

The Education Committee: Fostering Inquiry in England

Submission from The Fostering Network on Staying Put, November 2016

About The Fostering Network

1. The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people, and transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75% of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.
2. In 2013 The Fostering Network led the successful "Don't Move Me" campaign, which was instrumental in persuading the Government to change the law and introduce Staying Put across England. As the leading fostering charity, The Fostering Network is submitting a full response on a wide range of issues for consideration by the Inquiry. However, ensuring that Staying Put achieves in practice what the law change set out to do is an absolute priority for the organisation, and we believe it merits a separate response, based on stakeholder surveys and the input of The Fostering Network's Staying Put Working Group.

Response

3. The Fostering Network's response is informed primarily from:
 - a. Learning emerging from the Staying Put working group, which is made up of key stakeholders from across the sector and chaired by The Fostering Network.
 - b. A survey of young people, foster carers and fostering services on staying put, conducted in June 2016. There were a total of 379 foster carer respondents, 319 (84 per cent) from a local authority and 60 (16 per cent) from an independent fostering provider. We currently have a survey of local authorities which closes in December.
 - c. Our annual survey of foster care allowances in England.
4. The Staying Put Working Group has been set up to identify and address the key implementation issues following the introduction of the duty two years ago. Our response focuses on the key implementation issues and puts forward recommendations for change.

Summary of Recommendations

5. **Local authorities should ensure all fostering service providers, foster carers and eligible young people are aware of their local staying put policy. Staying put should be introduced as an option as early as possible in the care planning process and children and young people should be involved in all the decisions which impact on their care.**
6. **Following the success of the national minimum fostering allowance, there should also be a national minimum staying put allowance, in order to iron out any local variation across the country.**
7. **Reallocation of housing benefit between public authorities and payment direct by the relevant authority to the foster carer.**
8. **The Department for Education should issue clear guidance to fostering services. We think the guidance should make clear that if a foster carer wishes to maintain their approval they should be supported by their fostering service for the duration of the staying put arrangement.**
9. **We believe that in principle if a young person is part of the household prior to 18 they should continue to remain as such, and not necessarily be subject to a DBS check unless there were serious ongoing concerns related to previous behaviour.**
10. **Pre and post-approval training for all foster carers should include staying put. All staying put carers should have continued support and training throughout the duration of the arrangement.**
11. **We would like to see a principle in place that a child should not be disadvantaged because of the contractual arrangement between their (former) foster carer's agency and the local authority.**

Lack of information and planning

12. **Staying put should be considered as part of the long-term care plan for all looked after children and young people in a long-term/permanent placement. Information should be available to all stakeholders including: children, foster carers, fostering service providers, children's social workers, IROs and leaving care services.**
13. **Feedback from our foster carer survey showed that this is often not the case. Some foster carers said that planning starts as late as the young person's 18th birthday. There is a lack of awareness of local policies on staying put among foster carers and young people, and it is not being incorporated in a timely way into the**

care planning process, therefore not being seen as part of the spectrum of care. Significantly, we often hear that young people are not fully involved in the process.

14. Our survey found that fewer than 1 in 5 foster carers said planning always/often starts when a long-term placement is being considered.
15. **Recommendation: Local authorities should ensure all fostering service providers, foster carers and eligible young people are aware of their local staying put policy. Staying put should be introduced as an option as early as possible in the care planning process and children and young people should be involved in all the decisions which impact on their care.**

Finance

16. Feedback from foster carers clearly shows that financial reasons are a key factor preventing foster carers from agreeing to staying put arrangements. Many carers have reported that their income diminishes once the young person reaches 18. For some foster carers this will be too little to allow them to continue to provide a home for the young person, and will therefore cause strong relationships to be severed.
17. Foster carer fees are often stopped once a young person in their care reaches the age of 18. The fee is a foster carer's income in recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience. The Good Practice Guide for Staying Put, developed by the Children's Partnership, states that "no young person should lose out due to lack of financial support to themselves or their carer."¹ Foster carers should not be financially disadvantaged if taking on a staying put arrangement.
18. Nearly one-quarter of foster carers we surveyed said their young person did not remain with them because they could not afford a drop in income. Some quotes from foster carers:
 - a. *"It's a reduction of £480 per month."*
 - b. *"Unfair (to cut pay) as they still require the same level of support."*
 - c. *"I think the drop in money is terrible, it does not promote "staying put". A lot of 18 yr olds are just not ready for a move, but again foster carers have to make a living as most have given up full time jobs to be a carer, me included."*
19. We surveyed local authorities about Staying Put allowances for 2016/17 and found that 40 per cent reported a reduction in allowances post 18. Currently staying put allowances vary across England by as much as £215 a week. Allowances start at

¹ The Children's Partnership, 2014. http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_113930-2.pdf. The Children's Partnership is the voluntary and community sector strategic partner to the Department for Education 2013-15, led by 4Children and the National Children's Bureau and in collaboration with Barnardo's, the Family and Childcare Trust, NCVS, NSPCC and in producing the guide, The Fostering Network.

around £85 a week. The national minimum allowance for a foster child aged 16 is £185 a week, increasing to £216 in London.

20. We also found that many fostering services – over a quarter of those surveyed in 2016 – reduce allowances to foster carers once the young person reaches the age of 18 with the intention that this shortfall is made up by the young person claiming benefits (in particular housing benefit), and then forwarding this onto the foster carer. While this may be a sensible method of reallocating local government funds, it sets up young adults as benefit claimants immediately upon reaching 18. We would like to see any reallocation of benefits being made directly to the foster carers, without having to go via the young person.

21. Recommendations:

- **Following the success of the national minimum fostering allowance, there should also be a national minimum staying put allowance, in order to iron out any local variation across the country.**
- **There should be a reallocation of housing benefit between public authorities and payment must be made directly by the relevant authority to the foster carer.**

Continued approval as a foster carer

22. There has been some uncertainty about the ability of fostering services to recommend continued “suitability to foster” for carers who do not have space/capacity to offer fostering placements in addition to Staying Put arrangements. When the young person does leave at the end of the staying put arrangement, the foster carer is left with the issue of having to seek re-approval – a lengthy process which is both unnecessary and costly.

23. Our survey found that 12 per cent of foster carers said their approval as foster carers was terminated in instances where they provided a staying put arrangement but not a foster care placement.

24. **Recommendation: The Department for Education should issue clear guidance to fostering services. We think the guidance should make clear that if a foster carer wishes to maintain their approval they should be supported by their fostering service for the duration of the staying put arrangement.**

DBS checks

25. If there are children under 18 remaining in the household, DBS checks can be required for young people entering staying put arrangements. These can be

expensive, degrading and time consuming, and are not consistent with normal family life. This as an area of work that the Government needs to address.

26. **Recommendation: We believe that in principle if a young person is part of the household prior to 18 they should continue to remain as such, and not necessarily be subject to a DBS check unless there were serious ongoing concerns related to previous behaviour.**

Training and support

27. We have concerns that training and support for staying put carers is inadequate. Our staying put survey found that only 26 per cent of foster carers who did not have a foster placement received support from a supervising social worker for their staying put arrangement. Additionally from our survey:

- *30 per cent of foster carers said the quality of ongoing information and advice was very low.*
- *35 per cent of foster carers said the quality of training and development was very low.*

28. **Recommendation: Pre and post-approval training for all foster carers should include staying put. All staying put carers should have continued support and training throughout the duration of the arrangement.**

Independent Fostering Providers

29. Commissioning for staying put is not a contract requirement for Independent Fostering Providers (IFPs) and they often will not receive a fee from the local authority in respect of the staying put arrangement. If they want to continue to pay the foster carer the same rate, this leads to the staying put arrangement being run at a loss and therefore the stability of the young person's placement being at risk.

30. **Recommendation: We would like to see a principle in place that a young person should not be disadvantaged because of the contractual arrangement between their (former) foster carer's agency and the local authority.**

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Appendix: Survey of foster carers findings in full

Policy

- Around two-thirds of foster of local authority foster carers said their fostering service had a policy on staying put. Only 1 per cent said they definitely did not.
- One-fifth of independent fostering provider foster carers said their fostering service did not have a policy, with 70 per cent saying the placing local authority did.

Planning

- Planning for staying put arrangements is inconsistent with many foster carers saying that it starts as late as the young person's 18th birthday.
- Fewer than 1 in 5 foster carers said planning always/often starts when a long-term placement is being considered.
- A quarter of young people did not want to remain in a staying put placement
- Around one in ten foster carers said their fostering service would not allow their young person to remain with them.

Financial Support

- 70 per cent of foster carers said their allowances were reduced for a staying put arrangement
- Around two-thirds of foster carers said the level of fee for their staying put arrangement was reduced.
- Over half of foster carers said their young person claimed benefits in order to cover some of the costs of the staying put arrangement.
- One-fifth of foster carers said any housing benefit was paid directly to them.

Support and Training

- 44 per cent of foster carers who also had a foster placement, received support from a supervising social worker for their staying put arrangement.
- 26 per cent of foster carers who did not have a foster placement, received support from a supervising social worker for their staying put arrangement.
- 12 per cent of foster carers said they were deregistered as a foster carer in instances where they provided a staying put arrangement but not a foster care placement.
- 31 per cent of foster carers said the quality of information and advice about entering a staying put arrangement was very low.
- 30 per cent of foster carers said the quality of ongoing information and advice was very low.
- 35 per cent of foster carers said the quality of training and development was very low.
- Only 30 per cent of foster carers said their role had changed since entering the staying put arrangement.

Implementation

- Over half of foster carers (58 per cent) said staying put legislation had been implemented not very well or not at all well.