

Vulnerable children during the coronavirus outbreak: 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 Scotland, we are proud to have 100 per cent organisational membership of local authorities and independent voluntary fostering providers and over 4,200 foster care households (94 per cent of fostering households) in membership. 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 Scottish Government 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 the beginning of lockdown Fosterline Scotland, funded by the Scottish Government and run by The Fostering Network, has received a high volume of coronavirus related calls. The evidence provided in this consultation response is based on these calls as well as the engagement we have had with our foster carer and fostering service members through virtual forums, meetings and surveys over the last three months.

Our response focuses on the following areas:

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

The Fostering Network's response

1. Educational experience 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 age¹.

Throughout lockdown we believe the majority of children in foster care in Scotland did not attend school and were at home with their foster carers, in accordance with Scottish Government guidance on school attendance for vulnerable children.

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 in June 2020. 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 only²;
- 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 quote is from a foster carer in Scotland and encapsulates well the key findings of the report and what needs to be addressed as children make the transition back to school in August.

"We are not teachers and found it difficult to get our young person even to engage in the few hours we asked her to do of school work. It really brought to our attention the actual struggle it is for her during normal school hours and we have realised the enormity of the support her teachers give her"

The Young Advocates project, run by The Fostering Network, involves young people aged 16-25 with care experience creating learning opportunities for professionals (mainly those in the education

¹ Sebba J Luke N [The educational progress and outcomes of children in care: editorial](#) *Oxford Review of Education* 45, 4 (2019), 435 – 442

² NB this data is from across the UK where different guidance was given in relation to children's attendance at school.

sector) working with care experienced people. Since the outbreak, the project activity has shifted to connecting with young people, reaching out to them and offering support. We asked them, in their opinion, what their main concerns were regarding the coronavirus outbreak and how it has impacted their lives. They shared the following views:

- The young advocates have concerns about how their family are managing educating at home, for example: their parents finding the amount of home schooling difficult with multiple children and their siblings not having a huge variety of work.
- One young advocate asked to have virtual face-to-face time with teachers.
- In general, concerns were raised about young people who are transitioning from primary seven to secondary school and missing the opportunity to ease into this, especially for those with special educational needs.

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.

Recommendations:

- The Fostering Network welcomes the additional education funding announced by the Scottish 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.
- Guide and fund schools to make tailored transition arrangements for children in foster care 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 the 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.
- Each school in Scotland will have a person with a key responsibility for looked after children, this person should 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 head 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.

2. Contact arrangements with birth families and maintaining relationships

One of the first issues to come to the fore when lockdown was put in place was maintaining relationships for children in foster care with their birth families (and others important to them). Following the lockdown announcement, some foster carers felt that they were being expected to maintain face-to-face contact for too long, putting the child, their family and themselves 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 – was widely adopted, as were other methods of keeping in touch such as writing letters. Some foster carers have told us that children have enjoyed contact being remote, more inventive and frequent, whilst others, particularly those caring for younger children, reported virtual contact may not be very meaningful. Research by Neil³ 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. Another issue that was raised was the access to equipment the birth family had to facilitate virtual contact. 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.

With the easing of lockdown restrictions, we would advise that judgements should be made based on children's individual needs, with full consultation and consideration of the foster family's views, to assess how best to maintain family relationships while balancing the health and welfare of all parties. We support the use of the local decision making framework developed by Social Work Scotland⁴. 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, foster carers and birth families and consider if there are opportunities to incorporate virtual contact into the contact offer for more children.
- Foster carers to be properly consulted with and feed into decision making as face-to-face contact resumes.
- As face-to-face contact resumes, all parties should have the appropriate personal protective equipment should they need it, in line with government guidance.

3. Support for care leavers

Throughout the lockdown period our view was that young people in foster care whose plans were to move out of the foster home or Continuing Care arrangement, should have the opportunity to remain in that placement for the time being, with foster carers or former 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. 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.

³ 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)

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

We understand the emotional and practical impact of this on young people and foster carers, 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.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, every effort should have been made to address digital poverty among young care leavers and this needs to be a priority as we move forward. A recent CELCIS report concludes that digital access is a key rights and inequality issue which has been amplified during the pandemic⁵. 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.

We welcome the move by the Scottish Government via the [Connecting Scotland](#) programme which offers an internet connection, training and support, and a laptop or tablet to vulnerable people on low incomes, who are considered clinically at high risk if they contract coronavirus and who are not already online. However, whilst this is to be welcomed, by definition, this will not include many care experienced young people.

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.
- The Connecting Scotland project should be expanded to allocate dedicated tailored funding for care experienced young people experiencing digital exclusion and create a simpler way to access provision and support at local level, and this should continue beyond the pandemic.

4. 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 because they, or a member of their household, are in the very vulnerable category; and
- short break foster carers who are unable to offer short break 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 insurance 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 took on extra roles such as educating and entertaining children at home which involves paying for activities and equipment.

⁵ McGhee K Roesch-Marsh A [Bridging the digital divide for care experienced young people in Scotland: If not now, when?](#) (CELCIS/Scottish Care Leavers Covenant, July 2020)

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 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 believe this additional support should be covered by central government funding and, along with other sector organisations, raised the issue with the Minister for Children and Young People, Maree Todd, in [an open letter in April](#).

The Scottish Government has established a £350 million community support fund. This money has been given directly to local authorities to assist those most affected by Covid-19, and it is the fostering service's responsibility to ensure no foster families are disadvantaged during this time. This fund should cover those foster carers ineligible for government furloughing schemes, not just for those pleading financial hardship.

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 have not been able to temporarily foster due to Covid-19 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.
- Foster carers should receive an increase in their allowance to reflect the extra costs of having children at home during lockdown for example, due to home educating and keeping children entertained.
- 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 and recruiting to the foster care workforce.

5. Key workers

In 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 - we think the essential work that they do on the frontline of social care should be recognised.

The Scottish Government's position throughout the pandemic remained that foster carers were not key workers. Recognising foster carers as key workers alongside their social work colleagues would have enabled foster carers to have access to supermarkets outside general public times, the ability to make online orders for essential items and given them access to testing when it was not widely available as well as personal protective equipment. Additionally, it would have given foster carers recognition for the critical role they play in the children's social care sector.

Recommendation:

- Foster carers should be considered as key workers during a pandemic as they are frontline social care workers.

6. Capacity of the sector as lockdown restrictions ease

The majority of referrals to children's services come from the police, health services, educational settings. Therefore, it is predicted that when lockdown rules are relaxed, children return to school 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 74 per cent of all children looked after away from home and family in Scotland 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 overnight stays between homes is more widely 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.

7. Contingency plans for the future

It is important that the Scottish Government and children's sector are properly prepared for the impact of any future Covid-19 spikes or any other pandemics. 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, foster carers, fostered children and foster carers own children to find out what they think worked well, what they would like to continue and areas that needed improvement in respect to the current pandemic and post-Covid.

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 policy to dictate how contact, fostering 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 trained 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.

Contact details:

Kate Lawson, policy manager, The Fostering Network

Daisy Elliott, policy and research officer, The Fostering Network

policy@fostering.net

Sara Lurie, director of Scotland, The Fostering Network

sara.lurie@fostering.net