

State of the Nation's Foster Care Full Report

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February 2019

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Foreword

Over the past few years, our State of the Nation report has become recognised as the most comprehensive insight into foster carers' views of fostering in the UK. We hope that the publication of this latest report will be of use to policy makers in creating positive change, fostering services in benchmarking your own activity, and foster carers in understanding how your own experiences compare with others. And yet as you read the very clear messages from foster carers about the lack of support, training, respect and remuneration they receive – many of which are repeated from our last survey – you might join me in feeling a sense of frustration that little seems to have moved on over the last two years.

We have openly expressed our disappointment in the lack of vision demonstrated in the reviews that have taken place across the UK over the last couple of years and we believe that these reviews have too often failed to tackle the primary challenges facing fostering – systemic issues, support for children and young people, and the treatment of foster carers. In particular, we feel that the voices of foster carers have largely been ignored.

We are increasingly frustrated by the inertia of decision makers across the UK. We – everyone involved in fostering – need this to be a year of action. This report, and the lessons it draws from the 4,000 foster carers who took our survey, particularly reinforces the need for urgent changes to the support, terms and conditions for foster carers.

We will, of course, be working with and urging governments and other policy makers across all four countries to implement the recommendations in this report. We believe these recommendations are important steps towards ensuring that foster carers and the children and young people they are caring for are supported by a fostering system that is fit for purpose.

Kevin Williams
Chief Executive, The Fostering Network
February 2019

1. About the State of the Nation's Foster Care

Three-quarters of looked after children in the UK are being cared for by foster families. This means that improving the outcomes for children in care must start with improving foster care. Foster carers are best placed to tell us about how foster care is working for the children they look after and to highlight the areas that need to be improved. The Fostering Network regularly conducts an in-depth survey of foster carers throughout the UK and we publish our State of the Nation report based on the survey findings.

Our survey covered key practice and workforce issues such as placement stability, training and support for carers, and status and authority of the workforce. We received a record 4,037 responses, which has given us a unique insight into the issues currently facing foster carers across the UK. We would like to thank all those foster carers who took the time to complete the survey to share their views and experiences of fostering.

The Fostering Network will use the survey findings to influence the foster care agenda and create change through bringing them to the attention of national and local decision and policy makers. We will work with key stakeholders to advocate for the report's recommendations to be implemented in all four countries of the UK, with the aim of ensuring all fostered children are given the best possible care.

Fostering, while rooted in providing families for children, is not a single entity. Some foster carers offer occasional short break care, others emergency or short-term placements, while some provide children with a home for their whole childhoods and transition into adulthood. Many foster carers do a mix of these forms of fostering. An increasing number of foster carers are approved to provide care specifically to members of their extended family: they made up eight per cent of the 4,037 respondents to the survey. While these 'kinship' or 'family and friends' foster carers may at times have different needs and expectations from some of their 'mainstream' colleagues, we are confident that our recommendations throughout this report would benefit all approved foster carers¹.

¹ In Scotland kinship carers are generally not approved as foster carers, so they were not targeted by the survey. Therefore this report does not apply to them.

2. A snapshot of foster care

2.1 The realities of foster care

The Westminster Government has recently made a concerted attempt to replace the term “foster carer” with “foster parent”. We believe this is a backwards step that serves only to undermine the complex role of the foster carer and risks further marginalisation of the workforce. Therefore, we felt it was important in this year’s State of the Nation survey to have some focus on the challenges facing foster carers in their day-to-day work, and how these challenges may differ from those facing parents.

It is important to be clear about three things: by looking at these challenges we are not making light of the role of parents in our society, nor are we implying that foster care is not also about parenting. Nor – and most importantly – are we intending in any way to demonise looked after children. However, it is naïve to ignore the fact that the trauma experienced by many children before they came into foster care may impact upon their mental health, wellbeing or behaviour, and therefore we must also recognise that those tasked with looking after these children in a family setting, helping them to recover and thrive, require specific and enhanced skills, support, and training – above and beyond that of a parent – in order to do their job to the best of their ability and with the most successful outcomes.

It is also important to emphasise that while foster carer is the job title it does not preclude individual fostered children calling their foster carers by whatever term or name that they like: each, quite rightly, will build their own personal relationships.

Therefore we asked foster carers to tell us about what life can be like in their home – because aside from the joys, the stresses, the fun, the disagreements, and the love that is found in any family home, we simply do have to recognise that foster care is different.

Firstly, as a direct result of previous traumas, children in care are far more likely to require mental health support. We asked:

Q. Do you care for any children or young people who you feel should have access to mental health support (for example, CAMHS) but are not receiving this service?

- Yes – 48 per cent
- No – 52 per cent.

Nearly half of foster carers (48 per cent) state that they are looking after a child or young person in need of a mental health support service who is not receiving this support. The true figure about mental health problems presenting in the foster home will be much higher than 48 per cent, because it does not take into account the foster carers who have successfully been able to access external mental health support for their fostered child.

Therefore we can say with confidence that at least 48 per cent of foster carers are caring for a child with mental health problems. For comparison with the general population, a recent report from the Public Accounts Committee stated that 13 per cent of five to 19-year-olds have a mental health disorder². Supplementary questions about mental health support will be explored in more detail in section 4 of this report.

² Public Accounts Committee (2019) *Mental health services for children and young people*
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublic/1593/159302.htm>

We now move on to experiences in the foster home. We chose the following categories to provide a broad spectrum of the kinds of challenges foster carers may face every day.

Q. In the past 24 months have any of your fostered children had experience of the following? (please select all that apply)

	UK	%	YouGov survey
Total respondents	3435		1054
Self-harm	949	28%	7%
Causing violence in your home	887	26%	5%
Involvement with the police	861	25%	4%
Running away/going missing from care	854	25%	1%
Unauthorised contact with birth family	693	20%	-
Drug abuse	479	14%	-
Alcohol abuse	449	13%	-
Child sexual exploitation (CSE)	422	12%	-
Involvement with the criminal courts	205	6%	-
Gangs	203	6%	-
Teenage pregnancy	145	4%	-
None of the above	1505	44%	84%
Don't know / prefer not to say	-	-	5%

In addition to this raw data we examined in more detail the most common experiences. We discovered that half of foster carers (50 per cent) told us that in the past 24 months they have supported a child who has either:

- caused violence in their home
- self-harmed
- gone missing from the home; or
- been involved with the police.

In contrast, a YouGov survey in January 2019 of 1,000 parents of children under 18 across the UK gave a corresponding figure of only 11 per cent.

One in five (20 per cent) foster carers have had their task perhaps made more difficult due to unauthorised contact between the child and their birth family. Unauthorised contact is only made easier in a world of smartphones and social media.

We must also bear in mind that the 44 per cent of respondents who answered “none of the above” – in addition to those whose fostered children had not had those experiences – are likely also to include those carers without a current placement, and those looking after babies and younger children.

Recommendation for governments and the wider sector

- Language is key to reflecting status, and therefore we recommend that the term foster carer is universally acknowledged and used as the correct title that reflects this role.

2.2 Foster carer profile – summary

We have explored some of the challenges foster carers face, demonstrated how these may differ from the general population, and given a brief insight into the work that they do.

But what does this workforce look like? In short, the typical foster carer in the UK:

- Is aged between 45 and 54
- Is female
- Fosters with their partner
- Currently has one or two children in placement
- Has no birth children currently at home
- Has been fostering for more than six years.

This section summarises the profile of foster carers. The full information can be found in the appendix.

The survey was taken by 4,037 foster carers in total across the UK, broken down as follows:

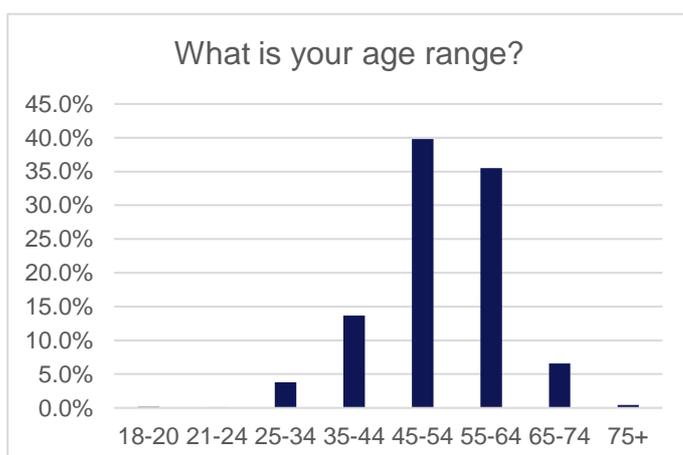
England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	Elsewhere
74%	13%	6%	6%	<1%

Male	Female
17%	83%

The very small minority of under 1 per cent stated that they fostered elsewhere such as the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man.

The overwhelming majority (83 per cent) of people who completed the survey were women. In Northern Ireland the gender split was wider with 88 per cent being women.

Nine out of 10 (89 per cent) foster carers who responded were between the ages of 35 and 64, with the most common age range being 45-54, at 40 per cent of the total:



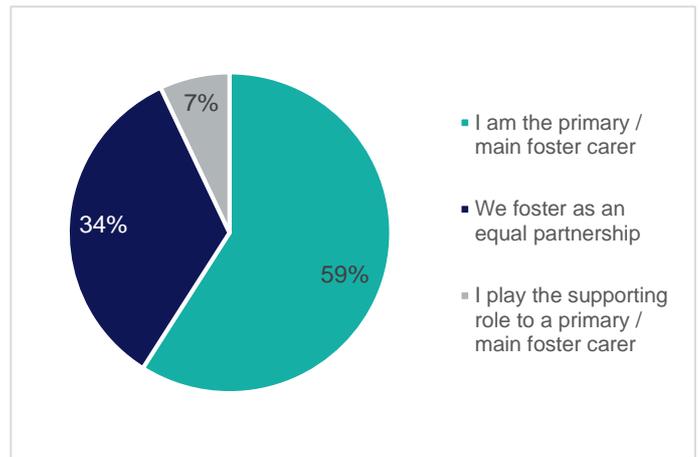
Age range	Numbers/percentages
18-20	6 (0.2%)
21-24	4 (0.1%)
25-34	154 (4%)
35-44	551 (14%)
45-54	1,607 (40%)
55-64	1,433 (35%)
65-74	266 (7%)
75+	17 (0.4%)

Since 2016 there has been a slight increase, from 40 to 42 per cent, in foster carers aged between 55 and 74, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of carers aged below 54. This continues a trend from our 2014 survey, indicating that the foster carer workforce is continuing to get slightly older.

2.3 Fostering households

Q. Do you foster alone or with somebody else?

More than three quarters (77 per cent) of foster carers said that they foster with a partner, and of these partners 98 per cent are also approved foster carers. Additionally, this year we asked respondents to describe their role if in a partnership. More than half (59 per cent) described themselves as the main carer, while a third (34 per cent) said they fostered as an equal partnership.



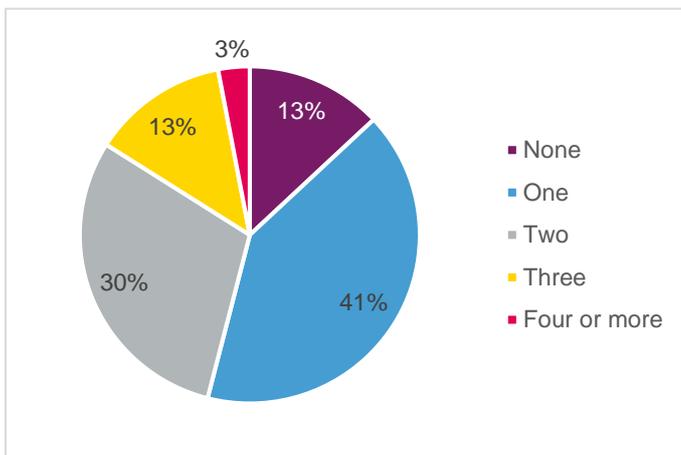
Q. Do you foster for:

	Eng	Sco	Wal	NI	UK 2018	UK 2016
A local authority, trust, etc.	69%	64%	76%	85%	70%	80%
An independent fostering provider	31%	36%	24%	15%	30%	20%

Responding foster carers were split 70 to 30 per cent between local authority/trusts and independent providers (IFPs) respectively. Northern Ireland had the lowest proportion of IFP respondents at only 15 per cent.

For comparison with the general foster carer population, national figures for England are available from Ofsted and suggest that available fostering households in 2017 – the latest data available – are split 60:40 between local authority and IFP.³

Q. How many fostered children and young people do you currently have in placement? Please do not include anybody over the age of 18.

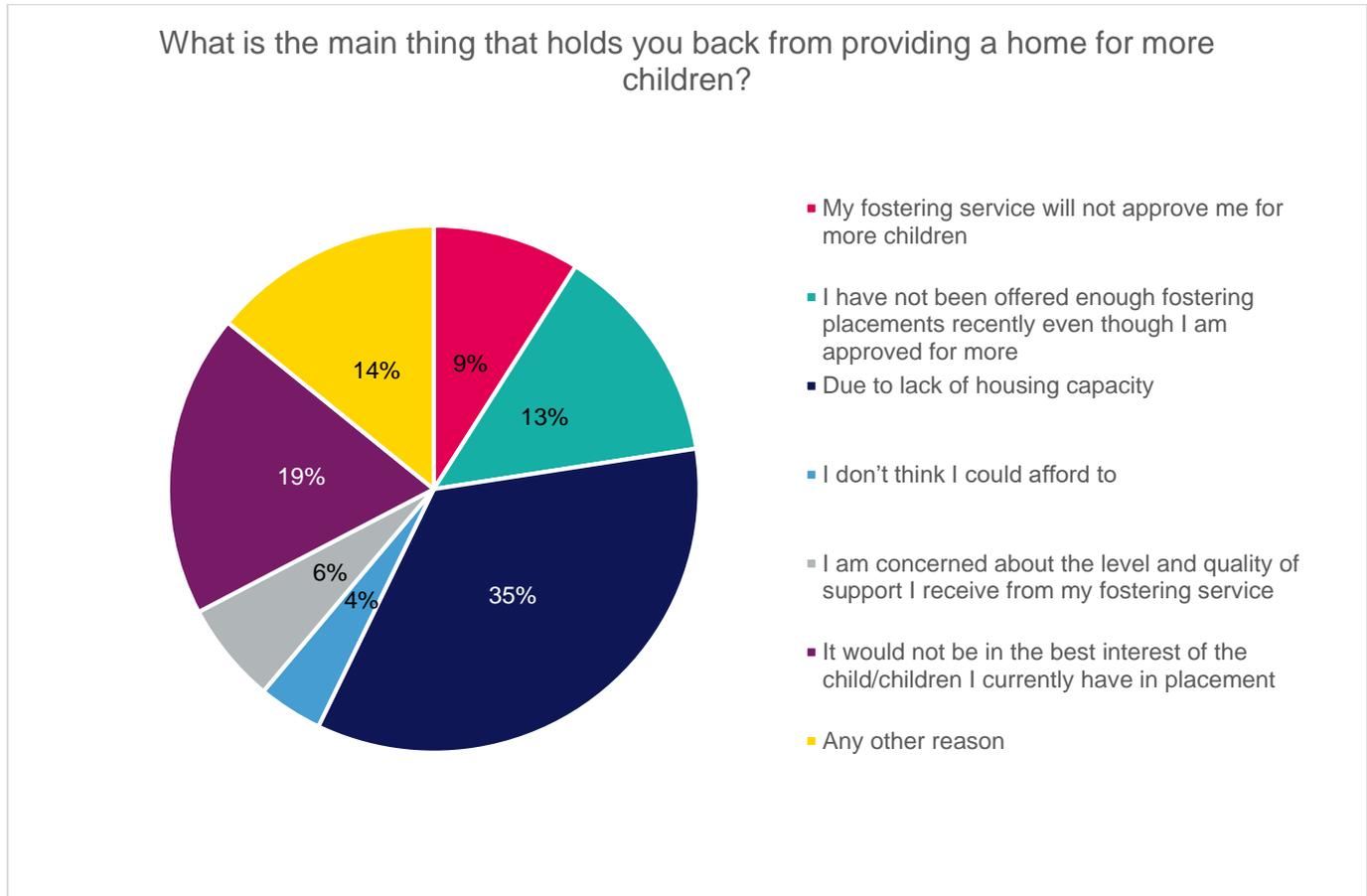


Nearly three-quarters of foster carers have either one or two children currently living with them. A minority (13 per cent) has none. These could be foster carers between placements, those who have been approved to foster but have not yet begun, or those who have recently retired from foster care. Very few respondents (three per cent) have four or more children. With placement limits now in force throughout the UK, it is rare for there to be more than three children in placement at any given time, which usually happens only in the case of sibling groups.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-in-england-1-april-2016-to-31-march-2017/fostering-in-england-2016-to-2017-main-findings#fostering-households>

Q. Would you like to provide a home for more children but are unable to? If yes, what is the one main thing that holds you back?

More than half (54 per cent) of foster carers said that they would like to offer a home to more children but were unable to do so. Of those who said yes, more than a third (35 per cent) said that it was due to a lack of housing capacity:



Q. In addition to any fostered children, how many children or young people currently live in your household?

	0	1	2	3	4	5+
Birth	57%	22%	15%	5%	1%	<0.5%
Adopted	89%	8%	2%	<1%	0%	0%
SGO	95%	4%	<1%	<0.5%	0%	0%
Non-fostered family & friends	92%	5%	2%	<0.5%	<0.5%	0%
Approved kinship (Scotland)	99%	<1%	<0.5%	0%	0%	0%
Care leavers	87%	11%	2%	2%	0%	0%
Other (please specify)	93%	5%	2%	<0.5%	0%	0%

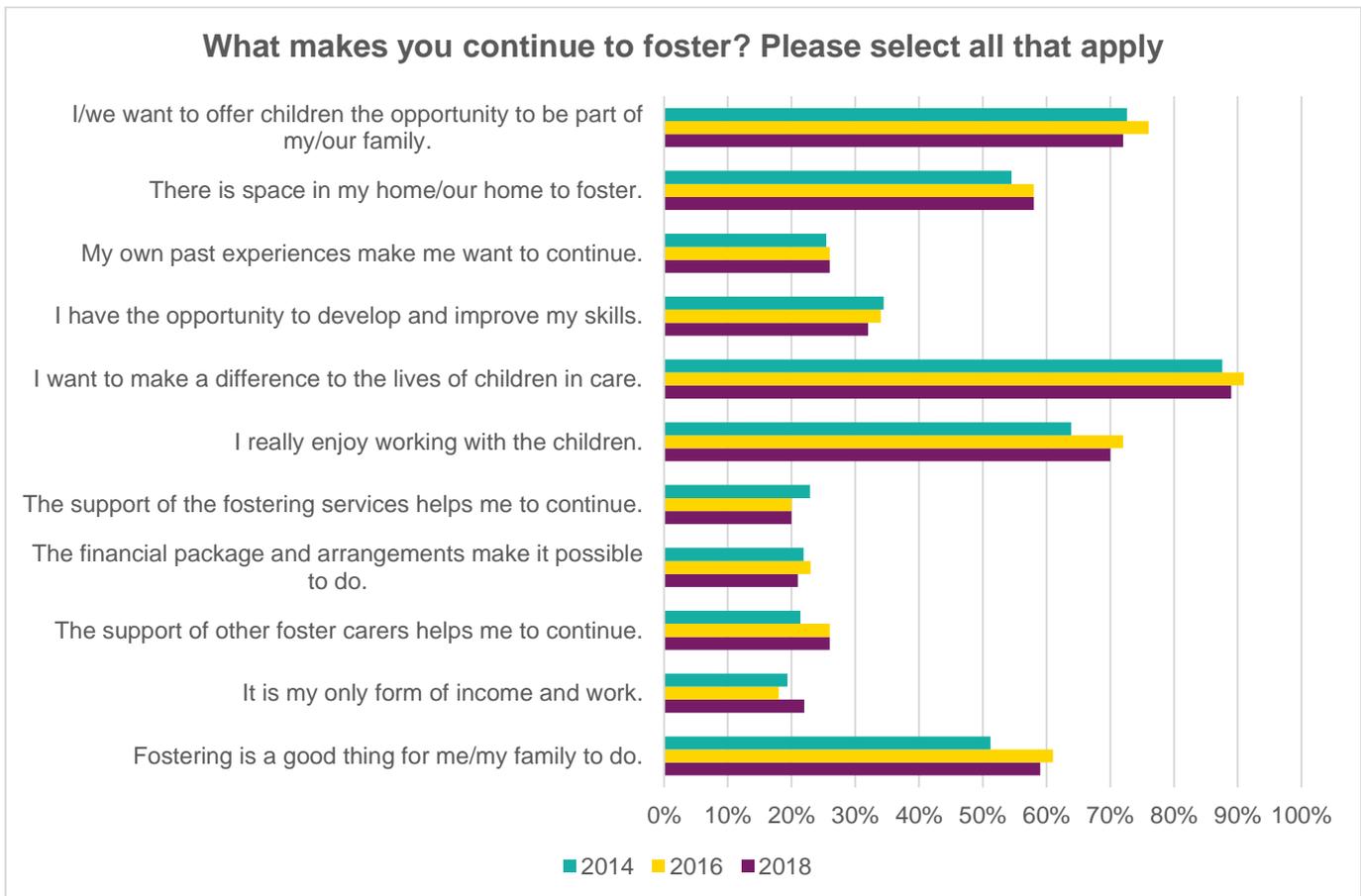
Nearly half (43 per cent) of foster carers also had one or more birth children of their own living with them. The “other” category included adult birth children, adult shared lives placements, fostered children on short breaks/respite, and parent and child placements.

2.4 Views and attitudes on fostering

We have seen how foster care is a complex and often challenging job. As with any workforce, it is important also to understand what motivates people to do this work, whether they would recommend it to other people, and how they think it can be improved.

Q. What makes you continue to foster?

We gave a list of 11 reasons, from which foster carers could choose as many or as few as they liked. We have now asked this same question in three State of the Nation surveys:

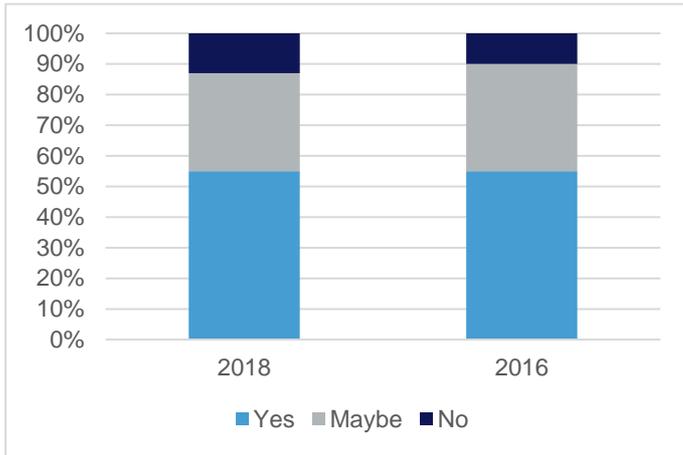


The top three reasons given were same as 2016, but each has decreased slightly since then:

- I want to make a difference to the lives of children in care
- I/we want to offer children the opportunity to be part of my/our family
- I really enjoy working with the children.

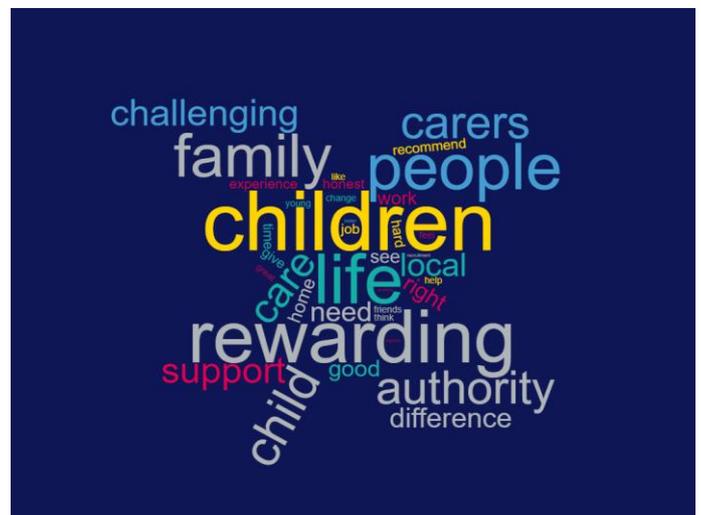
While the main reasons for continuing to foster have not altered over time – with similar percentages clustered around the same answers – there have not been many clear trends emerging since 2014 either. For example foster carers do appear to be valuing peer support more, are more likely to say that fostering is their only form of income, and are slightly less focused on developing their skills; but these are small changes and should be treated with caution.

Q. Would you recommend fostering to others who may be considering it?



At 55 per cent, the proportion of foster carers saying they would definitely recommend fostering to others has remained steady since 2016. However there has been a slight increase – from 10 to 13 per cent – in those saying no. IFP foster carers are more likely than local authority/trust foster carers to recommend fostering, with 63 and 52 per cent respectively answering yes to this question.

There were 200 foster carers answering yes who also left a comment for this question. A word cloud – a graphical representation of the number of times specific words are mentioned in the text – of their responses really helps to paint a picture of the motivations that foster carers have in their work.

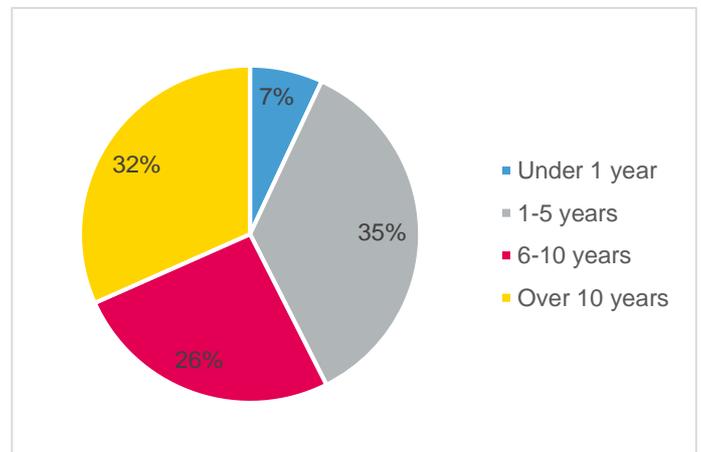


Moving on to the 13 per cent who said no, the vast majority of comments that they provided (100 out of 193 comments in total) related to poor treatment from their fostering service or a lack of support. Other themes included poor pay and/or allowances (14 occurrences) and the lack of worker status (also 14 occurrences).

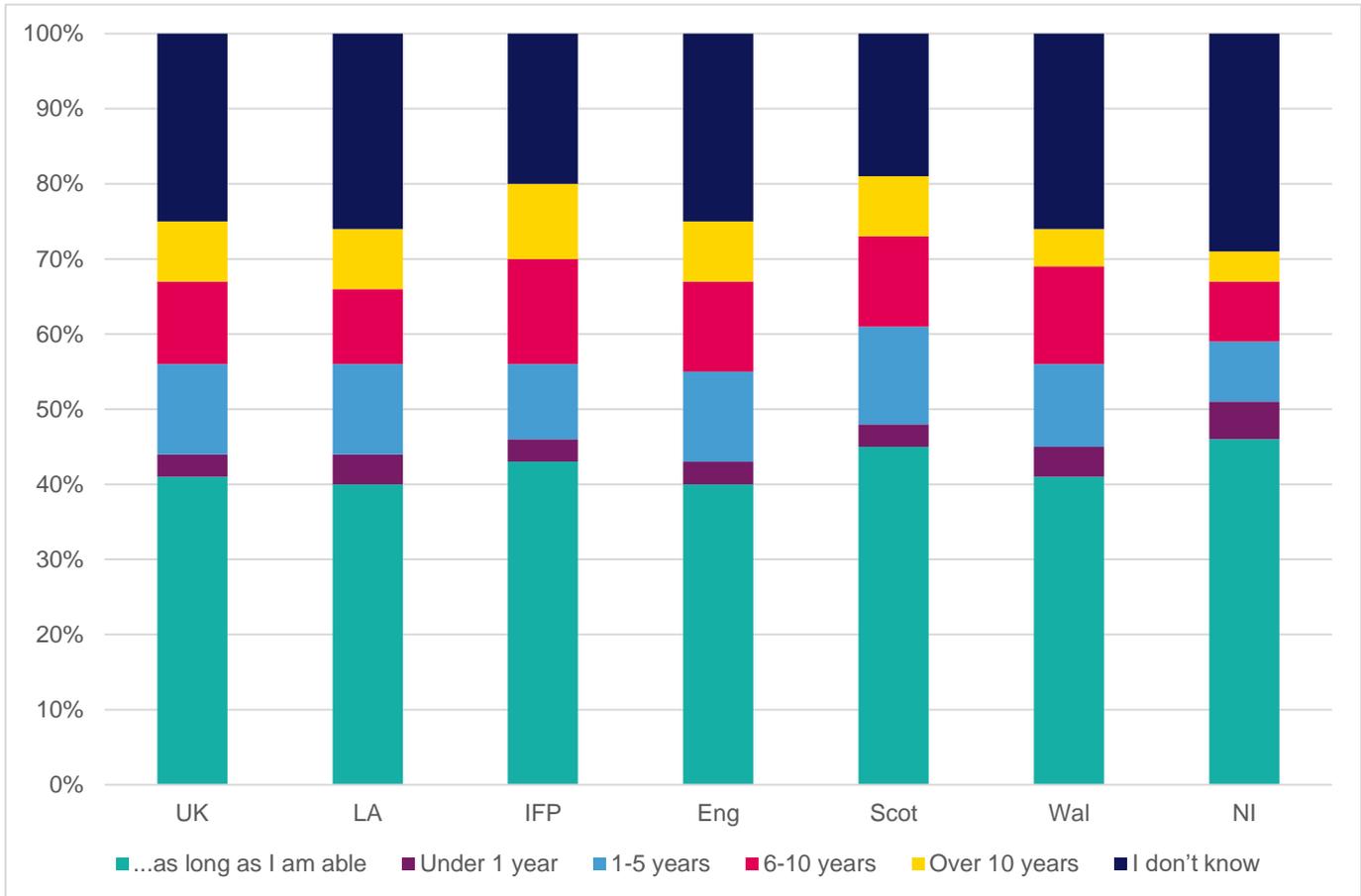
Q. How long have you been fostering?

More than half (58 per cent) of foster carers who responded to the survey have been fostering for six years or more.

IFP carers have been fostering for less time than local authority/trust carers, with those saying they had been fostering for over 10 years at 26 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. Meanwhile when comparing the countries of the UK, Wales has the most foster carers – at 36 per cent – who have been fostering for over 10 years.



Q. When do you think you will stop fostering?



Only 41 per cent of foster carers say that they will continue to foster for ‘as long as I am able’. This sentiment was highest in Northern Ireland, at 46 per cent. When it comes to uncertainty about when they will stop, Scotland is lowest here with only 19 per cent of foster carers replying “I don’t know”, compared with the overall UK figure of 25 per cent.

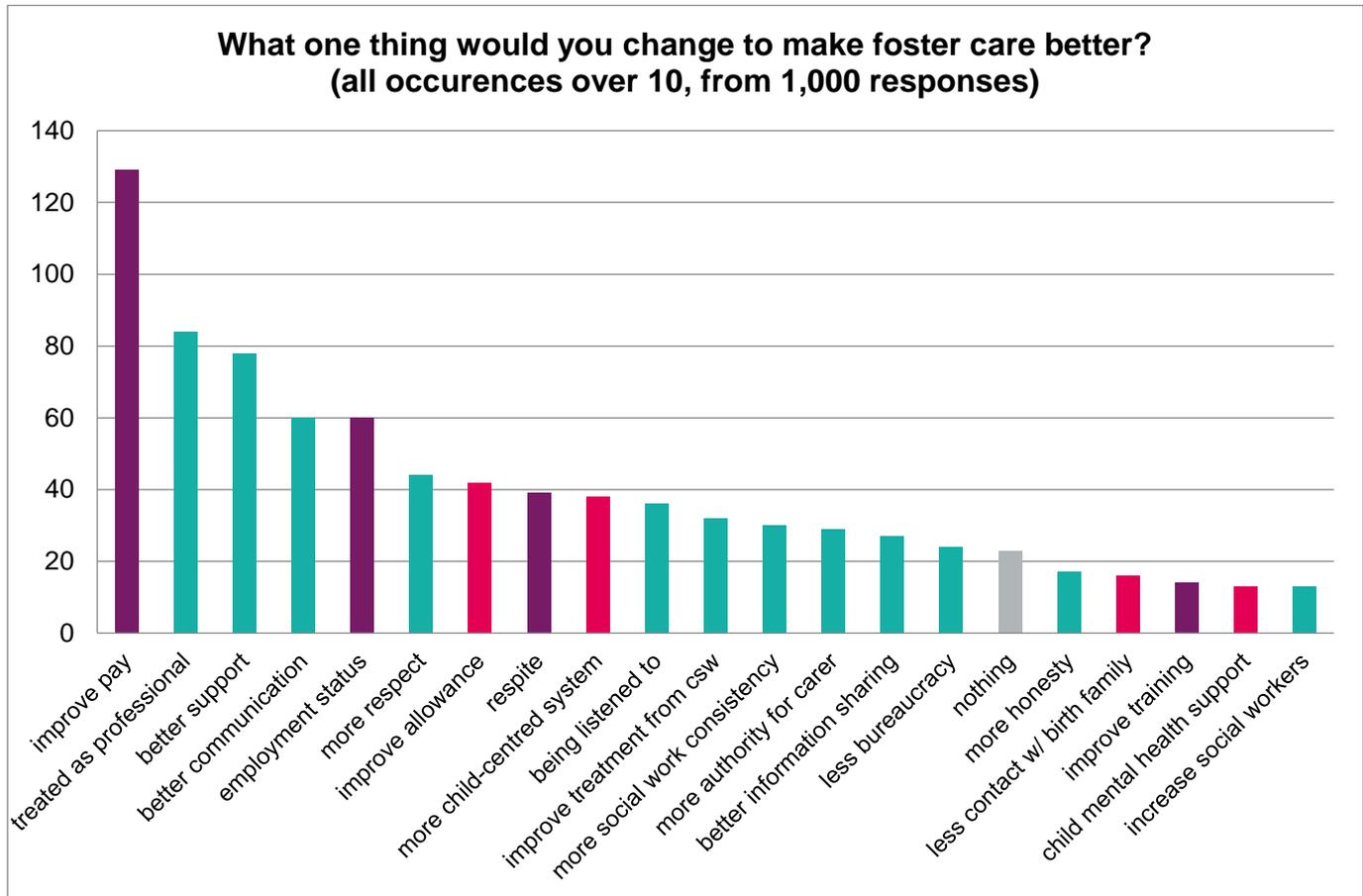
Q. What one thing would you change to make foster care better?

This was an open answer format, and the word cloud from the text of the thousands of answers to this question clearly shows that children are at the forefront of foster carers’ minds because, ultimately, foster carers know that better foster care will result in better outcomes for children, something to which we all aspire.



While the word cloud gives an at-a-glance impression, more in-depth analysis of the text from selecting at random 1,000 of the 2,382 comments allowed us to identify some issues, the top three being:

- To improve pay
- To be treated more as a professional
- To receive better support.



To remain within the spirit of the question, we were quite strict – any respondent listing more than the one “thing” we specified had the second and all subsequent suggestions discounted. The issues from this question can be analysed in a number of ways, and the above chart is just one option.

Another way of looking at this data is to group the issues together into different categories. For example in the above chart the colour coding represents:

- **Purple** = foster carer employment/conditions
- **Teal** = foster carer experience/treatment
- **Red** = direct impact on the child

Analysed in this way the largest category is the general treatment of foster carers and how this can affect their experience of the role and their capacity to perform it to the best of their ability.

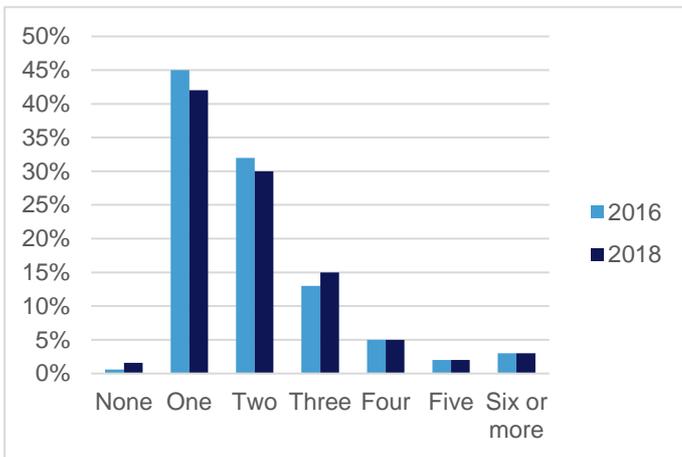
3. Supporting the foster carer workforce

3.1 Support

Foster care is an immensely rewarding yet often challenging role. As we have seen in the views and attitudes section, foster carers love the work that they do but can be frustrated or let down by a lack of support. Support for foster carers can come both formally at an organisational level and more informally from family and peers, and the quality of this can make a difference to the stability and success of placements

One of the most important relationships for foster carers is with their supervising social worker, who is the first point of contact with the service and supervises their role. A strong relationship here is key, wherein trust and respect can be built up over time. It is encouraging, albeit to be expected, that nearly all (95 per cent) foster carers told us that they currently do have a named supervising social worker.

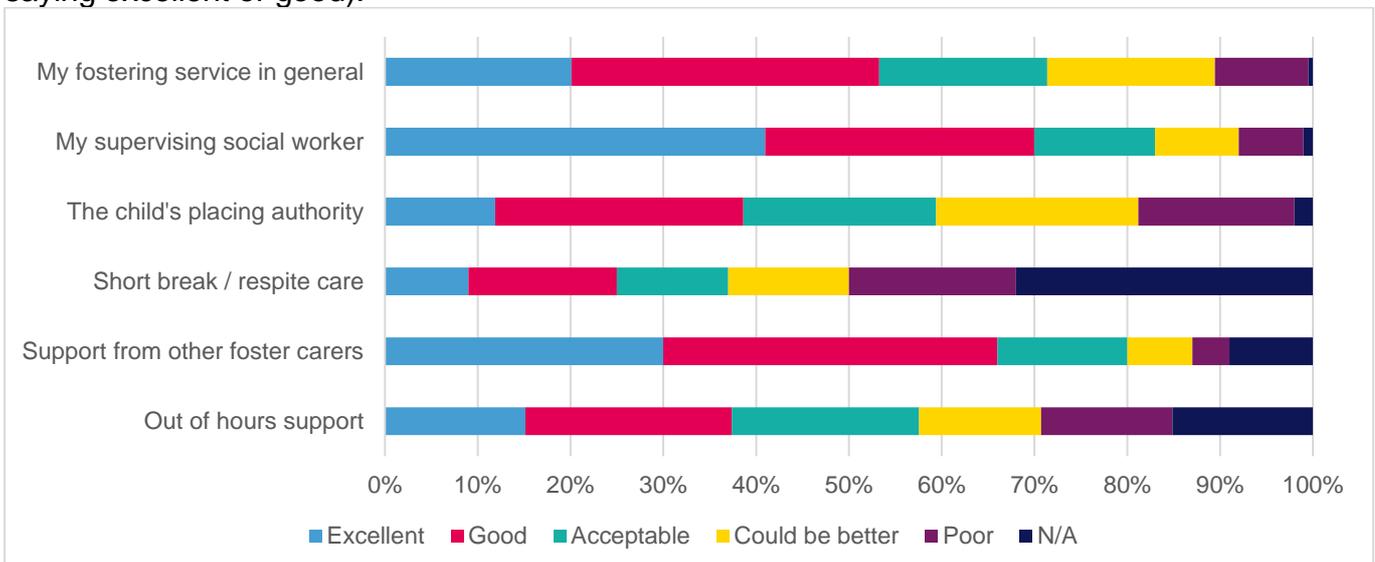
Q. How many supervising/link social workers have you had in the past 24 months?



Staff turnover, though sometimes inevitable, will always have a knock-on effect on consistency of support for the foster carer. Nearly half (42 per cent) of respondents told us they have had the same supervising social worker for the past two years. However, a quarter (25 per cent) reported having three or more – this is an increase of two per cent since 2016.

Q. How do you rate the following support that you receive for your fostering?

There is a clear difference between foster carers' perceptions of support from their supervising social worker (70 per cent saying excellent or good) and the fostering service in general (only 53 per cent saying excellent or good):



Scotland and Northern Ireland foster carers were more positive about the support from their fostering service in general, with 61 and 62 per cent respectively describing it as excellent or good.

Poor support from the child’s placing authority – fewer than 40 per cent of respondents rated this as excellent or good – confirms what we hear all too often: that there is an ongoing disconnect between those with corporate parenting responsibility and the families with whom these children are placed. This disconnect can lead to poorer outcomes for the child.

The two lowest performing categories in terms of support are out of hours support and short break/respice care.

Not all foster carers would feel that short break/respice care was relevant to them – perhaps because they are long-term foster carers or even short break/respice carers themselves – which may well explain why nearly a third (32 per cent) of them answered not applicable to this question. However, even if these responses are removed from the results, those rating short break/respice as excellent or good are still very much in the minority at only 37 per cent.

Out of hours support should be provided as best practice by every fostering service and yet nearly half (42 per cent) of foster carers state that it is either not applicable, poor, or could be better, with only 37 per cent rating it as excellent or good (rising to 44 per cent if discounting those who answered not applicable). There is also a stark difference between local authority/trust and IFP carers’ experience here: only 26 per cent of the former as opposed to 64 per cent of the latter feel that out of hours support is excellent or good.

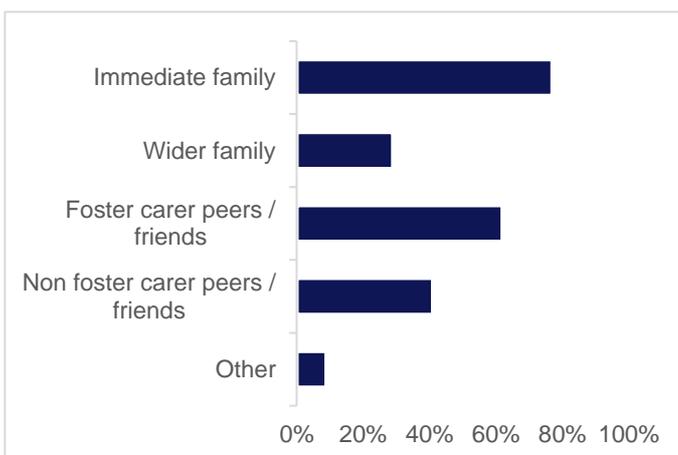
Overall the results from this question suggest that foster carers have a more positive experience of formal support from individuals than they do from institutions, with the supervising social worker and other foster carers coming out on top in terms of support that is rated excellent or good.

We also provided foster carers with the option of an ‘other’ category. The open comments for this question showed that foster carers listed child mental health services and schools as where they also find formal support for their fostering.

Q. In addition to formal support, from where else do you receive informal practical and emotional support?

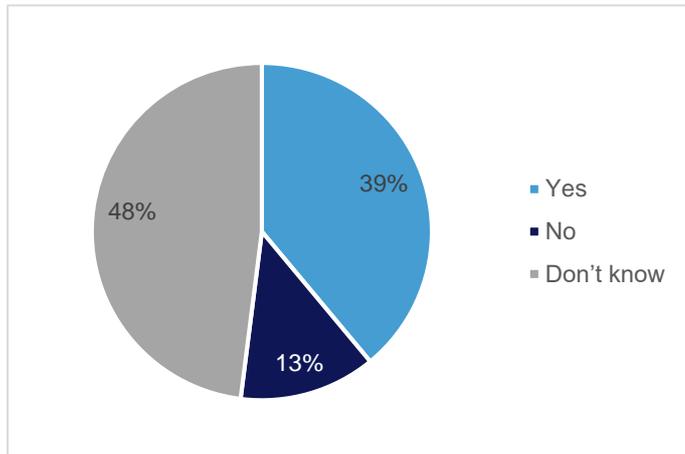
When asked where informal practical and emotional support comes from, more than three-quarters (77 per cent) of foster carers cited their immediate family. We know how important the sons and daughters of foster carers are. It is also clear that foster carers value informal support from other foster carers who will be able to empathise with their day-to-day experiences.

Foster carers ticking the “other” option mentioned in order of popularity: churches, schools, support organisations and social media as other avenues where they found informal support.



Foster care associations (FCAs) are formal groups of foster carers who come together to support each other and work with their fostering service to make improvements to the fostering experience locally. We wanted to find out from foster carers in every country whether they had one locally, and whether they were involved in its work.

Q. Is there a foster care association available to you locally?



Nearly half (48 per cent) of foster carers do not know if there is an FCA local to them. However, 39 per cent of carers could say for definite that there was an FCA available to them locally. FCAs are more widespread in England and Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK, with 42 per cent in both compared with 22 and 27 per cent in Scotland and Wales respectively. Meanwhile, local authority/trust foster carers are much more likely to have an FCA available to them (45 per cent saying yes) than those fostering for an IFP (22 per cent saying yes).

Of the 39 per cent who said that there was a local FCA, one in five respondents told us that they were not involved with it. Nevertheless, those who are involved with the FCA rate the support it provides as useful.

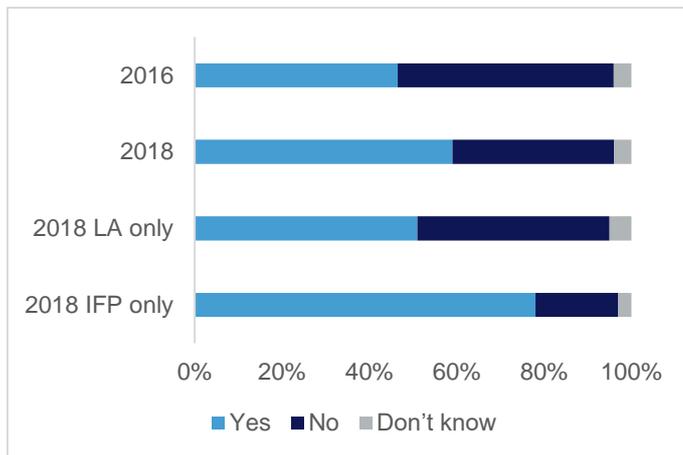
Recommendations for fostering services

- Support for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- All services should provide a dedicated out of hours fostering support service for carers and ensure access to short break/respice provision as required.
- Peer support opportunities should be enabled and promoted at a local level.

3.2 Training

Foster carers tell us that the children and young people they foster have a highly complex set of needs due to the trauma experienced prior to coming into care. Foster carers are expected to meet these needs, and yet there is no defined learning and development framework to help them achieve this. Provision and take up of learning and development by foster carers across the UK is therefore varied.

Q. Have you got an agreed training plan for the next 12 months?



It is encouraging that there has been a marked increase since 2016 (from 46 to 59 per cent) in the proportion of foster carers reporting that they have an agreed training plan in place for the next 12 months. It is clear however that those fostering for an IFP are far more likely to have such plans in place. Of the countries, England performed best here at 61 per cent. Northern Ireland was the lowest, with only 41 per cent saying yes. The aspiration of course, should be for 100 per cent of foster carers to have their training set out a year in advance, with the flexibility to incorporate any additional training needs as the year progresses.

We also asked foster carers:

Q. Does your training help you with your fostering?

There was also improvement here since 2016, with 86 per cent now saying yes compared with 82 per cent from two years ago.

It is important for foster carer training to keep pace with an ever-changing landscape and the new challenges it brings. We asked foster carers to identify gaps in their training. The top five subject areas that emerged were therapeutic parenting, behaviour management, mental health, specialised first aid (as opposed to the basic first aid training that all foster carers receive) and attachment.

These five subjects are a clear indication of the specialised role of foster carers, and reflect the challenges for today's foster carers as highlighted in section 1.

Recommendation for governments

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training. Within this national framework there must be flexibility for training to be tailored to allow foster carers to meet the individual needs of children and promote their own personal development.

Recommendation for fostering services

- All foster carers should have an agreed annual training plan that addresses both the standard and specialised training required to meet the needs of the children they are caring for, with the flexibility to incorporate any additional training needs as the year progresses.

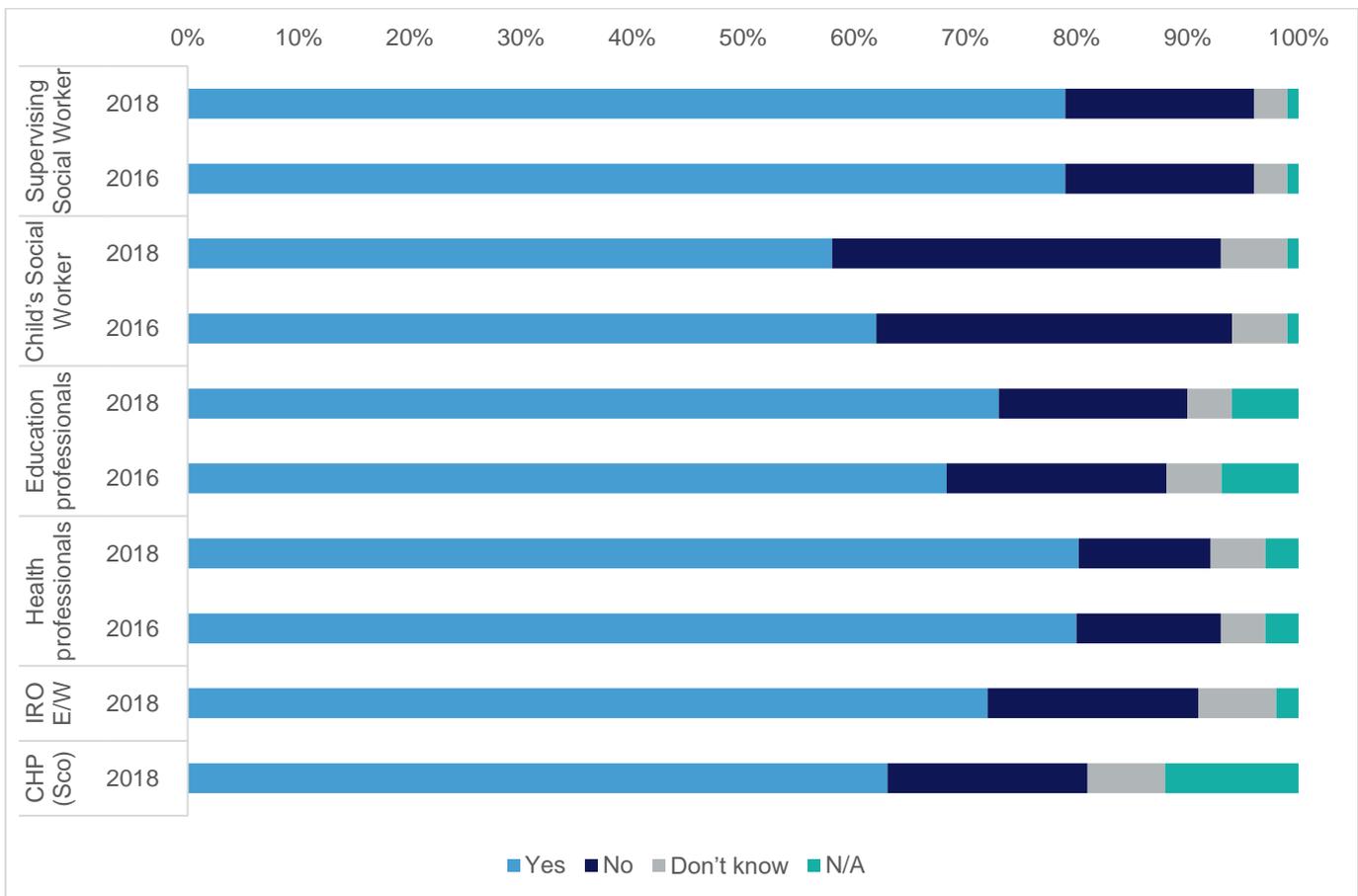
3.3 Status and authority

3.3.1 Foster carer status

“I feel we are only classed as “professionals” when we are agreeing with everyone else, but if we are not in agreement then we are ignored – especially by children’s social workers”.

Despite being key members of the team and often knowing the child best, foster carers can often feel left out or overlooked by other professionals. Therefore, we asked foster carers whether they felt treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by the following: their supervising social worker, the child’s social worker, education professionals, health professionals, independent reviewing officers (IROs) in England and Wales, and children’s hearing panel members (CHP) in Scotland.

Q. In general, do you feel treated as an equal and valued member of the team around the child by the following?



It is encouraging that 79 per cent of foster carers feel that they are treated as an equal and valued member of the team by their supervising social worker, a figure which has held steady since 2016. Those fostering for an IFP rate this even higher at 87 per cent.

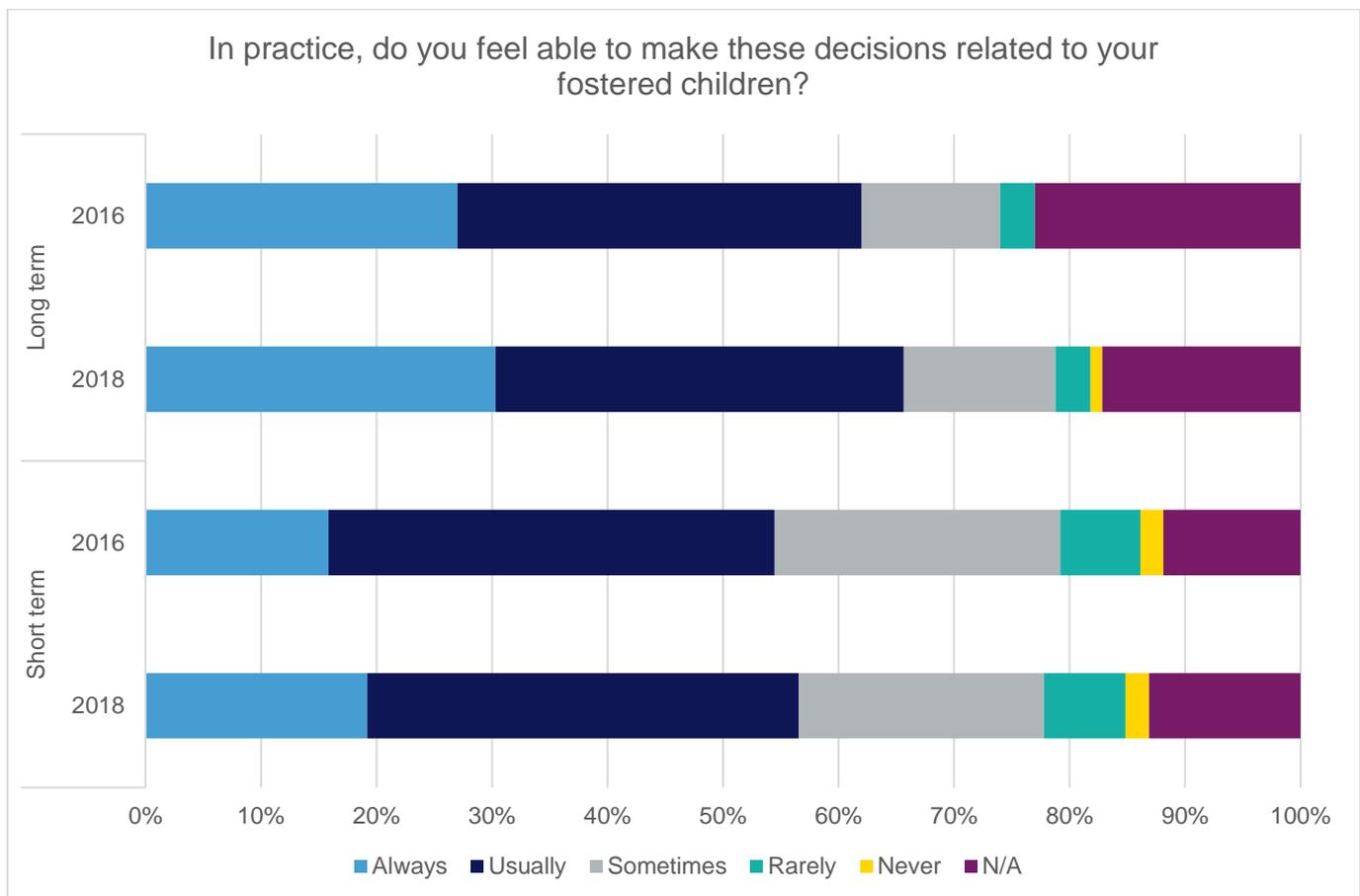
However, when it comes to the child’s social worker, the corresponding figure drops to only 58 per cent, a reduction of four per cent since 2016. We would like to see children’s social workers have much better training on foster care so that they are better able to understand the role of the foster carer. The picture is slightly better in Scotland here, with 63 per cent saying that the children’s social worker treats them as part of the team.

3.3.2 Foster carer authority

While foster carers look after fostered children on a day-to-day basis, they often have the least authority out of all those in the team supporting the child. The source of the tension about where responsibility and authority lie in foster care is the fact that the corporate parent is the local authority and is removed from those who have day-to-day responsibility for the care of children, the foster carers. The local authority/trust is often discharging its role as corporate parent within a large bureaucratic and regulated structure and one where a culture of blame can create a real sense of anxiety about delegating decisions to foster carers. The impact of this is ultimately on the child and it can hinder their ability to participate in normal family, school or social activities.

We asked foster carers if there is clarity from the children’s social worker about what day-to-day decisions they have the authority to make. Just over one-quarter (26 per cent) said it is not clear. Scotland has the worst picture here, at 29 per cent.

There was slight improvement compared with 2016 when foster carers were asked if they felt able to make the decisions that have been delegated to them:



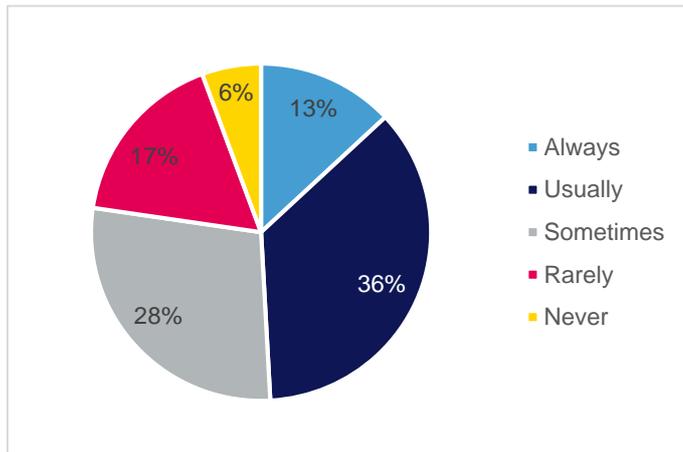
After removing the foster carers who answered not applicable:

- Short-term foster carers: always/usually 65 per cent (2016 was 55 per cent)
- Long-term foster carers: always/usually 79 per cent (2016 was 62 per cent)

We can see that there remains a significant minority (21 per cent) of long-term foster carers who are feel unable to make the day-to-day decisions that have been delegated to them, meaning that the child will potentially lose out on opportunities compared with their peers.

Of course it will not always be appropriate to delegate all decisions to the foster carer, especially if the child is in a short-term placement. So we also asked foster carers:

Q. If authority is not delegated to you on certain matters, do you feel that social workers respond to your or the young person's requests for decisions in a timely manner?



It is very concerning that half (51 per cent) of foster carers reported that the children's social worker responded in a timely manner only "sometimes", "rarely" or "never". These figures indicate a clear delay in the system at a local level which ultimately results in fostered children being prevented from participating fully in normal family, school, and social activities.

Recommendation for governments and the wider sector

- The foster carer role must be recognised by all those involved in the children's sector as a key member of the team around the child.

Recommendations for placing authorities and fostering services

- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers must be enabled to make everyday decisions that mean that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family.
- It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.

3.4 Finances

"There seem to be regular extra expenses, particularly with teens, as they are more conscious of trends and fashion. Children in care are singled out enough without them standing out among their friends. It's a fine balance between what they need to not "feel different" and spoiling them."

There are two components to foster carers' income from fostering. The **allowance** is designed to cover the costs of caring for a child. All foster carers in the UK receive an allowance. The other component is a **fee** which recognises the time and skills of the foster carer. Not all foster carers receive fees and there are no national regulations related to them; the amount received across the UK therefore varies widely.

3.4.1 Allowances

Every year The Fostering Network checks the allowances paid by all local authorities/trusts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure they meet national minimum levels. We campaign for them to be brought up to these levels where they are falling short; we have been successful in this regard, as only a very small minority of these fostering services now provide less than the national minimums.

We also collate allowances in Scotland, where there is currently no recommended minimum allowance for foster carers. Despite promising over 10 years ago to introduce minimum allowances, the Scottish Government has so far failed to do so. We continue to push for this through our Scottish allowances campaign.

We asked foster carers:

Q. In general, do your fostering allowance and the expenses you can claim (for example, for mileage), meet the full costs of looking after fostered children?

This year only 41 per cent of foster carers said yes. This is a slight decrease on the 42 per cent from 2016, so we have continued concern that allowances are still clearly not meeting the full costs of foster care.

Those fostering for an IFP were more likely to say yes, albeit only at 47 per cent. Of the countries of the UK the worst performing in this question was Wales, with only 36 per cent saying that allowances and expenses met the full cost of foster care.

Meanwhile, our 2018-19 survey of foster care allowances found that 11 local authorities in England and one in Wales were paying below government recommended allowances for foster carers. We have written to all of these fostering services to encourage them to come up to at least the minimum.

There were 550 comments provided by foster carers about why allowances and expenses were not meeting the costs of looking after children. The four most commonly cited reasons were: travel costs, holidays, the rising cost of living, and extra-curricular activities for children.

Here are some example comments which really demonstrate the growing problem, with a shortfall in allowances and expenses impacting on foster carers's household finances:

"We have had 150 miles of mileage a week taken away, which impacts on how far the allowance goes...meanwhile the parents, contact worker, and social worker all get paid travel expenses and I don't!"

"Allowances are not meeting the costs at the same level as most other birth children. £50 for birthday presents is a lot lower than most birth children would get. The cost of technology and phones is very expensive and they frequently break or lose them. The cost of basic holidays and paying for separate rooms or family suites due to not being able to share a room is not really affordable, or then paying for all the activities that a growing child should have access to. The allowance is very basic."

"We live rurally and three miles per school journey is taken from the school mileage. I don't use respite and yet no account of this is taken when I take children on several holidays a year. I foster 0-18 years and so sometimes need a babysitter for when I attend other children's meetings - this isn't paid for. I often feel I need to save up to take the next placement. Babies are especially expensive as they grow so quickly."

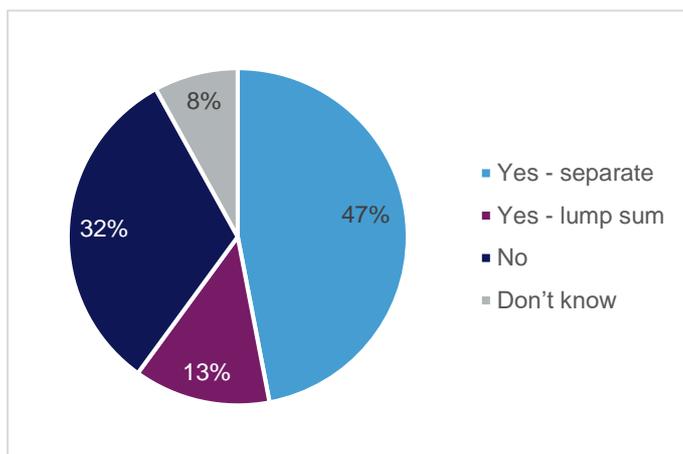
"My authority does not recognise mileage unless it is over 200 miles in the same week. Activities and cost of living has increased immensely in the last three years, and I have undergone a 33 per cent pay cut!"

3.4.2 Fees

Q. Do you think that foster carers should receive a fee payment for their time, skills and experience (This is in addition to the allowance to cover the cost of looking after a child)?

The Foster Care in England report⁴ that emerged from the stocktake stated that it was "understandable" that some foster carers – for example those looking after babies – are not paid. This statement was based on supposition with no evidence to support it. Yet nearly all foster carers responding to this question in our survey said that they believe foster carers deserve to be paid a fee for the work that they do, with only three per cent disagreeing.

Q. Do you consider yourself to get a fee payment for your time, skills and experience? (This does not include the allowance to cover the cost of looking after a child.)



Overall, three-fifths (60 per cent) of foster carers said that they receive a fee, a slight increase on 57 per cent in 2016. Across the UK the highest percentage was in Scotland at 69 per cent, and the lowest was in Northern Ireland at only 45 per cent. As in 2016, IFP carers are less likely to report receiving a fee than those fostering for a local authority/trust. They also have the highest number of 'don't know' answers to this question, which may well be because allowance and fee payments to IFP foster carers are often lumped

⁴ Narey M., and Owers M. (2018), *Foster care in England*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foster-care-in-england>

together as one, leading to considerable confusion.

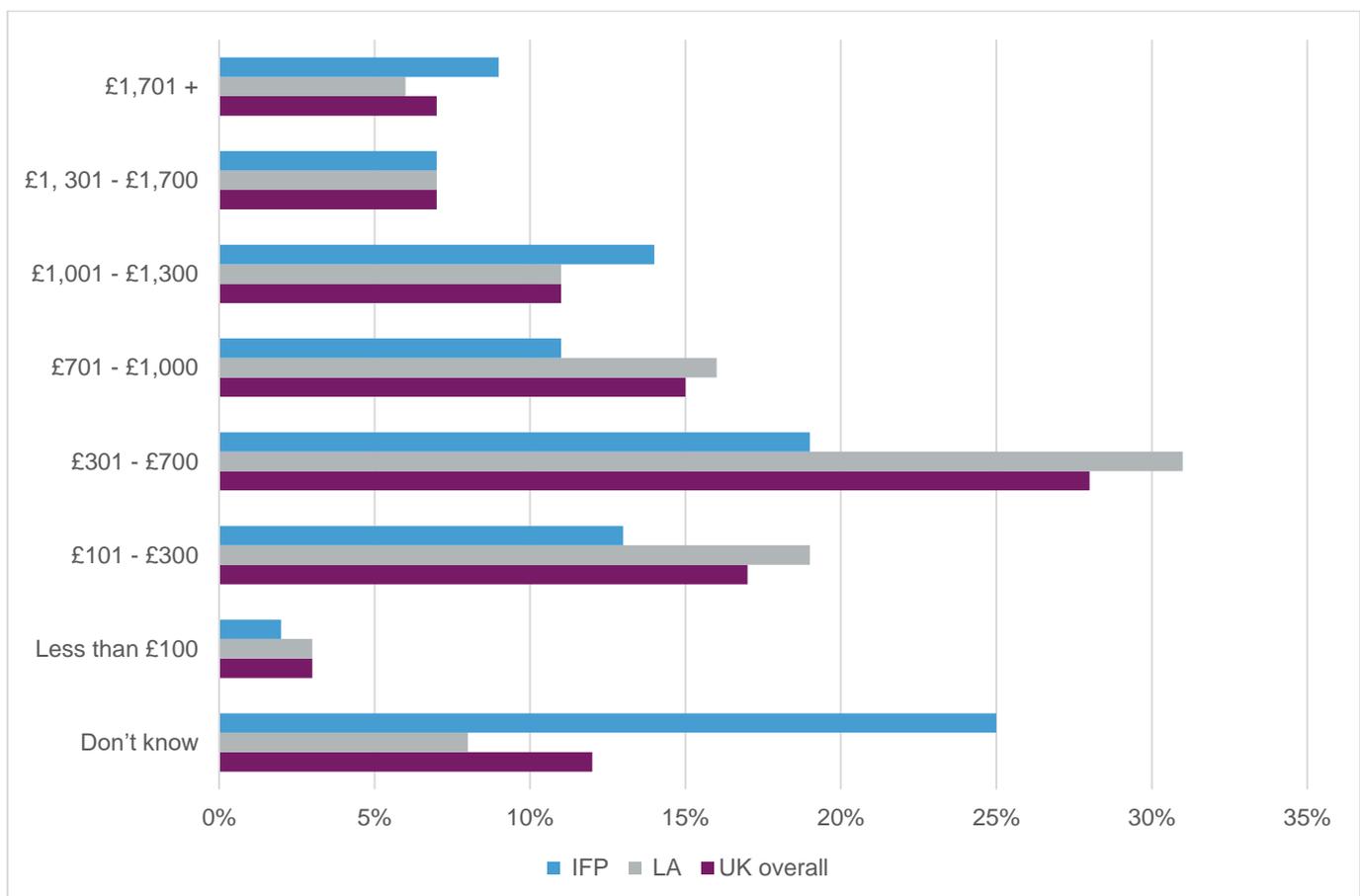
We explored this confusion more in the next question, which was asked of those 13 per cent of carers who stated they receive a lump sum:

Q. Are you told which part of the lump sum payment is to cover the allowance and which part is your fee?

One-third (32 per cent) of carers who receive a lump sum are not told which part is their fee, and which is the allowance for the child, and this rises to 43 per cent for IFP carers. The National Minimum Standards for foster care in England state that fostering services should make clear the breakdown between fee and allowance for foster carers, and there is an expectation that this happens in other countries of the UK as well. It is very disappointing therefore to discover that so many foster carers are still kept in the dark about this.

We asked those foster carers who reported receiving a fee to tell us, optionally, how much they were paid.

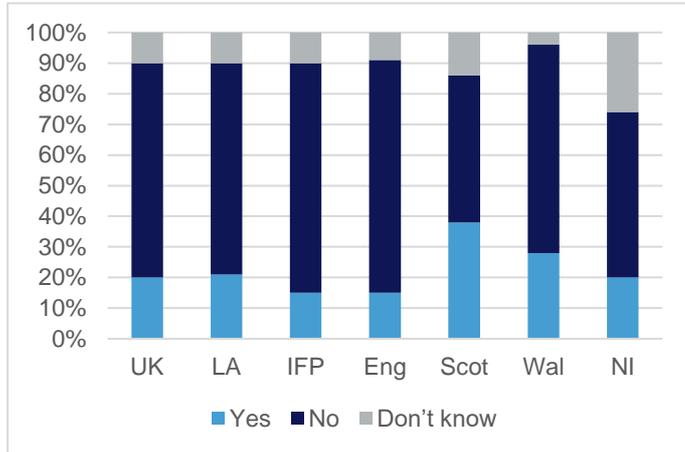
Q. What is your typical monthly income from your fostering fee payment? Please do not include the allowance which is given to you to cover the cost of looking after a child.



For the 60 per cent of foster carers who reported receiving a fee in the first place, the above graph demonstrates the breakdown of their income. Continuing the theme from earlier questions we can see that IFP carers are more likely to be unsure about their fee level, with a quarter of them replying 'don't know' to this question. Consider for a minute any other profession, and whether it would be conceivable for a quarter of its members not to know – even roughly – how much they were paid each month.

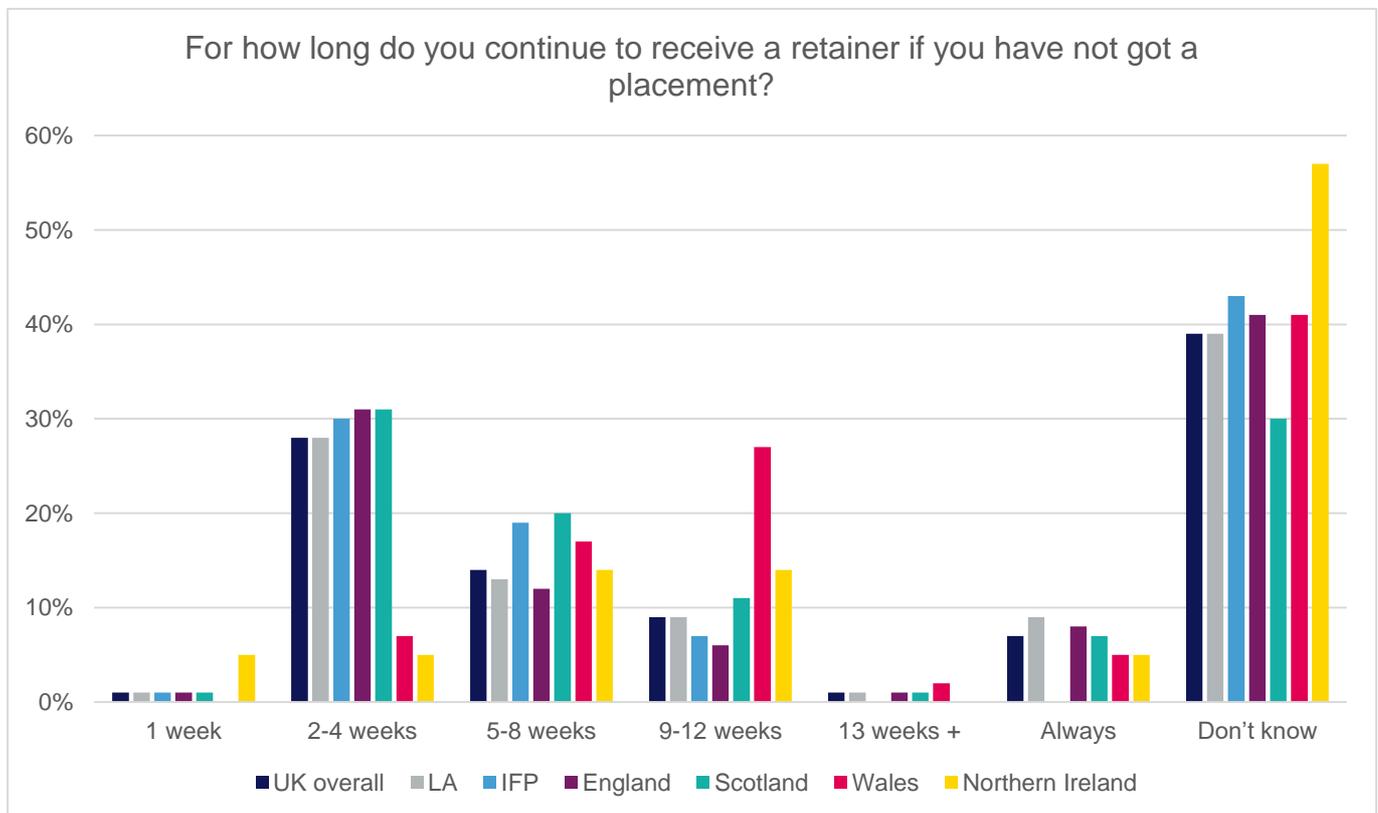
The National Living Wage (NLW) in the UK is currently £7.83 per hour which, if working a typical 40-hour week, would equate to £1,357 per calendar month. While IFP carers do appear to be earning more than local authority/trust carers, only 16 and 13 per cent respectively (14 per cent overall) are paid above £1,300 and therefore at or above the rough equivalent of the NLW. When also including those carers who reported receiving no fee at all, this proportion drops to **nine per cent of all foster carers**.

Q. Do you get paid a retainer between placements?



Very few foster carers receive retainer fees between placements: of those who reported receiving a fee in the first place, only 20 per cent said they receive a retainer. England has the worst record for retainers at only 15 per cent, while Scotland is highest at 38 per cent.

Retainers are most likely to be paid for between two and four weeks' duration. However 39 per cent of carers said that did not know how long a retainer would be paid for, reflecting an absence of clear policies at a local level. Welsh carers appear to have the lengthiest retainer payments, while Northern Ireland shows by far the highest number of carers who are unsure for how long their retainers are paid:



Recommendations for governments

- Governments in England, Northern Ireland and Wales should review the minimum levels of fostering allowances and related expenses to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
- The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance.
- Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.
- In the short term fostering fees must be paid, preferably via a tired payment scheme, at a level equivalent to the national living wage based on a 40-hour week for 52 weeks of the year, including holiday and sick pay. This is regardless of whether the foster carer has a placement or not, but only on the proviso that they have made themselves available to take a child. In the longer term fostering fees should be paid on a par with residential workers in children's homes.
- The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about the allowances and fees they are receiving.
- Allowance and fee levels should be publicly available.

3.5 Employment status

“I think it’s dreadful (because) we are not really self-employed, I can’t pick and choose which agency I work for or work for more than one. We are in effect employed but with none of the benefits. We should get a proper payment and pay tax so we can get a mortgage and stop having to claim benefits to make up our payments. We work very hard with rarely a holiday and should get paid accordingly.”

The employment status of foster carers is ambiguous. Most are considered self-employed, for tax purposes at least, and they have to fill in a self assessment form at the end of the financial year. However, unlike other self-employed people, foster carers do not enjoy the freedom of being able to work with lots of different organisations, as (apart from in limited circumstances in Scotland) they can only be registered for one fostering service at a time.

Q. Are you happy with your current employment status as a foster carer?

Only one-third (34 per cent) of foster carers told us that they are happy with their employment status. More than half (53 per cent) said no, while 13 per cent are unsure. Satisfaction is slightly higher for those working for IFPs, but still low at 40 per cent being happy.

We asked foster carers to tell us why in the free text comments beneath. The four most common reasons cited for being unhappy are:

- dissatisfaction with a lack of employment rights (particularly no paid holiday, pension or sick pay);
- a feeling that they are wrongly categorised as self-employed, when in fact the limitations on their work meant they should be classified as employed;
- they feel their current self-employment status contributes to their not being treated as an equal member of the team around the child;
- the poor payment received for the work that they do.

In their own words, foster carers explained why they are frustrated with the current situation:

“For the amount of time we give, both to the children directly and in training, meetings, travelling to and from school etc, it is a full-time commitment. You are expected to abide by rules and codes of practice, policies and legal requirements to look after these children. You are told you are an "equal" part in the team... which in reality is not always the case, you have judgements made about you which you have to accept and adhere to in your own home. If you question these judgements or decisions, you have that added to your records. At the same time, you are a parent with your hands tied by legal obligations in your role... In our annual review we had to justify our actions and judgements in a professional way. If those are the expectations on us, then we should have a professional status. Being a foster carer is just as difficult as being a teacher because you work with many people on a daily basis ‘for the good of the child’.”

“I think if we were employed, foster carers would have more status, would be expected to maintain higher standards of care, and be responsible for their own personal development and training. Pay should be equal between agency and local authority. A retainer should be paid if you have a vacancy, and also you should be able to have time off. Our local authority told people they couldn't go on holiday unless they arranged respite themselves because they didn't have enough carers! ... I don't foster for the pay, I foster for the children. But it would be nice to be treated equally.”

“It is a difficult one, not sure how you incorporate employment rights but still retaining that special relationship with the children in our care. Saying that, something needs to be done around sick pay, pension, holidays etc, as I do feel we are used and abused at times.”

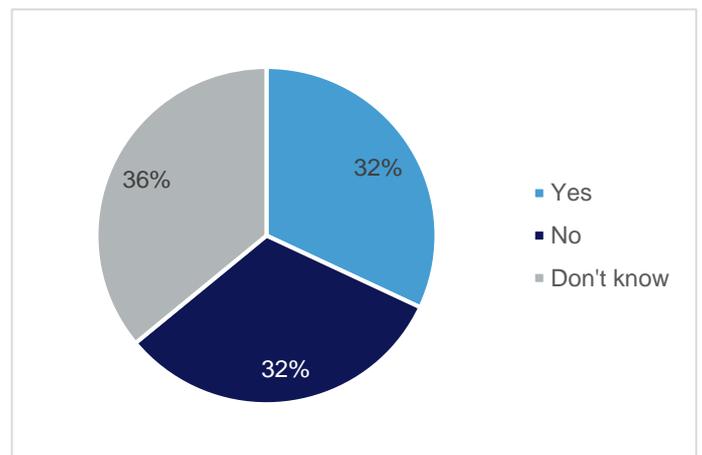
Comments from the third of foster carers who told us they are happy with their employment status mostly focused on the fact that foster care is a unique vocation, and they did not want to risk altering their relationship with, or focus on, the children:

“I remain uncomfortable with "career" foster caring as an employee as, I believe, this may distort some, but not all, individual motivations. I believe that the current debate about employment status is a reaction to long-term and sometimes very serious poor general management of and support to foster carers by services.”

Q. Would you, or do you (if you foster in Scotland), value the opportunity to work for more than one fostering service at a time?

Respondents were fairly evenly split three ways here. Although just seven per cent of foster carers gave being limited to one service as a reason they are unhappy with their employment status in the previous question, a third said they would value the opportunity to work for more than one.

In Northern Ireland the proportion of foster carers that don't know whether they would value this opportunity is higher than anywhere else in the UK, at 58 per cent.



Some further insight was provided in the open comments to this question:

“We would have more choice and control. We would be less dominated and victimised.”

“We live on the border of three authorities and it would be easier if we could have placements from all three, as there would be less travelling for the children.”

“The system at the moment gives fostering services too much power over carers... Having the choice to work for more than one means that services need to offer more to their carers in terms of support and respect. I can only see it as a positive solution.”

Recommendation for the wider sector

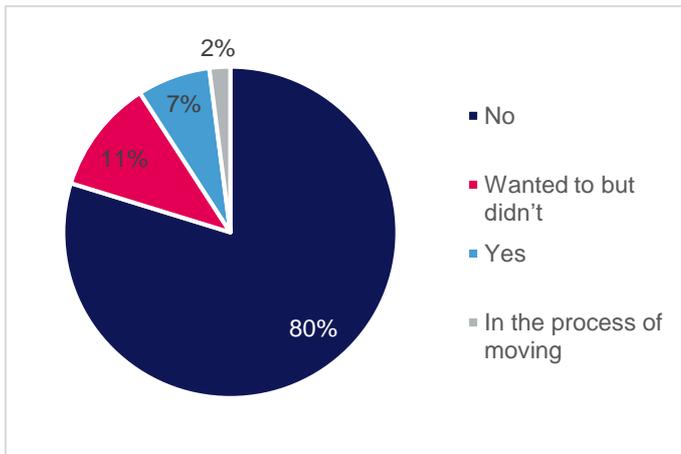
- Regardless of current job status, all foster carers should be recognised as equal members of the children's social care workforce, and should be treated as co-professionals by others involved in the team around the fostered child. Their terms and conditions should be a reflection of the work that they do, in line with the other recommendations in this report

3.6 Transferring service

As we have seen, while foster carers are self-employed for taxation purposes, they can only foster for one fostering service at a time – except in Scotland, where they can foster for more than one in certain circumstances.

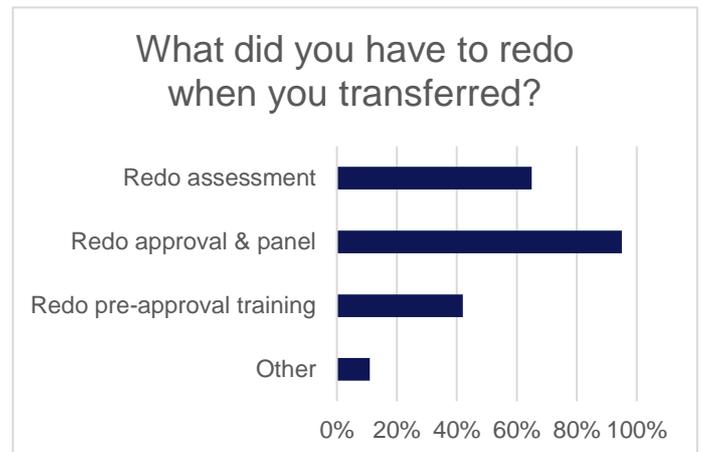
Moving to another fostering service usually requires foster carers to repeat fully the same approval and assessment process, which is time consuming and severely reduces their portability. Transfer protocols guide the way in which fostering services should manage the movement of foster carers between fostering services. There are currently transfer protocols in place in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland but we believe they are not routinely followed and applied in practice.

Q. Have you moved fostering services in the last three years?



Just over one in 10 (11 per cent) foster carers have wanted to move fostering service in the last three years but did not do so. This rises to 16 per cent in Wales, and IFP carers are more likely to have moved recently than local authority/trust carers. The top two reasons given for not moving were that they feel it is too much time and effort to go through the laborious process, and that their long-term placement would have to leave them if they move.

The first reason given, related to the time-consuming process, was corroborated by the findings from the next question. We discovered that 92 per cent of those who did move had to redo the whole approval process when they transferred which took, on average, six months to complete. We also asked about other requirements when moving:



Some of the open comments from the “other” category allow us a deeper insight into the process of moving services and demonstrate why reform is so badly needed:

“(We had to redo) Everything! References from family and friends, they met with them and interviewed them, they looked at our bank accounts, they asked intimate questions about our marriage and family relationships, they went through the whole invasive process again, from scratch.”

“I am redoing the assessment but it has taken eight months just to get references! Also delays caused by spurious concerns raised by present agency and threats of deregistration, or the new agency often halt or delay the process.”

“It was a complete waste of time and money – we still had the same child.”

Finally, once they had completed the move, only 27 per cent told us that they had received an exit interview from the service they left. While this is not a statutory requirement, it is considered best practice and we believe that such interviews should be provided as a matter of course.

Recommendation for governments

- A central register of foster carers should be introduced in each country, which would greatly enhance portability of the foster care workforce by providing a licensing approach. When a foster carer decided to move to another fostering service, the new fostering service would be able to carry out a simple check of the central register to confirm their approval status and then would only need to carry out local checks and interviews.

Recommendation for placing authorities

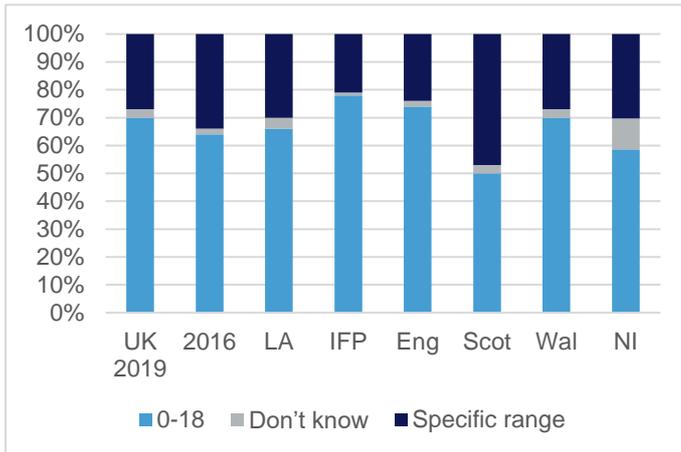
- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.

3.7 Approval range

Foster carers will usually be given terms of approval which set out the number of children, their gender and age range and any other information about the type of foster care that they are approved to provide. Over time the foster carer may request a change in their approval range or the fostering service may suggest a change.

This and previous surveys highlight a trend of foster carers being pressured to take children from outside their approval range and then not being given additional support and training.

Q. What is your defined approval age range?



There has been an increase from 64 to 70 per cent in the past two years in the proportion of foster carers who report having the largest approval age range of 0-18. IFP carers are more likely to have such an approval range, at 78 per cent compared with 66 per cent for local authority/trust carers. A 0-18 age range is least likely in Scotland by some margin.

For those carers who reported a specific approval age range other than 0-18, the most likely range by far was five to 18 years old.

Just over half of foster carers (51 per cent) told us they are asked to take children from outside of their specific age approval range. This figure is much lower for IFP carers, at 23 per cent.

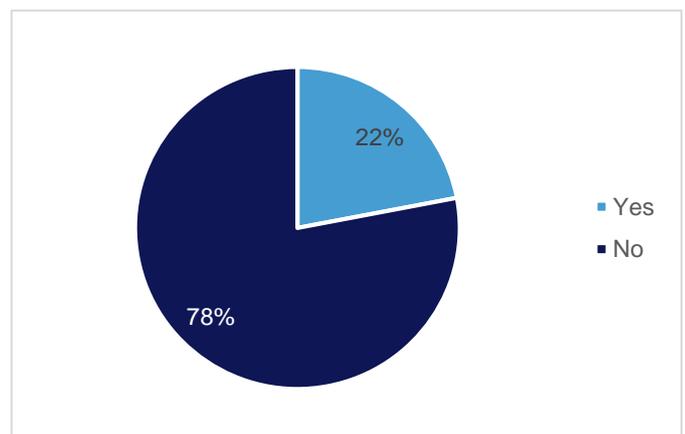
Meanwhile nearly one-third (30 per cent) of foster carers have been asked to take children from outside of the type of fostering for which they are approved.

We explored in more depth being asked to foster outside of your approval range, because it is one thing to be asked to do this and feel confident that you can refuse, and another to feel pressured into doing it for fear of repercussions. Unfortunately, of those foster carers who specified that they had a specific age range, nearly one-third (32 per cent) reported feeling pressurised to foster outside of either their age or type of fostering range.

It is worrying that this is happening so much, particularly when we then see that 78 per cent (rising to 84 per cent in Wales) of those who *do* foster outside of their approval range are given no extra training or support:

Q. If you have taken a child from outside of your approval range, were you given additional support and/or training?

“I stood my ground – I found it difficult to say no to some of the requests made and children I was contacted about, but I knew from the outset that I wasn't the right person for that child. It often felt like they were just rushing to make a placement and not necessarily looking at the best set up possible – the sticky plaster effect.”



The impact of this pressure on foster carers can be seen in some of the other comments we received on the subject:

“I was asked to take on a child with severe learning difficulties... I was then pressured into changing my approval status to long term. I was given no training in looking after a teenager, or someone with severe learning difficulties or a history of violence and sexual aggression. The opportunity for therapy was turned down, because I had found the therapist and not the LA. Various requests for help were turned down for three years. When I phoned to give notice, I was then 'miraculously' given some therapeutic support and the child was booked in to life story work sessions.”

“The LA will place children with you on a continuous basis that are outside of your approved age range, and just simply go back to the panel to seek approval. There is no specific training to meet these needs. The training at best is generic and the rest you have to learn or research on your own.”

“I had a two-year-old and three-year-old dropped off at 10pm at night – no nappies, no clothes – nothing. I had to sleep outside of the bedroom as I had no baby gate on the stairs.”

Recommendation for governments

- Regulatory and inspection frameworks should be designed and implemented which require placing authorities to carry out a needs analysis of their local looked after children population to inform targeted recruitment and commissioning.

Recommendation for placing authorities

- Each placing authority should conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform a targeted recruitment and commissioning strategy for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population.

Recommendations for fostering services

- Foster carers should be advised in writing of their terms of approval. This will make clear the type of fostering placement they will provide, and this clarity should also be in their foster carer agreement.
- Where foster carers agree to a change of approval, they should receive additional training and support as required.

3.8 Allegations support

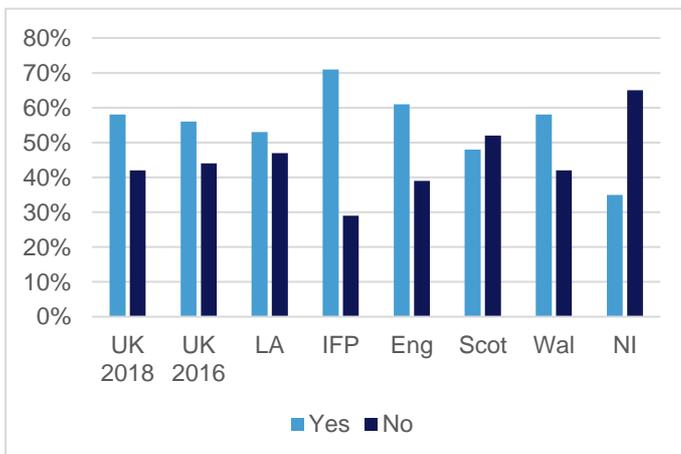
An allegation within foster care is an assertion from any person that a foster carer or other member of the fostering household has – or may have – behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence against a child, or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates they are unsuitable to work with children. Unfortunately, facing an allegation is something that many foster carers will experience: this year we found that more than a third (35 per cent) of foster carers have experienced one or more allegation during their fostering career, up two per cent from 2016. The majority of these will be unsubstantiated or unfounded.

Once an allegation has been made it is inevitably a distressing time for the foster carer. They are too often left not knowing timescales, not being given access to independent support, and having financial support removed. In contrast, their social work colleagues would be afforded HR, legal and emotional support should an allegation be made against them. This adverse impact on the foster carer is only too clearly demonstrated in the following comments:

“Horrible experience with a kind of cloak and dagger attitude to information being given to us. We were and still are financially struggling as we had made plans to alter our home for the long-term care of our placement and my partner finished her job to help me. Our agency took back most of our monthly salary, because we are paid in advance.”

“It was the worst experience of my life. The LA did not follow their own policy and procedures. I found out from a third party about having independent support. I feel that the LA closed ranks and left me high & dry.”

Q. Have you attended training on managing allegations since becoming a foster carer?



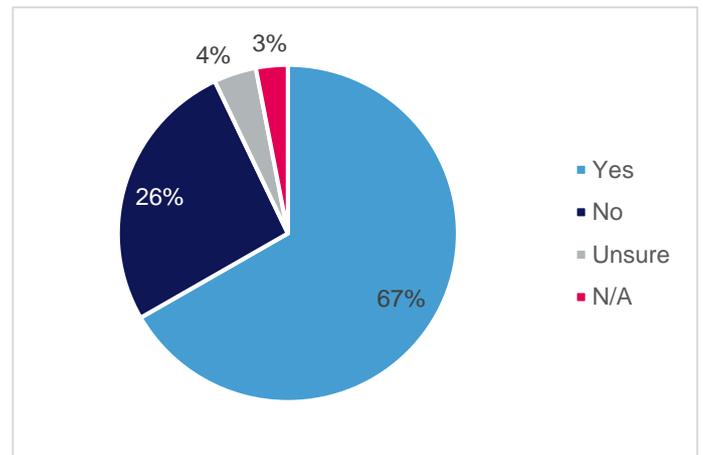
Despite it being such a common occurrence, our survey found that only 58 per cent said that they had attended training on managing allegations since becoming a foster carer. This represents a slight improvement on the 56 per cent in 2016 but is still a very disappointing figure. IFP carers were much more likely – at 71 per cent – to have received this training, but even that shows that over a quarter of IFP foster carers are missing out on what should be a fundamental element of core training that absolutely no one should have to do without.

Northern Ireland carers were least likely to have received this training, with only 35 per cent saying “yes”, and Scotland also had more people not receiving this training than those who had.

When asked, most foster carers (79 per cent) were aware that they are entitled to independent support throughout any allegation process. This was broadly the same across the UK apart from Northern Ireland where only 57 per cent said yes.

Q. Would you know how to access independent support in your service?

Of those foster carers who are aware of their entitlement to independent support, two-thirds (67 per cent) said they know how to access it in their service: from analysing the open comments to this question, 20 per cent of them specifically mentioned The Fostering Network as their first port of call, followed by five per cent saying their union, four per cent Foster Talk, and three per cent their foster care association. Approximately eight per cent volunteered that while independent support was available, they did not feel it was truly independent, or that the service offered was very poor.



Two-thirds of the foster carers (67 per cent) who said they have experienced an allegation in their household told us that they did not receive any independent support. This is unchanged from 2016.

Recommendations for fostering services

- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales. Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.
- Foster carers must be given access to independent support throughout the allegation process.

4. Supporting fostered children

4.1 Mental health support

“All of the children need support with their mental health in one way or another. Having been neglected or abused and removed from birth parents is enough to give them all mental health problems and in-house counselling/psychologists should be available immediately for all looked after children”

The above quote from a foster carer sets the scene well: there should be a robust assessment of looked after children’s mental health needs as soon as they enter care, and thereafter clear pathways for accessing mental health support, because as we continue to discover, this kind of support is currently severely lacking.

We outlined in section 2 that we asked foster carers if they cared for any children or young people who they felt should have access to mental health support, but who were not accessing this service: 48 per cent said yes. Foster carers saying yes in Northern Ireland and Wales were lower in number than the UK figure, but still quite high at 37 and 38 per cent respectively.

The main reasons given for the child not accessing these services were:

- lack of resources/long waiting lists (56 per cent),
- the child not meeting the threshold for support (16 per cent)
- the child refusing to engage (13 per cent).

The first two reasons could in fact be linked: when resources are tight it is possible that in practice thresholds will be increased to limit demand. Many foster carers also said that they think all children coming into care should be offered mental health assessments and then ongoing support if required. Here is a selection of their comments which really help to paint a picture of the current problems surrounding mental health provision for looked after children.

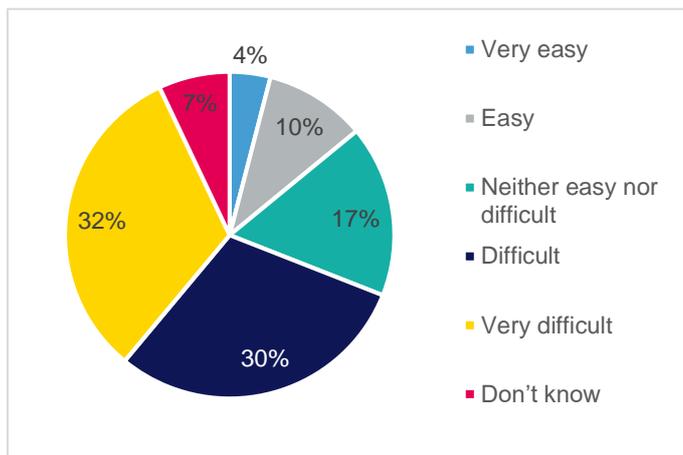
“The child in question has now moved on, but at the time of coming into care he would have greatly benefited from some help from CAMHS. However, the perceived wisdom was not to start any kind of psychological help until he was in a permanent home. I thought he needed it as soon as he came into care, to help him cope with the massive change in his life.”

“We have a young person who is under the Staying Put arrangement who has had a lot of trauma in the past and is still manipulated by her family; she would really benefit from counselling, but she is scared of opening up to anyone other than us.”

“Often the mental health issues are immediate, and once through crisis point the follow up is slow with long wait times. By the time the appointment comes the child is often deflated and saying I don’t want to engage now!”

“Quite simply, the children in our care ‘aren’t troubled enough’. Which is ridiculous. ALL looked after children are traumatised in some respect and they should ALL be offered therapeutic service to protect their mental health going forward. The system is far too reactive rather than preventative and if this doesn’t change then mental health services are always going to be ‘firefighting’ rather than keeping fires from starting in the first place. There just doesn’t seem to be an appreciation that all children coming into care need access to mental health services as best practice.”

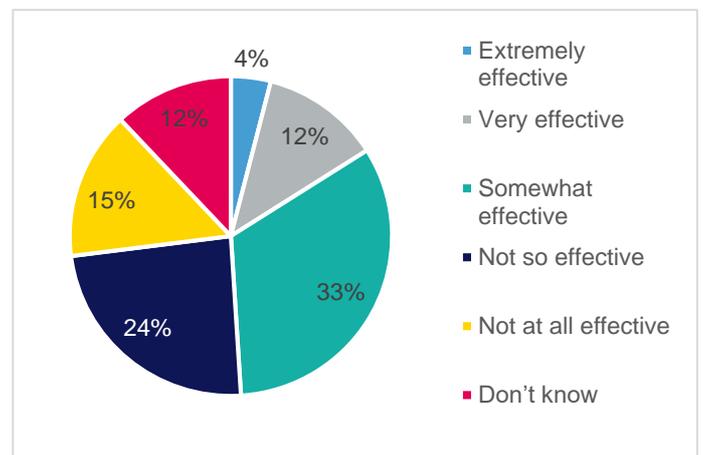
Q. If the children and young people you care for have required mental health services how would you rate their access to these services?



The concerns of foster carers unable to access mental health support were echoed when those who had accessed it were asked about the ease of access, with 62 per cent saying it has either been difficult or very difficult.

Q. If any of the children and young people you care for have accessed mental health services how would you rate the effectiveness of these services?

Finally, in addition to the difficulties accessing mental health services, we also wanted to learn more about foster carers' experiences of them once accessed. The picture here is mixed, with only half (49 per cent) saying that they thought the services were effective. The picture across the UK was similar apart from in Northern Ireland, where 65 per cent said services were effective.



Recommendation for placing authorities and the wider sector

- Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services whenever needed, and without delay.

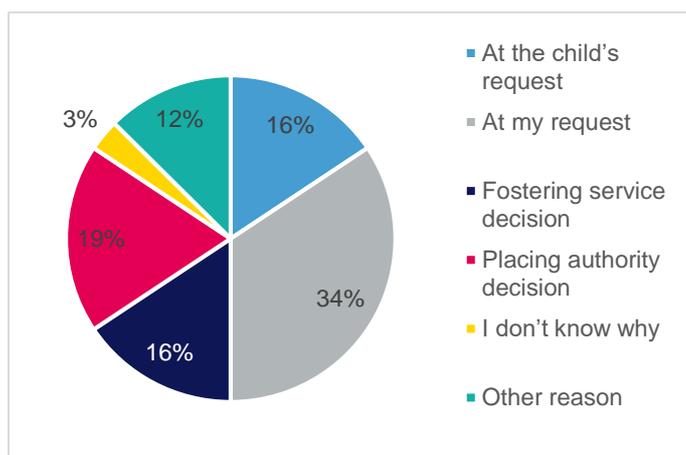
4.2 Placement stability

Stability means ensuring that every child in care is found the right placement as soon as possible and that the placing authority supports the placement to ensure that it lasts for as long as the child needs it. Where this is with a foster family, this means that both the child and foster family should be offered all the support and help they need to make the relationship successful. Although some placement moves may be in the best interests of a child, we believe that too many looked after children are experiencing multiple moves and placement instability. We are concerned that some of the decisions to end a placement are not in the best interests of the child and that independent scrutiny over placement decisions is not being routinely applied. There are regulations in place in England and Wales which state a placement cannot be ended unless a case review has been held and the views of all concerned have been taken into account. However, we believe these are not being routinely adhered to. Such regulations are not in place at all in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Research suggests a child's psychological and emotional wellbeing can be compromised every time they have an unplanned move, and placement instability often contributes to a range of poor achievements, including poorer educational outcomes, breakdown of relationships with trusted adults and the inability to make and maintain such vital relationships in the future.

Q. During the past three years have you experienced an unplanned placement ending when you felt it was not in the child's best interests?

One-third of foster carers responded saying yes. The reasons given are shown in the following chart:



The top four reasons given in the "other" category were:

- the child was causing disruption or violence in the home
- an allegation against the foster carer
- a lack of support for the foster carer
- the birth parent's influence/request.

There is a sense of being powerless from foster carers when they are not involved in the decision to end placements. For example one respondent said:

"No respite was offered or a disruption meeting called by the social workers. The five-year-old child was dropped off at school at the agency's and social services instructions, and he was unaware that he was going to be picked up by another carer. We were absolutely distraught and would not have done it if we'd known we could have refused to comply. At the time the local authority and our social worker appeared to not communicate properly and there was little or no regard for the child's or our feelings."

Of those who had a placement end, only 21 per cent could say for sure that it was preceded by a review. In 2016 the corresponding figure was 30 per cent, so it is a worrying trend if the already low number of reviews taking place under such circumstances is decreasing even further.

We also asked if foster carers had been given the opportunity to feed referral information into the subsequent placement. More than two-thirds (68 per cent) were not given this opportunity.

Recommendation for governments

- A framework must be in place in all four countries to independently scrutinise end of placement decisions to ensure they are in the best interests of the child.

Recommendations for placing authorities

- Independent scrutiny of placement decisions and endings should increase. Placements should not end, except in emergencies, unless a review has been held and the views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carers and the fostering service as well as the placing authority.
- Foster carers should always be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition.
- Guidance should be introduced to ensure that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them.

5. Summary of recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for governments and the wider sector

- The foster carer role must be recognised by all those involved in the children's sector as a key member of the team around the child.
- Language is key to reflecting status, and therefore we recommend that the term foster carer is universally acknowledged and used as the correct title that reflects this role.

5.2 Recommendation for governments

- A learning and development framework for foster carers should be implemented in all four countries of the UK, covering accredited and standardised pre- and post-approval training. Within this national framework there must be flexibility for training to be tailored to allow foster carers to meet the individual needs of children and promote their own personal development.
- Governments in England, Northern Ireland and Wales should review the minimum levels of fostering allowances and related expenses to ensure that they cover the full costs of looking after a child.
- The Scottish Government should introduce and fund a minimum recommended allowance.
- Foster care should be appropriately resourced to ensure foster carers receive a payment which recognises their time and skills.
- A central register of foster carers should be introduced in each country, which would greatly enhance portability of the foster care workforce by providing a licensing approach. When a foster carer decided to move to another fostering service, the new fostering service would be able to carry out a simple check of the central register to confirm their approval status and then would only need to carry out local checks and interviews.
- Regulatory and inspection frameworks should be designed and implemented which require placing authorities to carry out a needs analysis of their local looked after children population to inform targeted recruitment and commissioning.
- A framework must be in place in all four countries to independently scrutinise end of placement decisions to ensure they are in the best interests of the child.

5.3 Recommendations for fostering services

- Support for foster carers should be tailored to the individual needs of the child they are caring for and should be matched to the developmental stages of the child.
- All services should provide a dedicated out of hours fostering support service for carers and ensure access to short break/respite provision as required.
- Peer support opportunities should be enabled and promoted at a local level.
- All foster carers should have an agreed annual training plan that addresses both the standard and specialised training required to meet the needs of the children they are caring for, with the flexibility to incorporate any additional training needs as the year progresses.
- Fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full costs of caring for a child.
- In the short term fostering fees must be paid, preferably via a tired payment scheme, at a level equivalent to the national living wage based on a 40-hour week for 52 weeks of the year, including holiday and sick pay. This is regardless of whether the foster carer has a placement or not, but only on the proviso that they have made themselves available to take a child. In the longer term fostering fees should be paid on a par with residential workers in children's homes.

- The administration of fee and allowance payments should be transparent, and clearly distinguish between the two, so that all foster carers are clear about the allowances and fees they are receiving.
- Allowance and fee levels should be publicly available.
- Foster carers should be advised in writing of their terms of approval. This will make clear the type of fostering placement they will provide, and this clarity should also be in their foster carer agreement.
- Where foster carers agree to a change of approval, they should receive additional training and support as required.
- A transparent framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and ensuring adherence to timescales. Foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded their social work colleagues.
- Foster carers must be given access to independent support throughout the allegation process.

5.4 Recommendations for placing authorities and fostering services

- Foster carers must be recognised and valued as the experts who best know the children they care for; and their views must always be invited and taken into consideration by all those involved in the team around the child.
- Social workers (both children's and supervising social workers) should ensure their practice enables foster carers to contribute fully to the care and placement planning process.
- Foster carers must be enabled to make everyday decisions that mean that their fostered child is not treated differently from their peers and feels part of their family.
- It must be made clear to foster carers at the outset what decisions they can and cannot take, and social workers must deal swiftly with any requests for decisions that are outside of the foster carer's authority.

5.5 Recommendations for placing authorities

- Independent scrutiny of placement decisions and endings should increase. Placements should not end, except in emergencies, unless a review has been held and the views of all concerned have been taken into account. This includes the child if they are of sufficient age and understanding, their parents, their foster carers and the fostering service as well as the placing authority.
- Foster carers should always be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition.
- Guidance should be introduced to ensure that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them.
- Continuity of care for children in placement should be ensured during any transfer of foster carers between fostering services, in line with existing protocols.
- Each placing authority should conduct an annual needs analysis of their local looked after children population in order to determine types of care placements required and to inform a targeted recruitment and commissioning strategy for foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the current care population.

5.6 Recommendation for placing authorities and the wider sector

- Foster carers and the children in their care should have access to mental health support and therapeutic services whenever needed, and without delay.

5.7 Recommendation for the wider sector

- Regardless of current job status, all foster carers should be recognised as equal members of the children's social care workforce, and should be treated as co-professionals by others involved in the team around the fostered child. Their terms and conditions should be a reflection of the work that they do, in line with the other recommendations in this report

Appendix 1

Methodology

The State of the Nation survey was launched in July 2018 and ran for two months. It was conducted online, using SurveyMonkey. The survey was promoted to foster carers via our website, member e-news, social media, podcasts, and our membership magazine, Foster Care. In total 4,037 foster carers from across the UK took part in the survey, which represents just over four per cent of the estimated total foster carer population of 91,093. This was a significant increase over the 2,500 respondents we received in the 2016 survey.

Figures cited in this report refer to the percentages of those who responded to the question being discussed. As well as analysing the data and comments for each question, we also compared the data with previous surveys where possible and analysed the data for similarities and differences between countries and types of fostering providers (local authority/trust and independent and voluntary fostering providers). **Where country variations are not highlighted, this means that the findings are similar throughout the UK.**

When 'placing authorities' are referenced in the report, the term refers to the authority with the corporate parent responsibility for placing and supporting children in a foster home. In England, Wales and Scotland this will be the local authority or children's trust, and in Northern Ireland it will be the Health and Social Care Trust. The term 'fostering service' refers to both local authority/trust and independent and voluntary fostering providers. The abbreviation IFP refers to independent fostering providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and independent and voluntary providers in Scotland.

Appendix 2

Foster carer profile

Gender	UK	2016	2014	IFP	Eng	Sco	Wales	NI
Male	17%	18%	16%	19%	17%	19%	15%	12%
Female	83%	82%	84%	81%	83%	81%	85%	88%

Age range	Numbers/percentages 2018	Numbers/percentages 2016
18-20	6 (0.15%)	-
21-24	4 (0.1%)	18-24 range: 10 (0.4%).
25-34	154 (3.81%)	96 (3.8%)
35-44	551 (13.65%)	390 (15.4%)
45-54	1,607 (39.8%)	1,018 (40%)
55-64	1,433 (35.49%)	865 (34%)
65-74	266 (6.59%)	140 (5.5%)
75+	17 (0.42%)	11 (0.4%)

Age range	Eng		Sco		Wal		NI	
	2018 (2959)	2016 (1942)	2018 (500)	2016 (359)	2018 (246)	2016 (122)	2018 (250)	2016 (107)
18-20	0.1%	-	0%	-	0%	-	0.4%	-
21-24	0.1%	0.36%	0%	0%	0.4%	2.5%	0%	0%
25-34	4%	4%	4%	2.2%	4%	7%	2.8%	2.8%
35-44	14%	15%	10%	14%	17%	12%	17%	24%
45-54	39%	40%	46%	41%	39%	40%	41%	35%
55-64	36%	34%	33%	37%	33%	35%	30%	36%
65-74	7%	6%	6%	6%	6%	3%	9%	0.9%
75+	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%	0%	0%	1.9%

Religion	2018	LA	IFP	2016
None	34%	32.32%	37%	32%
Christian	57.9%	59.86%	54%	60%
Buddhist	0.25%	0.26%	0.2%	0.4%
Hindu	0.17%	0.19%	0.2%	0.2%
Jewish	0.25%	0.19%	0.25%	0.2%
Muslim	1.24%	1.15%	1.44%	0.2%
Sikh	0.2%	0.04%	0.6%	-
Not	3.12%	2.97%	3.5%	3%
Other	2.85%	3.04%	2.6%	3%

Ethnicity	2018	LA	IFP	2016	2014
White English/Welsh/Scottish/NI/British	89.67%	90.36%	89%	91%	81%
White Irish	2.1%	2.19%	1.4%	1%	2%
White gypsy or Irish Traveller	0.07%	0.04%	0.08%	0	
Any other White background	0.67%	0.59%	0.59%	1%	
White and Black Caribbean	0.54%	0.48%	0.68%	0.5%	1%
White and Black African	0.25%	0.3%	0.08%		
White and Asian	0.3%	0.33%	0.25%		1%
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	0.25%	0.19%	0.42%		
Indian	0.35%	0.33%	0.42		
Pakistani	0.64%	0.48%	1.02%		
Bangladeshi	0.17%	0.22%	0.08%		
Chinese	0.07%	0%	0.25%		
Any other Asian background	0.07%	0.04%	0.17%		
Black African	0.32%	0.19%	0.59%	1%	2%
Black Caribbean	1.66%	1.59%	1.78%	2%	
Any other Black/African/Caribbean background	0.12%	0.07%	0.25%		
Arab	0.02%	0%	0	0	
Prefer not to say	1.24%	1.19%	1.27%	1%	
Other	1.51%	1.41%	1.61%	15 (1%)	

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