

## **Scrutiny of Covid-19 and its impact on children and young people: Response from The Fostering Network, July 2020**

### **About The Fostering Network**

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.

In Wales we have a strong membership base with over 5,400 foster carers, all 22 local authority fostering services and the majority of independent fostering agencies. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research, in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

### **Introduction**

We welcome the opportunity to feedback to the Children, Young People and Education Committee what our members and the children they care for have experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic. We also want to take this opportunity to emphasise the critical work foster carers and all those working around them have continued to do throughout the pandemic to keep the country's most vulnerable children safe. With the sudden lockdown, foster carers assumed many additional responsibilities overnight. Many foster carers have been home educating the children in their care, supervising virtual contact arrangements with birth families in their own home and facilitating virtual social work visits in addition to their daily fostering duties.

Since it was announced that schools would be closing on the 20 March, Fosterline Wales has received a high number of coronavirus related enquiries. The evidence provided in this consultation response is based on these calls and emails as well as the engagement we have had with our foster carer and fostering service members through virtual forums and meetings over the last few months.

This response covers the following topics in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and makes recommendations:

- Financial support for foster carers;
- Educational experiences of fostered children during lockdown and the transition back to school;
- Key worker status;
- Contact arrangements with birth families;
- Foster families' health and wellbeing;
- Support for care leavers;
- Capacity of the sector as lockdown restrictions ease; and
- Contingency plans for the future.

## 1. Financial support for foster carers

During the lockdown period The Fostering Network has received, and continues to receive, queries from foster carers concerned about their fostering finances during the Covid-19 crisis. The queries fall into three groups:

- those foster carers with coronavirus who temporarily can no longer care for their fostered child(ren);
- those who have to self-isolate for 12 weeks because they are in the very vulnerable category; and
- respite foster carers who are unable to offer respite placements as a result of the social distancing requirements.

Foster carers fell through the cracks of support from the beginning of the crisis when the original furloughing offers for the employed and the self-employed were announced. Foster carers are only classified as self-employed for tax and national insurances purposes, many use Qualifying Care Relief and the majority of foster carers have no taxable profit from their self-employment.

In addition, due to the 'Stay at Home' guidance that was issued, many foster carers told us that they have taken on extra roles such as educating and entertaining children at home which involves paying for activities and equipment.

Therefore, The Fostering Network believe that foster carers who are temporarily unable to work due to the impact of coronavirus (see categories above) should be paid a retainer at this time, and during any future period of lockdown, by their fostering service to ensure consistency of financial support. We believe fostering services should be able to draw down from a central government fund to pay for these retainers. We have also asked for a higher allowance for foster carers to cover additional costs of the child while lockdown restrictions are still in place. We believe this additional support should be covered by central government funding and, along with other sector organisations, raised the issue with Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, Julie Morgan, [in an open letter in April](#).

The Welsh Government has advised The Fostering Network that they are in regular communication with fostering services, are monitoring the financial situation of foster carers, and if a fostering agency is considering offering additional monetary support to their foster carers, they should consult the AFA Cymru guidance document<sup>1</sup>.

We imagine that currently, work to model the demand and capacity of services to meet increased demand is happening at a local and national level. The fostering sector recognises the need to build capacity in the foster care system over the coming months and fostering services are working hard to recruit and approve new foster carers. However, a vital part of building capacity is retaining the existing workforce. We are concerned that the lack of financial support given to the foster carers is going to have an impact on the retention of foster carers.

### Recommendations:

- Foster carers who cannot temporarily foster, and therefore earn money, due to illness, shielding or because they are a respite carer and therefore do not have a placement whilst lockdown restrictions are in place should be paid a retainer for the whole period of time that they are without a placement. This will help protect the capacity of the sector and ensure that no family is left without an income due to coronavirus.

<sup>1</sup> AFA Cymru [Supporting effective functioning during Covid-19](#) 2020

- Foster carers should receive an increase in their allowance to reflect the extra costs of having children at home during lockdown.
- Fostering should be appropriately resourced to ensure all foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time, skills and expertise. This is an essential step in retaining carers and recruiting to the foster care workforce.

## **2. Educational experiences of fostered children during lockdown and the transition back to school**

Children in foster care have the same aspirations as other children, however, it is well documented that looked after children and young people can face particular challenges in relation to education and, on average, have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to others of the same age<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout lockdown we believe the majority of children in foster care in Wales did not attend school and were at home with their foster carers, in accordance with Welsh Government guidance on school attendance for vulnerable children. From the 29 June 2020 some children, including children in foster care, started to return to school settings before the summer holidays, where a blended learning approach was adopted to prepare for a full return in September.

To understand more about fostered children's experience of education during the pandemic, The Fostering Network launched a rapid response survey for foster carers and fostering services across the UK. The survey results have helped provide an understanding about both the educational experience of fostered children during lockdown and their needs as they transition back to school. We have summarised the key findings and recommendations from the report below. The full version is available on [The Fostering Network's website](#).

### **Key findings from the report**

- 487 foster carers, representing 870 fostered children and young people, and 48 fostering service members of staff from across the UK responded to the survey;
- Foster carers reported that 78 per cent of their children were not attending school when schools were open to key worker and vulnerable children only;
- The frequency of contact from educational providers about individual children's needs varied. While carers told us that 32 per cent of children's educational providers contacted them once a week, 14 per cent had not contacted carers at all;
- 74 per cent of foster carers said they were unaware of any special arrangements in place to support looked after children when they return to school; and
- We asked foster carers what they thought were the top three most important forms of support needed for all children when they return to school. They chose:
  - Extra tuition including one to one tuition (selected by 58 per cent of respondents).
  - Flexible and individualised transition arrangements (selected by 39 per cent of respondents).
  - Mental health support (selected by 38 per cent of respondents).

The following recommendations will be necessary to support the transition back to school and beyond as the impact of Covid-19 on children's education will be much more long-term.

<sup>2</sup> Sebba J Luke N [The educational progress and outcomes of children in care: editorial](#) *Oxford Review of Education* 45, 4 (2019), 435 – 442

## Recommendations:

- The Fostering Network welcomes the additional education funding announced by the Welsh Government to address the impact of Covid-19 on education but, as children transition back to school, their new and emerging needs will have to be assessed and additional funding and support allocated if necessary. It is vital that this funding covers any new or emerging needs of looked after children or those previously looked after. Existing funding should not be used to meet these new needs.
- The Welsh Government must ensure all schools have adequate funds, guidance and resources to:
  - put mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of transition planning
  - increase one to one and small group learning support
  - increase provision for children with special and additional learning needs
  - respond flexibly to individual children's needs when making transition arrangements
- Guide and fund schools to make tailored transition arrangements for fostered children on their return to school. There may also need to be a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs during the transition period and beyond.
- Offer clear direction to schools on approach to behaviour policies in the public health context. While public health needs to be a priority at this time to ensure children, staff and families are kept as safe as possible, schools need to be encouraged to adopt a restorative rather than punitive approach to behaviour.
- Schools should consider a change in approach to prioritise meeting children's emotional and social needs as well as their educational needs to engage all children in the transition back to school.
- Schools must recognise the importance of the foster carer role in the team around child and consult with foster carers fully in the transition planning and beyond for their child as they are well placed to assess their needs.
- Ensure there is no delay in accessing specialist support that has been delayed, or put on hold, due to Covid-19.
- Create tailored transition plans for fostered children where appropriate.
- The primary focus of re-engagement should be on children's mental health and wellbeing. This will support their academic re-engagement.
- Virtual schools, or other similar local authority body with oversight of the statutory duty to promote the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are or who have been in care, need to fully engage with all the children they are responsible for. Their role will be vital in the transition back to school.
- Every looked after child needs to have a consistent and transparent offer from their virtual school or body with similar responsibility. This is essential to try and overcome the postcode lottery of support for looked after children experienced during the pandemic.

### 3. Key worker status

We welcome the move by Welsh Government to make foster carers eligible for social care worker cards which provide them with key worker status, making them eligible for Covid-19 testing and personal protective equipment, and benefits, such as early supermarket access and priority online delivery, during the pandemic. This is an important recognition of the fact that foster carers are caring for some of our most vulnerable children during this time of crisis - maintaining relationships, providing stable family homes and keeping children safe.

#### **4. Contact arrangements with birth families**

One of the first issues to come to the fore when lockdown was put in place was facilitating contact for children in foster care with their birth families. Following the lockdown announcement, some foster carers felt that they were being expected to maintain face-to-face contact for too long, putting themselves, their family and the child at risk. Others who did not normally facilitate contact were asked to step into this role.

Since then, virtual contact – which has usually been taking the form of shorter and more frequent phone/video calls – has been widely adopted, as have other methods of keeping in touch such as writing letters. Some foster families tell us that they have enjoyed contact being remote, more inventive and frequent, whilst others, particularly those caring for younger children, felt virtual contact may not be very meaningful. Research by Neil<sup>3</sup> reiterates the experiences of virtual contact being mixed, for both the children and the foster carers, and depended on past experiences, pre-existing relationships and previous face-to-face contact between the child and birth family. The full effect of virtual contact on children, how it has impacted relationships with birth family (both positively and negatively), needs to be fully assessed following the crisis.

Current Welsh Government guidance is that contact arrangements should be assessed on a case by case basis and where it is not possible for it to be face-to-face, virtual contact needs to happen in the spirit of the court ordered contact. We would advise a similar approach is taken to the easing of lockdown restrictions and that the case by case judgements should be made with full consultation and consideration of the foster carer's and the child's views. Local decision-making frameworks and national bodies could draw on the learning developed in Scotland<sup>4</sup>. In addition, fostering services should promote The Fostering Network's resources for [social workers](#) and [foster carers](#) designed to support the decisions being made around contact plans highlighting issues to consider.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Investigate fully the effect of virtual contact with birth families on children in care and consider both its benefits and challenges, and long-term use in the sector.
- Foster carers to be properly consulted with and feed into decision making about when face-to-face contact restarts and in what form this might be.
- When contact resumes, all parties involved should have the appropriate personal protective equipment should they need it, in line with government guidance, and appropriate risk assessments should be undertaken.

#### **5. Foster families' health and wellbeing**

Foster carers have adjusted to the unprecedented changes to their family life to ensure the wellbeing of the children and young people in their care (and in many cases their own birth children too) is protected while also ensuring the restrictions are maintained and providing care around the clock.

The National survey for Wales' latest results since May 2020<sup>5</sup> show that 41 per cent of people have experienced anxiety during the pandemic. Mental health issues are therefore being exacerbated at a time where both formal (such as face-to-face social worker visits) and informal (from peers) modes of support have decreased. It is important that foster families feel properly emotionally supported and do

<sup>3</sup> Neil E, Copson R, Sorensen P [Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch?](#) (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory/University of East Anglia, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Social Work Scotland [Connections for wellbeing and contact framework](#) 16 June 2020

<sup>5</sup> Welsh Government [National Survey for Wales: May 2020 onwards](#) 25 June 2020

not feel isolated during this time. We have heard through Fosterline Wales reports of foster carer exhaustion and high stress levels.

Additionally, we have heard evidence from some foster carers that they have struggled with how to use digital devices and are unsure what their children are doing online and how to keep their usage safe. We would like to highlight a need to train foster carers in using digital equipment and how to keep their children safe and healthy while using the internet, social media and gaming platforms.

### **Recommendations:**

- Funding, guidance and resources should be provided to local authorities to support foster families' mental health and wellbeing.
- Foster carers need to be given the appropriate training to support children digitally and keep them safe online.

## **6. Support for care leavers**

Throughout the lockdown period our view was that young people in foster care who are turning 18 should have the opportunity to remain in foster care for the time being, with foster carers receiving the same practical and financial support as previously – in the same way as many fostering services allow young people turning 18 to remain with their foster carers in a fostering arrangement until the end of the academic year. Young people who are due to be leaving a When I am Ready arrangement should also have the opportunity to stay in this arrangement until the coronavirus crisis comes to an end if they wish. This can help ensure that the right support is put in place for young people whose plans for the future may have been paused, and for their foster carers (or former foster carers). Foster carers who change to a When I am Ready arrangement should not see any drop in their income because of their change in status, this is in line with When I am Ready guidance<sup>6</sup>.

We understand the emotional and practical impact of this on young people and foster carers, and on the capacity of foster placements, but the priority at this time is ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all members of the fostering community. We do not believe that now is the time to be moving young people into independent living if the usual support networks are not available and if this would not be in the best interest of the young person

We welcome the Welsh Government's updated guidance around the St David's Day Fund advising that local authorities should give priority to care leavers who may be experiencing financial hardship due to income loss, difficulty with tenancy agreements, food and other basic living necessities. We have heard anecdotally that many young care leavers have felt isolated during the pandemic such that, after the pandemic, an effort to address digital poverty among this group of young people should be made. Having internet access and a laptop/tablet opens doorways to a wealth of information, knowledge and educational resources, increasing opportunities for learning in and beyond the classroom as well as facilitating social interaction and maintaining relationships.

### **Recommendations:**

- Young people should have the opportunity to review their transition decisions in light of the pandemic and services need to support them by providing flexibility.

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Government [When I am Ready: Good practice guide](#) March 2016

- More funding is needed to address digital poverty among young care leavers

## 7. Capacity of the sector

In Wales, the most recent statistics state that the majority of referrals to children's social care come from local authorities (38 per cent), police (17 per cent) and primary or community health (16 per cent)<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, it is predicted that as lockdown rules are relaxed, face-to-face meetings and routine health appointments resume, referrals will go up and there will be an increased demand for all different types of looked after children's provisions. Given that 71 per cent of all children looked after in Wales live with foster families, we can expect the demand for foster placements specifically to be particularly high. In addition, families that rely on short-break foster carers will need this support urgently when movement between homes and overnight stays are advised again.

Recruitment activity will need to ensure the right kinds of foster families are recruited to match the needs of the local looked after children population. It is also equally important to focus on the retention of foster carers to maintain the foster carer population.

On 27 July, the Welsh Government announced a consultation on the proposed Adoption and Fostering (Wales) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020<sup>8</sup> to make the following changes relevant to fostering: the introduction of a self-declaration health assessment for prospective foster carers who cannot access a face to face consultation with a GP, and extension of the period during which a person may receive temporary approval to act as a local authority foster carer.

While we recognise the need behind producing new guidance – to ease administrative burdens and to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the fostering sector – we would urge caution about bringing in new regulation unless absolutely necessary. Any such amendments to guidance or regulations need to maintain essential safeguarding practices, be temporary and involve formal consultation with the children's sector, including if appropriate children and young people themselves. We believe any such amendments to the regulations and associated guidance are to be used only when absolutely necessary and, where possible, existing timescales should be adhered to. If amendments are used, there should be a clear record of decision making and the views of foster carers and children and young people should be taken into consideration. We will respond in full to the aforementioned consultation before it closes towards the end of August.

### Recommendations:

- If amendments to the regulations are passed, after a full consultation process, to increase flexibility of foster carer approval, such amendments should only be made following consultation with the children's sector and be guided by the following principles:
  - Keep the child's best interest at the heart of decision making.
  - Be risk-sensible, rather than risk adverse.
  - Be family focussed (taking into consideration the views of the whole fostering household and birth family).
  - Be proportionate and justified.
  - Be collaborative and transparent.

<sup>7</sup> Stats Wales [Children in need by local authority and source of most recent referral](#) 2016

<sup>8</sup> Welsh Government [The proposed adoption and fostering \(Wales\) \(Miscellaneous Amendments\) \(Coronavirus\) Regulations 2020](#) 27 July 2020

- If amendments are made to the regulations, their use and impact should be monitored, and recorded centrally and these records made publicly available.

## **8. Contingency plans for the future**

Pandemics, such as the one we are currently experiencing, may happen again and it is important that the Welsh Government and the children's sector in Wales are properly prepared should this occur. It is important that all decision makers learn robustly from the impact of the current crisis and ensure that safeguarding standards and people's wellbeing and health needs are maintained as paramount should another pandemic occur.

Fostering services should consult with their staff, including foster carers, and fostered children to find out what they think worked well, what areas they would like to see incorporated into future practice and areas that need improvement.

Many services will have already considered the impact of the pandemic and may have taken measures to respond and create contingency plans for the future. We intend to support services as they continue to plan and address gaps in service provision. We will continue to:

- Bring together fostering, social care, health and education to discuss the issues together.
- Continue to develop the publication of resources through our website and networks for example, the contact checklists we developed as well as hosting free seminars covering topics such as digital safeguarding, compassion fatigue and self-care, and supporting children and carers through to new normal.
- Encourage foster carers to consult, challenge and collaborate.

The Fostering Network in Wales can offer bespoke and responsive consultancy-based services and interventions as Welsh Government further develops its looked after children's Covid-19 response and policy.

### **Recommendations:**

- All fostering services should pay a retainer to any foster carer who cannot work temporarily due to a pandemic to keep foster placements open and aid retention.
- All fostering services should have a robust policy to inform how contact, panels and any other face-to-face meetings should move online in the case of a pandemic and ensure that foster carers are enabled and have the skills required to participate in these virtual meetings.

### **Conclusion**

There is still a long way to go to recover from the full impacts of the coronavirus, and some of the impact may be unrecoverable. We must do our best to support all children and families to return to 'normality' safely and continue to support them through the transition period and beyond. We must ensure that we use this crisis period as a crucial learning opportunity to discover new and better ways to support foster families and the children they look after.



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