emphasis on achieving educational success. Everyone involved with the education of the child should be encouraged to have the same expectations of looked after children as they have of other children.

Each looked after child should be treated as an individual with regard to their educational potential.

2.4.2 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers can contribute by informing and developing their children’s Personal Education Plan (PEP).

Foster carers hold the key to ensuring that all looked-after children achieve their potential. At the heart of any approach to transforming outcomes for looked-after children must be a set of measures designed to increase the authority, expectations and skills of foster carers.

2.5. Foster Carer involvement in Education.

How much are you involved in your foster children’s’ education?

Most survey respondents (67%) said they were “very involved” in their foster child’s education. 17% said they were “quite involved” and 16% said they were “not so involved”.

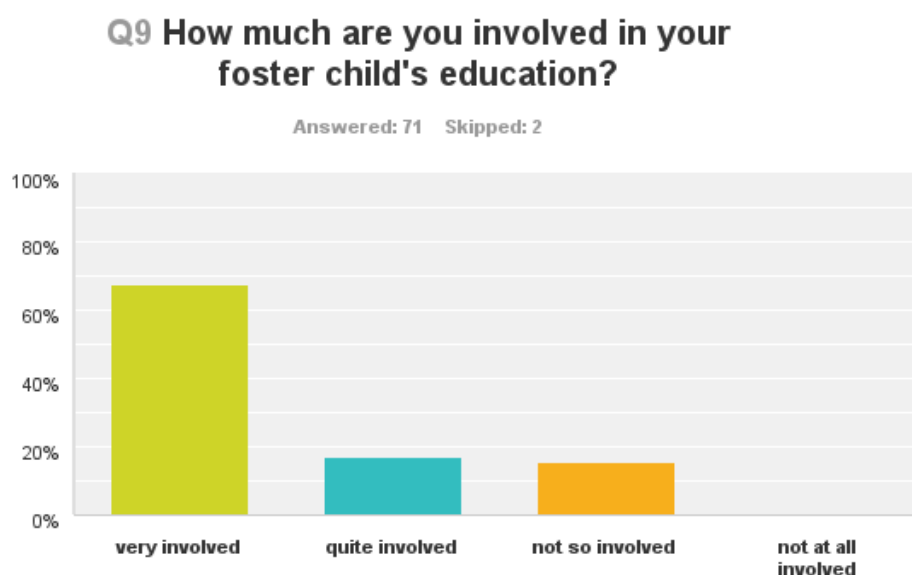


Table 4: How foster carers regard their involvement in their foster child’s education

Almost all foster carers (94%) said that they attended parents evening and 94 % also said they attended school events.

The survey asked how often foster carers met with various professionals and other foster carers.

The child’s social worker, class teacher and supervising social worker formed the main contact points with the educational system for foster carers.

Every foster carer who responded had met with their child’s social worker and 80% met with them monthly.

Almost all foster carers (96%) had also met with the child’s class teacher and supervising social worker. Most foster carers (70%) met the supervising social worker monthly but there was more variation in the frequency of meetings with class teachers with 44% meeting with the class teacher more frequently than monthly and 35% meeting monthly.

Foster carers had more daily meetings with teaching assistants than any other professional. 23% of foster carers met with teaching assistants daily. However 28% of foster carers had never met their child’s teaching assistant.

Q14 How often do you speak about the education of the child in your care with:

Answered: 66 Skipped: 7

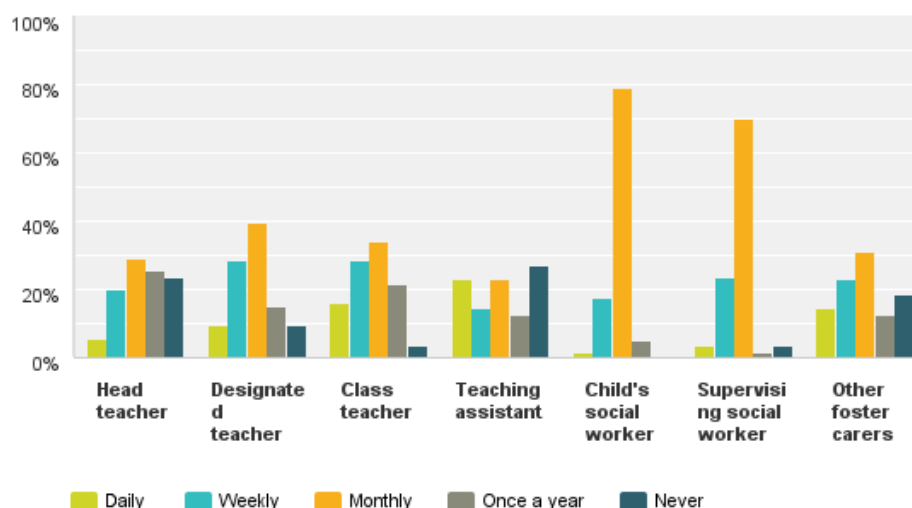


Table 5 above: Foster carer’s engagement with education professionals

The survey therefore suggests that most foster carers are already involved with their child’s education.

However, the discussion in the focus groups focused on barriers that foster carers experienced in becoming further involved in their children's education and in particular on their desire for more recognition of their role and the need for more value to be placed, by professionals, on the knowledge that foster carers had of their children's needs and qualities.

A strong view emerged from both group discussions that foster carers were not currently generally regarded as professionals nor equal partners by most educational and social work professionals and that their particular insights and expertise were not given recognition.

"We need the social workers to recognise that we are professional. We have these children 24/7 and bring a wealth of experience to our role Social workers Know all the legal stuff but they need experience".

There was general agreement that a system of registration for foster carers would help enhance their status. A participant in one group said:

"We are professionals; we are not regarded as such. We need a professional register of foster carers with the Care Council which would give us recognition".

There was unanimous agreement with this statement.

Foster carers believed that recognition of their value would allow them to assist other professionals.

"I feel sorry for social workers. Their case loads are so big. But we can take some of the pressure off them if we are treated as professionals for example in the PEP's and so on".

This question generated further discussion about the use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant. Once again participants stated their view that the grant should be used to benefit individual children and that they should be involved in deciding how it should be used to benefit their child.

"There are lots of ways to use the money. How much say do carers have? The grant is not used specifically for that child; schools are not using it correctly. The money for LAC children is pooled to pay for a teaching assistant or drama therapy but that is not individual attention. The teaching assistant is used to teach other children. With schools it's a constant battle..."

Other participants provided examples of the grant being used to benefit their child in the way they wanted.

"I couldn't argue when they offered extra tuition at home, that was great".

Yet even this participant who was satisfied with the outcome was not actually involved in taking the decision.

“The school gets the money, we need to convince them that foster carers should get a say in what this money is spent on”.

Others said they too had been excluded.

“Foster carers are excluded from the decision making about the spending of the fund that schools get for fostered kids”.

Although some foster carers had a say in deciding how the pupil deprivation grant was spent in relation to their child, most did not, and the general view was that foster carers should be involved because they knew the child’s needs best and could therefore make a valuable contribution to determining how to meet them in a way that would improve educational attainment.

Several examples were given of the insights that foster carers gained from living with a child which could be, or had been useful to schools and to social workers.

“We had a child once who couldn’t use a knife and fork, could not recognise colours, and was under threat of institutionalisation. The social workers read the file on the child but they should read our file. They know nothing about us and they don’t know how much we do for the children....”

“A young Moslem girl was only writing with her right hand, when she was naturally left handed, because of Moslem sensibilities. The teachers didn’t know and when she started writing left handed she improved dramatically”.

“.... key opportunities are being missed. I knew my child was dyslexic at the age of eight, but the social worker would not listen, they just think you are a pain in the neck”.

Foster carers strongly believe that they can help teachers and social workers identify the needs of their foster children but that this opportunity is missed by many professionals. This was another very strong finding of the focus groups.

“We need appreciation by social workers and the social services that we know what we are talking about and that we can recognise these needs. Foster carers can signpost social workers to the needs of the children in their care but the social workers don’t listen. Decisions are made by the professionals who don’t know the children.”

Several other associated points were made in the groups.

One person said that foster carers needed better information about their foster child at the start of the placement. They understood that some information might be

withheld to avoid deterring a potential foster carer. However they felt this was unnecessary and counter-productive.

“All foster carers are professional people and do a professional job. If given the correct information when the child arrives with them they can do a better job. It won’t put them off. We need as much information as we can so we can support better”.

In consultation with foster carers in these groups, The Fostering Network found that the majority of foster carers felt that they were not given all the information they needed about a fostered child before they moved in, and this in turn affected their ability to help them in their education. Information about past educational achievements and ongoing difficulties was not always passed on to foster carers by children’s social workers and this made it more difficult for foster carers to communicate effectively with schools. If information is not shared as a matter of course with foster carers, it can be damaging to fostered children educational attainment

To create positive educational change, The Fostering Network believes that children’s services must provide foster carers with full information in order that they can help them to achieve their potential, and fostering services should ensure that this happens. Children’s social workers’ training must also involve a clearer understanding of the role of foster carers and their key place in the team around a fostered child.

There was also further discussion about looked after Children’s Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

Some foster carers were already involved in developing their child’s personal education plan. 59% of survey respondents said they had some input into their child’s personal education plan (In one group, a quick poll also found that five out of the eleven participants were involved).

Q10 Do you any input into the Personal Education Plan (PEP)?

Answered: 69 Skipped: 4

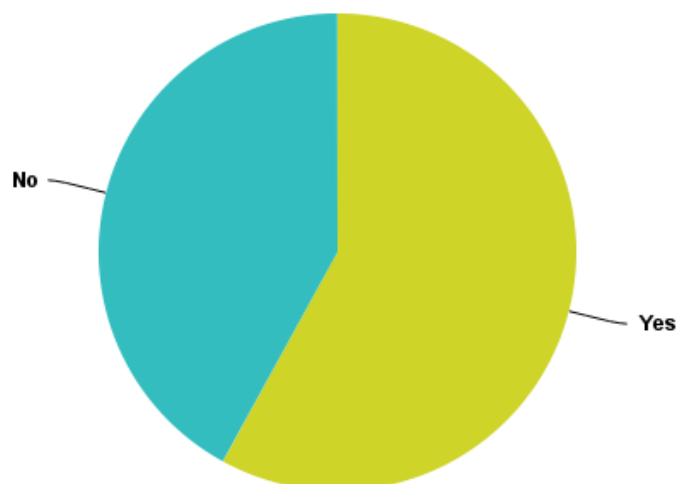


Table 6 above: Foster carer's involvement with their child's Personal Education Plan (PEP)

Those who were involved welcomed this. Those who were not involved wanted to be and resented the fact they were currently excluded from the process.

"... He moved to another school and went into absolute nose-dive. We asked about his PEP and they said they had written a new one. We weren't asked or consulted and they said you are only a foster carer. We have to be involved in our child's PEP".

"An education plan meeting was held but they failed to invite me, his carer who knows him best! But I'm not seen as a person with a professional view".

One participant had been quite involved because they fostered in Cheshire where the PEP is linked to the Pupil Premium. He felt that linking the two could give an incentive to the school to involve the foster carer but added the proviso that: *"I was quite pushy and I know that not all foster carers are as assertive and confident as me"*

It must be recognised that not all foster carers are confident of representing the interests of their fostered child to teachers or other educational professionals. Many foster carers have no educational qualifications and may be worried about working with educational practitioners to ensure the child they foster reaches their potential. Many foster carers do not currently feel sufficiently empowered and equipped to do this advocate in an educational sense for the child they look after.

The expectations and demands on foster carers are not always clear enough and consequently local authorities and fostering services often do not provide them with the training and resources they need and this must be addressed.

Several participants described meetings they knew took place which concerned their child's education but to which they were not invited. Others mentioned meetings where actions had been agreed but not followed through.

There was a general view that foster carers needed more opportunities to meet face to face with other professionals in forums which influenced their children's education.

The survey findings suggest that most foster carers feel they are involved in their child's education. However the focus groups generated a lot of discussion and strong views about this topic. They deliver a clear message that barriers to foster carers' involvement remain, and that most foster carers want to be more involved in their child's education than they currently are. The recommendations focus on actions to reduce these barriers.

2.5.1 What actions need to be taken?

The majority of foster carers agreed that a system of registration with the Care Council Wales for foster carers should be established.

The Fostering Network recommends a national registration scheme for foster Carers with the Care Council Wales that would both promote and help to underpin the changes and developments that need to occur in foster care. National registration would help to confirm expectations on foster carers, raise standards, set qualification standards, oversee a learning and development framework, and assist with the movement of foster carers and the safeguarding of children. Registration with the Care Council for Wales (CCW) would enhance the status and standing of foster carers.

It would also offer a number of other benefits including:

- Putting foster carers on equal footing with other staff subject to registration.
- Offering a safety net, as it should ensure that information about a foster carer who has previously fostered is always passed on to any new fostering service.
- Providing a mechanism to improve the portability of approval for foster carers thereby avoiding experienced foster carers having to be completely reassessed if they move to a new fostering service.
- Providing an appeal mechanism for foster carers who are or feel they are unfairly de-registered.

- Emphasising the requirement on foster carers to act in children's best interests, and giving them the confidence to do this.

The knowledge foster carers have of their children should be put to good use by other professionals to benefit the child.

Foster carers should be involved in deciding how to use the pupil deprivation grant in relation to their child because they have a good insight into their child's needs and can therefore make a valuable contribution to determining how to meet these needs in a way that will improve educational attainment.

The use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant should be linked to the Personal Education Plan to create a single coherent process which should make it easier for schools to involve foster carers in the PEP.

Foster carers should be included as equals in meetings which influence their child's education unless there are exceptional over-riding considerations.

The possibility of having a looked after children's representative on school boards of governors should also be explored.

2.5.2 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers can contribute their knowledge of their own child to help decide how to best use the pupil deprivation grant and to develop the Personal Education Plan to improve their educational attainment.

Foster carers can contribute their detailed knowledge of their child to meetings which influence its education.

2.6. Relationships between the school and foster carer.

2.6.1. Does the nature of the relationship between schools and foster carers affect educational outcomes for foster children?

Participants in the focus groups agreed that a good relationship between schools, social workers and foster carers was important.

"A co-operative approach is needed".

30% of survey respondents said that social workers, teachers and foster carers worked well together, 17% said they did not, and 53% said they sometimes did.

The focus group discussion confirmed this mixed picture.

Some participants said they had a good relationship with their school and social workers and gave examples of this.

One foster carer reported that she had agreed with the primary school that they would phone her if her foster child was naughty at school. She could then re-inforce the message at home, for example he punched a teacher so he was not allowed to use his tablet at home that night. Equally, the school would tell her when he had been well behaved so she could praise or reward him.

Others gave a range of illustrations of the positive relationship they enjoyed with their school or social worker.

“My child’s school phones me up and asks has anything happened over the weekend. Social workers don’t need to know (everything) So a direct relationship is helpful. It’s taken a while but they are asking me now. It’s helping a lot”.

“When changing schools I was involved in the decision about where they went. They did listen to me!”

“I am very lucky, I have an amazing social worker. I get a weekly phone call and she visits Three times a month. She sought my opinion at all times concerning the child”.

However other participants provided illustrations of the unsatisfactory relationship they had with professionals.

“Schools ignore you except once a year at the parents evening. They don’t see you as professionals”.

“They don’t support you in enforcing that. The same at school. Sometimes if there is a problem, the teacher will phone the social worker not the foster carer, but we are the ones who have to sort out the problem”.

Despite these mixed experiences there was general agreement that a good relationship between foster carers and professionals would be beneficial to foster children.

“LAC social workers don’t come to the forum, they don’t want to know. It’s understandable that if the foster carer is always complaining they get defensive. We need to develop positive co-operation, develop their empathy so they can see what it’s like for us and help them make us feel valued”.

2.6.2 What actions need to be taken?

A specific action is that all LAC social workers should attend foster carer forums consistently.

In more general terms, activities to bring social workers and foster carers together, in order to promote mutual understanding in a “non-threatening” setting would help build the more positive relationship that all agree is needed.

The Fostering Network believes needs to be a clear and stronger message that everyone involved with looked-after children must be ambitious for them and must work with others to help achieve their potential. This requires a cultural shift that will lead to far greater emphasis on achieving educational success. Foster carers, fostering services, children’s social workers and local authorities (children’s services, social services or health & social services) must all be more focused on helping all children in public care to reach their potential. Corporate parenting strategies must reflect this.

The negative stereotypes and low expectations perceived to be held by professionals of looked after children need to be acknowledged and addressed both at an institutional level and at community level.

Foster carers agreed that there was a lack of clarity about the expectations on them with regard to attending ‘parent’ evenings or meetings at school and liaising in other ways with the school. Information about past educational achievements and ongoing difficulties is not always passed on to foster carers by children’s social workers and this makes it more difficult for foster carers to communicate effectively with schools. Foster carers must be regarded as first educators of children in foster care and be fully supported to do so

2.6.3 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

In very general terms, foster carers can continue to offer their insights and experience and seek to build positive relationships with professionals while avoiding being overly critical.

2.7. Stability.

Do current arrangements offer enough stability to foster children, or do changes of placement or changes of school have an impact on their education?

55% of survey respondents said that changes in placement or changes of school had affected the education of their foster child while 45% said it had not.

Participants in the focus groups believed that stability was a very important factor affecting a child’s education. Some made the argument that it was a crucial factor.

"I don't think money helps, the bottom line is that stability is the main thing".

"Achieving the best you can be is linked to long-term sustained, positive placements. Short-term placements, being moved around often, has an impact on them and then on their education".

Some participants commented on the negative impact of frequent changes.

"They change placements, they move schools, they moved TA's, they change social workers, and they change their one-to-one support. In eight years we've had about 12 different social workers".

Participants acknowledged that there were situations when changes of placement or of school could be beneficial, for example to break unhelpful or stigmatising associations.

One participant said that even respite care could, in some circumstances be experienced as rejection by a child, although continuity would help e.g. staying within the same school catchment area so they could still meet their friends, and going to the same respite carer.

Another said that foster carers were not told how long a foster child will be with them. This lack of information could add to feelings of instability.

"My child got to the two years stay point and was anxious he was going to be moved again. Because it's happened to them before, they find it difficult to believe that it won't happen again".

The fact that placements can break down was acknowledged. However, some foster carers argued that the reason for placement breakdown was often lack of support and not being told the full story about a child in advance whereas they felt that social workers would present the reason for the breakdown as lying with the foster carer.

Some participants said that placements were, at times, ended for financial reasons and that this could prove to be a false economy in the longer term.

"If stable placements are moved because of money, that doesn't feel fair.... It's not helpful to the child nor to the carer who has to deal with the insecurity of the child that has just been moved again. Every time they are moved it impacts upon them".

Several participants reported that frequent changes of social worker had a de-stabilising effect.

"We have changed social worker two times this year already".

What is needed to enable looked after children to achieve in education? : A Report of a consultation to identify what foster carers in Wales say they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education. August 2015.

“It’s to do with the amount of money there is too now. Social workers in (this county) change often. We had five different social workers for one child we looked after”.

They felt a stable relationship with a social worker was important.

“You should have one social worker with one child and they should stay with them permanently”.

“We need a better relationship between the social worker and the foster carer. We need consistency; we need to build a relationship with the social worker and to keep the same worker”.

2.7.1 What actions need to be taken?

The impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school, and respite care provision.

2.7.2 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers could work with organisations such as Fostering Network to raise awareness of how instability impacts the children.

2.8. Additional Findings

Is there anything else you want to add that we have not already covered?

A cross cutting finding is that the way that foster children are supported to do well at school varies across Wales. There are examples of very good practice and also of poor practice.

2.8.1 What actions need to be taken?

Best practice in promoting educational attainment among looked after children should be identified and rolled out.

2.8.2 What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?

Foster carers are able to identify good practice and could help inform any study into this.

3.0. A Summary of Actions

3.1 Finance

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>Foster carers believed that additional funding should be used primarily to benefit individual looked after children in a consistent manner across all local authorities in Wales and that Foster Carers should be able to influence how this funding is used in relation to their child.</p> <p>Examples of good practice in using the pupil deprivation grant and involving foster carers in this (or its equivalent pupil premium in England) should be identified and lessons drawn from these.</p> <p>Welsh Government should explore good practice examples of funding to Looked after children e.g. Fostering Achievements in Northern Ireland managed by The Fostering network.</p> <p>Steps should be taken to increase the understanding foster carers have of the pupil deprivation grant, and what it may be used for.</p>	<p>Foster carers would be able to participate in discussions with teachers and other professionals to help decide the best use of individually focussed funding for the child in their care for their child.</p>

3.2 Support

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>Additional funding should be made available to provide extra tutoring, professional support for emotional issues, and access to activities.</p> <p>The above forms of support should be</p>	<p>Foster carers can help identify the learning and emotional needs of their children. They can be involved by professionals so that they are better able to complement the tutoring and professional support their children receive.</p> <p>Foster carers can help identify the kind</p>

<p>available to looked after children in all schools and should be provided flexibly in such a way as to avoid stigmatising the child.</p> <p>Schemes such as the Conwy “FIT card” scheme and the Flint “Activate” scheme should be encouraged.</p> <p>The Fostering Network recommends that that all children in care have prompt and high quality, holistic assessments of their physical, emotional and mental health needs and regular reviews. It is important that CAMHS deliver effectiveness to ensure that children requiring early help and those who have specialist needs have access to timely, child centred assessment and support.</p>	<p>of activities which would most benefit their children. They can encourage their children to sample different activities and enable them to attend those that work for them.</p> <p>Some foster carers may be in a position to contribute towards the cost of activities.</p> <p>Leisure service and other activity providers can be encouraged to recognise the particular needs of looked after children and to include them in discount or free access schemes. Foster Carers can help identify activity providers that might be approached and encouraged to develop such schemes.</p>
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3.3 Learning and Development

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>The content of training provided to teachers and others who interact with looked after children through the education system should be checked to identify whether and how far it addresses the issues particularly</p>	<p>Foster carers can contribute in schools e.g. information and understanding.</p> <p>Organisations of foster carers such as Foster Care Associations can provide information through talks, discussions,</p>

<p>affecting looked after children and the role of the foster carer.</p> <p>Steps should be taken to fill any gaps.</p> <p>Education professionals should be encouraged to take up existing opportunities better to understand the needs of looked after children for example attending activities run by local foster care forums and The Fostering Network , and making use of information provided by foster carers.</p> <p>Further information, support or training should be offered to foster carers. Topics should include their rights and responsibilities in relation to their child’s education, how a school works, support available to them, confidence building and assertiveness. There is a need to improve child and carer confidence, skills, and attitudes.</p> <p>All foster carers should be encouraged to take up the training or support available.</p> <p>More co-ordinated collective action could help improve relationships with schools.</p> <p>A tailored core training package should be available to foster carers, teaching professionals and open to other stakeholders such as social workers and learning support assistants across Wales.</p> <p>Training should cover: four areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A vision and aims, and how all can play a role in raising educational attainment. 2. Working together to raise attainment: understanding the education system, roles, responsibilities, delegated authority and sources of support 	<p>and training.</p> <p>Some foster carers would be able to deliver training to professionals if they received “train the trainer” tuition themselves.</p> <p>Some foster carers would be willing to provide peer support or act as mentors to others.</p> <p>Foster carers could support each other in improving relationships with school for example by doing more collectively through organisations like Fostering Network Wales.</p> <p>Training content should be informed by foster carers needs identified through a baseline survey, steering group input, and expert trainers.</p>
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<p>3. Happy children learn: strategies to support emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn</p> <p>4. Building local networks of support</p> <p>Participants will gain new knowledge, understanding, skills, confidence and practical strategies to use in working with each other and with the children in their care. Additional sessions should be offered, targeted at hard to reach carers (including family and friends foster carers).</p>	
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3.4 Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and foster children.

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>All teachers should be encouraged to have the same expectations of looked after children as they have of other children.</p> <p>Each looked after child should be treated as an individual with regard to their educational potential.</p>	<p>There is a clear need for foster carers to play a more important role in PEP planning. Foster carers can contribute to informing and developing their children's PEP and IEP.</p>

3.5 Foster Carer involvement with Education.

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>A system of registration for foster carers with the Care Council Wales should be established.</p> <p>The knowledge foster carers have of their children should be put to good use by other professionals to benefit the child.</p>	

<p>Foster carers should be involved in deciding how to use the pupil deprivation grant in relation to their child because they have a good insight into their child’s needs and can therefore make a valuable contribution to determining how to meet these needs in a way that will improve educational attainment.</p> <p>The use of the Pupil Deprivation Grant should be linked to the Personal Education Plan to create a single coherent process which should make it easier for schools to involve foster parents in the PEP.</p> <p>Foster carers should be included as equals in meetings which influence their child’s education unless there are exceptional over-riding considerations.</p> <p>The possibility of having a looked after children’s representative on school boards of governors should be explored.</p>	<p>Foster carers can contribute their knowledge of their own child to help decide how to best use the pupil deprivation grant and to develop the Personal Education Plan to improve their educational attainment.</p> <p>Foster carers can contribute their detailed knowledge of their child to meetings which influence its education.</p> <p>Foster carers can contribute their specialist insights to school boards.</p>
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3.6 The relationship between the school and foster carer.

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
<p>A specific action is that all LAC social workers should attend foster carer forums.</p> <p>In more general terms activities to bring social workers and foster carers together, in order to promote mutual understanding in a “non-threatening” setting would help build the more positive relationship that all agree is needed.</p>	<p>In general terms, foster carers can continue to offer their insights and experience and seek to build positive relationships with professionals while avoiding being overly critical.</p>

3.7 Stability

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
The impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school, and respite care provision.	Foster carers could work with organisations such as The Fostering Network Wales to raise awareness of how instability impacts the children.

3.8 Additional issues

What actions need to be taken?	What can foster carers contribute?
Best practice in promoting educational attainment among looked after children should be identified and rolled out.	Foster carers are able to identify good practice and could help inform any study into this.

4.0. Conclusion

This study has provided an in depth national picture, of how foster carers believe they could support improved educational outcomes for looked after children. The report reflects the reach and expertise within The Fostering Network, to provide Foster Carers with a voice in the policy making process.

The report discusses issues of practice and of policy and makes recommendations for policy makers to consider. The findings reflect an ongoing willingness by foster carers to play an ongoing participative role in supporting the children and young people in their care to achieve their potential. In doing so they discussed and debated how local authorities, schools and fostering services may be enabled to better work with them to achieve this shared objective.

A prevailing theme, evidenced in the findings is that foster carers remain concerned that their skills and expertise often remains unlocked, as they do not feel they are enabled to act as a key stakeholder in the team around the child. They feel overlooked by professionals and they don't feel that their experience as the primary carers of the children and young people is valued, perhaps as much as it should be.

Foster carers made a number of recommendations to improve the educational achievements, and consequently the long-term outcomes for looked-after children.

The following main themes emerged from the focus group discussions and online survey:

Finance

Foster carers believed that additional funding should be used primarily to benefit individual looked after children in a consistent manner across all local authorities in Wales and that Foster Carers should be able to influence how this funding is used in relation to their child.

Additional funding should be made available to provide extra tutoring, professional support for emotional issues, and access to activities. Support should be available to looked after children in every school and should be provided flexibly in such a way as to avoid stigmatising the child.

Support

Children in care should have prompt and high quality, holistic assessments of their physical, emotional and mental health needs and regular reviews. It is important that CAMHS deliver effectiveness to ensure that children requiring early help and those who have specialist needs have access to timely, child centred assessment and support.

Further, this consultation has evidenced a lack of remedial help for children in care. Many children who come into foster care will do so because of circumstances that make it very difficult for them to concentrate on their school work and as a consequence they will fall behind their peers. While children whose GCSE education is disrupted face obvious difficulties, children who miss out at any stage may be considerably disadvantaged. This will also be compounded for children who move in and out of care from an early age, and for whom remedial help may be essential on an ongoing basis. Despite the obvious need for looked-after children to be entitled to immediate remedial or supplementary assistance, this is very rarely available.

Training

A tailored core training education package should be available to foster carers, teaching professionals and open to other stakeholders such as social workers and learning support assistants across Wales.

Training should cover four main areas:

1. A vision and aims, and how all can play a role in raising educational attainment.
2. Working together to raise attainment: understanding the education system, roles, responsibilities, delegated authority and sources of support
3. Happy children learn: strategies to support emotional wellbeing and readiness to learn

4. Building local networks of support

Outcomes would result in participants gaining new knowledge, understanding, skills, confidence and practical strategies to use in working with each other and with the children in their care. Additional sessions should be offered, targeted at hard to reach foster carers (including family and friends foster carers).

Topics for foster carers should include their rights and responsibilities in relation to their child's education, how a school works, and support available to them, confidence building and assertiveness. There is a need to both improve child and carer confidence, skills, and attitudes.

Aspirations for looked after children

Fostering services have traditionally seen the main function of foster care as providing care for children and there has generally been too little emphasis on ensuring children achieve their educational potential.

Individual foster carers and social workers do champion the needs of the children they care for, but they often do not find this easy and come up against bureaucratic obstacles which make educational success much harder.

We must all strive for cultural change and raise all our aspirations for children in care. Securing good educational provision for children and young people in foster care relies on good and timely access to specialist help and ensuring foster carers are equipped and have the resources to provide good quality care. This depends on local authorities and their ability to manage, provide and commission services. It also depends on their ability to take a lead in ensuring that all agencies make it a priority to co-operate on improving outcomes for looked-after children. In short, it depends on local authorities acting as good 'corporate parents'.

The role and status of the foster carer

Transforming outcomes for looked-after children requires a transformation in the way foster carers are regarded. Foster carers can no longer be seen as simply caring for a child while the main responsibilities for their education or therapeutic needs lie elsewhere. Foster carers need to be regarded as the key adult for a fostered child, the adult who has primary responsibility for helping the child to achieve their potential.

The status and authority of foster carers should be properly recognised within the children's workforce needs to be recognised and supported. In order for children to achieve academically and, foster carers must be regarded as partners in the team around the child and they must be granted greater decision making powers on everyday education issues, with a presumption that they can make decisions regarding the children they foster. The Fostering Network wants a society that values

the important role of foster carers by recognising their status, giving them the authority they require, meeting their learning, development and support needs and ensuring they are properly remunerated.

Foster Carers' Involvement in Education.

Activities to bring social workers and foster carers together, in order to promote mutual understanding in a “non-threatening” setting would help build the more positive relationship that all agree is needed.

Fostering services should provide regular and ongoing training for their foster carers to ensure they can represent children effectively to teachers and other educational staff. Foster Carers want to and should be fully involved in the child's education and seen as an equal partner in this process.

Stability

The impact of instability on children needs to be fully recognised and taken into account when decisions are being made about placements, changes of school, and respite care provision.

Foster carers are the key to ensuring that all looked-after children achieve their potential. What makes this difficult is that foster carers frequently feel unsure of their role and authority in terms of linking with schools and educational professionals. They struggle with administrative decision making that effectively prevents necessary resources being allocated quickly. Foster carers are keen to promote educational achievements in the children they foster. However they cannot do this effectively unless they are given the tools and equipment they need. They also cannot do this alone and require the help and co-ordinated resources of local authorities and fostering services.

Foster carers hold the key to ensuring that all looked-after children achieve their potential. At the heart of any approach to transforming outcomes for looked-after children must be a set of measures designed to increase the authority, expectations and skills of foster carers.

The Fostering Network would like to see co-ordinated efforts to increase the skills, status and authority of foster carers. We believe a number of measures are required that will equip and enable foster carers to deliver improved outcomes. These should include:

- Foster carers being registered with the Care Council Wales.
- Improved training and support for foster carers, including joint training with residential social workers.
- Foster Carers as an equal part of the team around the child.
- Guidance that clarifies the authority of foster carers to make decisions with regard to the children they foster.

- Improved partnerships between foster carers and designated teachers.
- Foster carers having access to funds to purchase supplementary activities for children in foster care.
- Foster carers seen as educators of children in foster care.
- Improved access to remedial and supplementary education/coaching.
- Improved partnership working within the social care, health and education sectors in Wales.

Finally, what was obvious from the consultation was the dedication and responsibility that foster carers felt towards the children and young people they fostered. Whilst they recognised the structural limitations within which they fostered, what was clear was their will to ensure that each looked after child or young person reached their potential.

This consultation response reflects the views of foster carers. The intention of the consultation is to recognise the many examples of good practice in, but to also challenge to strive for greater improvement in key areas in education as identified by foster carers themselves.

4.1 Next Steps

The Fostering Network team would welcome further dialogue on the elements raised in this consultation with foster carers, and will continue to play a key role in raising the educational attainment of looked after children and young people in Wales.

We propose that further work is undertaken to:

- Share these findings with Fostering Services.
- Bring together Foster Carers and Educational Professionals to discuss the issues together.
- Develop a *Thrive* Magazine for Looked after Children and Young People focusing on schools and colleges and the experiences of looked after children who have excelled.

The Fostering Network Wales can offer bespoke and responsive consultancy based services and interventions as WG further develops looked after children's education strategy.

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What is needed to enable looked after children to achieve in education? : A Report of a consultation to identify what foster carers in Wales say they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education. August 2015.

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Appendix One – Topic Guide for Focus Group Discussion

Foster carer education discussion day - Topic Guide.

6 July 2015, Conwy Business Centre Llandudno Junction and 7 July 2015 Caspian Point, Cardiff.

A) Welcome and introductions

B) Context, purpose of the event, timings, ground rules, any questions.

C) Discussion. *For every topic think about: What actions need to be taken? What can foster carers contribute to achieving the changes that are needed?*

1) Finance – would extra financial support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so what should this extra financial support be for?

2) Support – Would additional (non-financial) support (for foster carers or foster children) help foster children with their education? If so, what kinds of support would help?

3) Training – would additional training either for foster carers or for other professionals help them improve educational outcomes for foster children? If so what kind of training and who should be trained?

4) Hopes and expectations of professionals, foster carers and foster children. Are the hopes and expectations that people have for foster children's education, and those that foster children have for themselves the same as for other children?

5) Involvement in Education. How much are you involved in your foster children's education?

6) Relationships between schools and foster carers. Does the nature of the relationship between schools and foster carers affect educational outcomes for foster children?

7) Stability. Do current arrangements offer enough stability to foster children, or do changes of placement or changes of school have an impact on their education?

8) Anything else – is there anything else you want to add that we have not already covered?

What is needed to enable looked after children to achieve in education? : A Report of a consultation to identify what foster carers in Wales say they need to enable the young people in their care to progress with their education. August 2015.