‘THE NAME NFCA has served us well over 26 years but “the Fostering Network” will take us to the next stage of our development.’

With these words, in 2001, former chief executive Gerri McAndrew looked ahead. She added: ‘The name better describes our ambition to work closely with everyone involved in improving the service for children and young people’.

In the years that followed, foster care has changed dramatically. It has been a decade of significant change, with the Fostering Network at its heart. On the following pages we try to capture the richness and variety of our work. There are many strands but all of them are high quality and constantly improving.

Public understanding of children and foster carers’ needs has deepened and impacted on policy. These include better training and recognition for foster carers and a greater commitment to improved outcomes for young people.

The Fostering Network has played a leading role in these developments in all four UK nations. They include, for instance, the introduction of minimum fostering allowances for England, Northern Ireland and Wales. And significantly, over the decade, more and more foster carers have received our higher recommended allowances.

National minimum standards in England, Scotland and Wales have also helped improve practice and support. The new framework, introduced in England this year put foster carers and the children they care for at the centre of fostering practice – we heavily influenced this and our letter writing campaign from foster carers to children’s minister Tim Loughton resulted in the strengthening of standards about allegations and payments.

In Northern Ireland the Fostering Network leads the way in making life better for fostered children and the families that care for them through the Fostering Improvement project.

In the last 10 years, the status of foster carers has greatly improved, with a developing understanding that foster carers are child care experts. Work on delegated authority in England, Northern Ireland and Wales is driving this forward, with foster carers enabled to make more day-to-day decisions.

Our comprehensive Together for Change campaign, calls for further action on financial support and status as well as in the key areas of learning and development and practical support. This campaign pushes for policy and practice improvements, as well as helping to change public perception of the role of foster care.

A vital part of our work involves building relationships with governments and members of parliaments in all four nations.

The Fostering Network, through its offices in London, Glasgow, Belfast and Cardiff, is continuously engaged with new legislation, funding issues and policy implementation.

The organisation’s media team works non-stop to raise the profile and understanding of foster care and uses the UK media to achieve our campaign aims. It generates over 1,000 annual press and broadcasting mentions and interviews for the Fostering Network, and reaches millions of readers, viewers and listeners across the year, particularly for our successful Foster Care Fortnight campaign.

While policy and support have moved forward there have also been big changes in IT and the internet. Today the Fostering Network uses Twitter, appears on Facebook and hosts a vibrant website. Foster Care magazine is still a life blood for many, enhanced by an editor’s blog and reflecting experience and knowledge through the UK.

There is, of course, a long way to go. Working to ensure that welfare reforms consider the needs of foster carers is a current priority.

With the help of our members we will continue to strive, in the words of Together for Change, ‘to make foster care work for every fostered child and every foster family’.
Offering reassurance

Advice and mediation workers provide a service in more than 30 fostering services in England. Using an advice and mediation worker is a reassurance to foster carers, says team manager Alison King.

“They will have seen the details in the magazine, they can make a phone call and get a response very quickly. Advice and mediation workers are not adversarial and we are always working to get that message out to fostering services. We are helping them meet standard 22 in England requiring independent support in the event of an allegation.

“However we have had some very moving feedback from foster carers such as “I slept for the first time after a conversation with you.”’

Alison stresses the one-to-one continuity that a Fostering Network advice and mediation worker provides and the ability to visit foster carers in their homes. The Fostering Network also provides advice and mediation support in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Pat Woolley is one of the most recently appointed advice and mediation workers, delivering services in the north west of England.

“You sit between the foster carer and the local authority.

“Sometimes I work with a foster carer individually – for instance if they are not sure what benefits they may be able to claim if they are considering a special guardianship order or there is a child in placement who has a disability.

“Or a foster carer may ring up and tell me that they are having difficulty building a relationship with their supervising social worker. I offer to sit down with them both and enable them to share their views.

“It’s often just a case of misunderstandings and lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities.

“For me it’s important that I visit in person if I can and I always visit when a foster carer is facing an allegation.”

Pat also supports fostering services: ‘Sometimes a social work team manager will phone up to ask my view on something, for example what the new NMS say about allegations.’

From strength to strength

More than a decade ago, the Fostering Network started a helpline operated by a single staff member.

In 2005, its value was recognised by the then Department for Children Schools and Families in 2005 and government support allowed the service to expand dramatically.

Now with two years extended funding from the Department for Education, Fosterline is going from strength to strength, open Monday to Friday, with a full complement of staff. The team does not offer casework support but this means they can handle thousands of one-off calls and signpost callers to further resources.

Teresa Benkhabe-House has worked on Fosterline for six years. Her quiet, confident manner has reassured many individuals who have called in a crisis.

Before joining the team she fostered teenagers, both long-term and short-term, and has just about seen it all.

“I knew about the police stations, the hospitals and the schools – then I had to get an in-depth knowledge of the regulations, law and standards.”

Teresa and her colleagues also handle calls about allowances, fees and tax and offer guidance on managing behaviour. It is a huge brief but they are constantly updating their knowledge, dealing with an increasing number of calls. Foster carers in Scotland and Wales can also access Fosterline services, with a support line in Northern Ireland.

Fosterline 0800 040 7675 See page 3 for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

John Rosenfield, foster carer, Scotland

Janice and I have been foster carers for six years to a little girl with myotonic dystrophy. The disease took her mum and the adult form will kick in when she’s about 12, so we’re working hard at giving her the best life possible.

We read all the Foster Care magazines avidly. I went to an event in Elgin and it was far better than I expected. I realised that we weren’t the only ones with problems.

We’ve been talking about these horrible cuts which are targeting the most vulnerable members of the community. Parents wear themselves down by fighting for things that they should have by rights.

We’re sheltered up here: reading the magazine I’m aware of how lucky we are.

Bryn Miles, foster carer, Wales

My wife Linda and I have been foster carers for more than 13 years. We’ve had 40 to 50 children, some just for weekends. I’ve been a member of the Fostering Network since I started.

What I like about the Fostering Network is that they campaign. They campaign for change – approaching AMs and MPs – and on all fronts: pay, equality, recognition of skills and training. We need that.
Ann Marie Browning, children’s service manager, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Wales

I’ve spent 18 years in fostering and adoption, in local authorities and Barnardo’s.

In my work, the Fostering Network has been second to none in helping staff and foster carers. They’ve been working alongside us to improve and increase our recruitment of foster carers to our preventative project Support Care. They’ve given us high-quality advice on standards for fostering. They’ve organised regular meetings with all the south Wales fostering team managers and taken forward issues to the Assembly.

The Fostering Network has been great on working with the Assembly on delegated responsibility. They did research and campaigned and we got a positive outcome so that we can develop our own policy.

Liz Shaw, social care commissioning lead – fostering and kinship care, Health and Social Care Board, Northern Ireland

Our experience of the Fostering Network has been very positive. Kate Lewis [director] is an excellent voice for foster care. Raising the profile of fostering is in line with what we do. We’ve set up a regional fostering and adoption taskforce bringing together statutory and independent organisations to develop services for children in foster/kinship care and adoption. The Fostering Network plays a big part in that.

We have launched an exciting DVD-ROM for use in secondary schools. Funded by the National Assembly for Wales, Claire’s story – What’s it like to be in care? tells the fictional story of Claire who is fostered and starting a new school. The drama has been launched to help the teaching of personal and social education.

Strengthening Families, run by the Fostering Network and funded by the Big Lottery, aims to extend the use of support care in Wales. It builds on the extensive expertise already developed by the Fostering Network Wales in this area. Support care helps families at risk of breakdown to avoid their children coming into longer term care.

Men Who Care captures the often demanding but important, experience of being a male foster carer. Some children explore trusting relationships with adult men for the first time in foster care. But many men worry about becoming foster carers because it has been seen as a ‘female’ profession. The book contains personal stories, challenging stereotypes around men and foster care.

Download at www.fostering.net/resources
Growing influence in England

- The Fostering Network had a strong influence on the national minimum standards, fostering regulations and guidance launched in April. Policy staff worked hard to consult members about the changes and pass on their views to ministers. The organisation is pleased that the values of Together for Change, raising the status and recognition of foster carers, were at the heart of the new regulatory framework.

- Over two years the Fostering Network’s delegated authority project developed critical insights into foster carers’ needs for more authority over day-to-day decisions. The project also developed valuable tools, training materials and resources. www.fostering.net/delegated-authority

- The Fostering Network has just launched a sample charter to show fostering services in England how they can implement the Government’s new foster carers’ charter. See News page 3 www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/resources

Learning vision

A commitment to learning and development is a crucial part of the Fostering Network’s vision.

‘We have been heavily engaged with training in England, for both the new regulations and the national minimum standards’, says Diane Heath, part of the membership support team. ‘We have run seven oversubscribed open events around England with some 300 people attending.

This was mainly for fostering service staff and also some foster carers.

‘The Skills to Foster is, of course, a key part of our work. We are running The Skills to Foster “train the trainers” course in September linked in to The Skills to Foster assessment materials.’

The Fostering Network is launching a version of The Skills to Foster assessment materials this autumn, for use in assessing family and friends as foster carers.

Marian Corr (with Hugh), foster carer of the year in Northern Ireland

I do enjoy reading the magazines and finding out what’s going on. I’ve been fostering for 20 years and 18 children have come through this house. I take them for respite but mostly long-term. I’ve my own children but they’re married and away – three children and six grandchildren.

They’re all here for Sunday lunch now - 23 around the table.

I go to the support meetings once a month without fail. They’re very useful when you’re a new foster carer: you talk to someone and you maybe find an easy solution to your problem with a child, be it bedwetting or tantrums. I used to take advice, now I can pass things on myself.
The Fostering Network is a network where you could share the problems you were going through the weekends if someone was taken urgently into care. At the same time, we were going through the adoption process ourselves. It would have been so helpful to have been part of a network where you could share the problems you experience.

Many fostering services value the personal touch. ‘It was a huge boost having Helen Clarke come up from London,’ says Caroline Matthews, Northumberland County Council’s marketing officer. She was commenting on the support Helen, the Fostering Network’s recruitment specialist, gave in the development of the north east fostering service marketing and recruitment forum. The group is driving forward best practice and sharing ideas around recruitment. There is also appreciation for support with new IT and multimedia techniques.

‘Helen and Matt Cooper (senior media officer) have been helping us to improve our search engine visibility, on google, for instance, and using different social media.’ She praises Foster Care Fortnight, which this year has again seen a noticeable rise in enquiries: ‘We advertise in the second week, once the initial Fostering Network national messages have all got out. It is invaluable – a great focus.’ In between the annual Foster Care Fortnights in May there are six issues of the Fostering Network’s Attracting and Keeping Carers, sharing ideas for recruiting and retaining foster carers.

‘I love that publication’, Matthews adds. ‘It is good to see ideas that have worked from the other end of the country which we can utilise in the north and vice versa.’

Fostering Achievement is administered by the Fostering Network Northern Ireland. It is funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and gives practical and financial support to foster families. Support ranges from individual grants for equipment, training and travel, to group activities like the numeracy and literacy summer schemes running this year.

The Fostering Network Northern Ireland has been leading the way with significant research into foster carers’ views and a big input into government guidance on sleepovers and delegated decision making.

There are high levels of fostering by family and friends in Northern Ireland – we have worked hard to accommodate the different training needs of those who have responded to a pressing family need.

Northern Ireland’s ‘fostering achievements’

Liz Black, social worker, Northern Ireland

All of our foster carers are members of the Fostering Network. It’s great that there is someone independent that our foster carers can turn to for advice or advocacy. The Fostering Network’s Fostering Achievement team offers everything from violin-playing to jungle gym, to help children achieve their potential. However, I think that the real bonus is the advocacy that they can offer.

Mick Antoniw, Welsh Assembly Member

The Fostering Network serves a real need. My wife and I have three adopted children with a five-year gap between them. Before we adopted the girls we had two long-term foster placements and some emergency fostering at weekends if someone was taken urgently into care. At the same time, we were going through the adoption process ourselves.

It would have been so helpful to have been part of a network where you could share the problems you experience.

Hashida Dave, foster carer, Tower Hamlets, London

The Fostering Network is a great support in developing our foster care association.

Foster Care online at www.fostering.net
Scotland’s success

- The Big Lottery-funded Fostering Links project reduces isolation and supports foster carers across Scotland to play an active, confident part in influencing decision makers and developing peer support skills.
- Our animated DVD, Consequences, funded through the RS McDonald Trust was made by young people through the Young People’s Project with the help of Solo Films. This is soon to be released.
- Our allegations guidance, developed for the Scottish Government, is designed to ensure foster carers are treated with respect and allegations are investigated fairly.

An opportunity for foster carers

Foster care associations (FCAs) are an important opportunity for foster carers to share experiences and interact with their fostering service. The Fostering Network is committed to building them.

Sarah Tarrant has been fostering for Slough for eight years. ‘Our FCA was launched officially in June but foster carers have been operating as a group since last year when we organised over fees. ‘There are about 40 of us with four elected reps dealing with the department. I am the secretary.

‘Jamie Roome, the Fostering Network foster care association development worker, has visited on five occasions – she has been a great help. That included the first open evening when we explained what an FCA was and then through the setting-up process.
‘It was very exciting and we have good relations with the new family placement team manager. She and I spoke briefly at the recent Foster Care Association conference. ‘We meet with her every two months, passing on how foster carers are feeling. They have asked us to set up a buddy scheme and given us our own budget – we are all looking forward to a trip to Bournemouth.’

Bill Atkinson, deputy director of education and children’s services, Perth and Kinross

I’ve been working in social work with children for 35 years. I am very positive about the Fostering Network. Particularly over the last four years, it’s become much more focused on local authorities and all the stakeholders who are working to improve the life chances of looked-after youngsters.

I sit on the Scottish committee of the Fostering Network and as a local authority, we are members. Our foster carers are also individual members: we encourage them to join and most of them find it helpful.

We all benefit in different ways: there is information in the magazine, which we all enjoy; there are the area networks, which support foster carers with developmental issues with their charges; there is excellent training and there is the advocacy role.

Fresh air

‘I remember when the Fostering Network was born and the first edition of the magazine. It was like a breath of fresh air, providing support, information and a sense of community, which is still true today.’

Author and foster carer Cathy Glass
Finger on the pulse

Niall Kerr, service manager at Kinder Care, Northern Ireland, explains why they value links with the Fostering Network.

I’ve been working for five years, running this independent service provider. We work with five local trusts and 24 families. Currently we’ve got 22 children, ranging from 28-day rolling placements to long-term.

The Fostering Network has been a great help to us as a very small organisation. They facilitate the quarterly meetings of the Independent Fostering Forum, for all four of the Northern Ireland independent fostering agencies to meet with the five heads of the local trusts. In fact, they helped set it up in 2010. It’s a safe environment to discuss problems.

The Fostering Network really has its finger on the pulse of fostering: it often gets to hear things before we would.

And they are helping in the push to introduce fostering standards locally. We already work to UK standards as our head office is in London. But sadly it’s all in limbo, awaiting a decision which may depend on finance.

The Fostering Network has led on delegation of authority: allowing foster carers to make decisions on things such as sleepovers, haircuts and holidays. This is so important to help fostered children not to feel different from their schoolmates.

Resources and publications

We have hundreds of resources and publications in all media and stock is constantly being added to. This is just a brief taster of the material available to read in print, online or to hear on your ipod.

In print
Pathways Through Fostering
The complete set of Pathways Through Fostering will give foster carers the practical advice and information they need on six key topics: safer caring; behaviour; health; education; contact and attachment. Face-to-face and online training are also available on each of these topics.

Signposts
Signposts are A5 information booklets giving new and experienced foster carers information on crucial areas of foster care. The two most recent are Benefits, reflecting changes in the March budget, and Income Tax and National Insurance, a new edition of the popular guide detailing which allowances and payments are taxable.

All You Need to Know: Fostering Regulations, Guidance and NMS 2011
This popular guide explains the new standards and regulations that come into force in April in England in a clear, jargon-free way.

Visit www.fostering.net/resources/publications

Downloadable
Foster Carers’ Charter: putting it into practice
Guide to putting the Government’s charter into practice in England.
Visit www.fostering.net/sites/www.fostering.net/files/fc_charter_english.pdf

Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future: a guide for fostering services
Identifies key elements required to recruit foster carers.

Update to the Cost of Foster Care report.
Updated estimates of the investment needed to provide a properly resourced foster care service throughout the UK.
Visit www.fostering.net/resources/reports/update-cost-foster-care-report

Podcasts
Supporting the popular Men Who Care: experiences and reflections from male foster carers book produced by the Fostering Network Wales, we have five podcasts of some of the stories.
Visit www.fostering.net/resources/podcasts

Newsletters
The latest issue of Kidz Biz, the quarterly newsletter written by and for children and young people in Scotland, is now available to download.

Thrive, an award-winning magazine produced by the Fostering Network Wales for young people with experience of foster care is also available to download.
Visit www.fostering.net/resources/newsletters

• A decade of change
additional reporting by Victoria Neumark