



# The age of foster care

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the fostering network  
the voice of foster care



## Introduction

There are over 51,000 children living with 43,000 foster families on any one day in the UK. Today's foster carers are child care experts working alongside a team of other professionals to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children.

There is already a shortage of at least 10,000 foster carers in the UK. This shortage means local authorities and health and social services trusts (in Northern Ireland) are often forced to place children where there is a vacancy rather than with a foster family that best meets a child's individual needs.

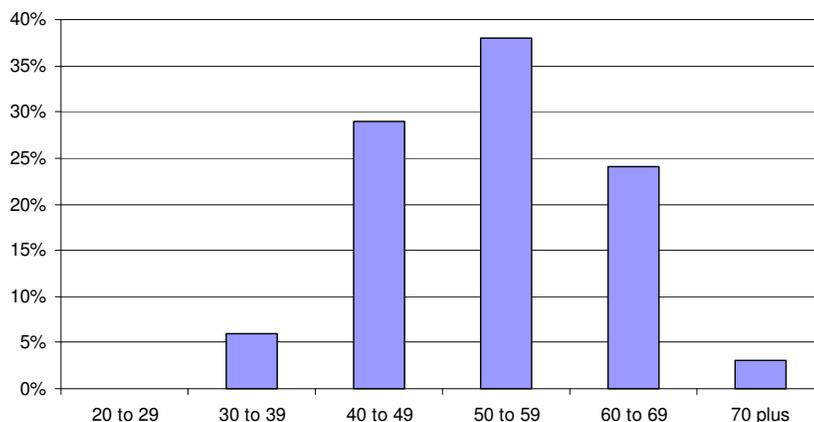
Not having enough foster carers means that children may be forced to change schools and move a long way from family and friends. Mismatched foster placements are bad for children, their parents and their foster carers and are more likely to break down. Foster carers and children who experience the breakdown of a placement invariably suffer as a consequence.

Very little has been done in recent years to profile the foster care workforce. Against this background, the Fostering Network looked at the age of current foster carers to identify whether there are any immediate concerns for the future of the provision of foster care.

## Findings

In March 2009 the Fostering Network analysed a sample of 11,000 of its foster carer members. The results showed that 94 per cent of foster carers are aged 40 and over and 65 per cent are aged 50 and over (see appendix, page 6).

**A breakdown of the age of foster carers in the UK**



While there is rightly no upper age limit on fostering, these figures suggest that a huge proportion of the workforce might choose to retire over the next 10 to 15 years. This would be cause for concern in any sector, and it is crucial that more people of all ages come forward to foster.

The average age of foster carers is rising significantly. According to the most recent comparable study in 2000<sup>1</sup>, the average age of a female foster carer was 46. Today it is 53. For male foster carers the average age has risen from 47 to 54 over the same period. A more recent study<sup>2</sup> carried out by the Fostering Network in Scotland found that only 12 per cent of foster carers were under 40 years of age and that fewer young foster carers were being recruited. The new survey found that only 6 per cent of the current foster care workforce is under 40.

Unless recruitment of new foster carers of all ages is stepped up sharply there will be a far higher deficit of foster carers in the near future. It is vital that measures are put in place by national and local governments to ensure that there is not an even more severe shortage of foster carers in 10 to 15 years time.

### **The recruitment of foster carers**

Most fostering services currently succeed in replacing the 10 per cent of the workforce which ceases fostering every year and thus maintain their pool of available foster carers on a year-on-year basis. But local authorities are struggling to achieve an increase in this pool, and hence are not recruiting sufficient foster carers to cope with the potential rise in retirements. There is some evidence that independent fostering providers have been more successful in increasing the supply of foster carers, but the overall shortage of foster carers continues and is likely to get worse.

There are also specific acute shortages which fostering services are attempting to address. These include finding foster carers to care for teenagers, either on a short-term or long-term basis, and children with disabilities, and foster carers from some minority ethnic communities.

Furthermore, although many people come into fostering with a range of relevant experience, it can take several years to develop all the skills needed to foster. As the most experienced foster carers retire over the coming decade, it will be increasingly difficult to find the right foster carers for the children coming into care when and where they are needed.

### **The need for more foster carers**

Although there are no age limits on when people can apply to foster, all applicants attend training and undergo a thorough assessment to ensure they are capable of doing this very demanding job.

Currently, foster care tends to attract more mature individuals, many of whom have experience of working with children or bringing up their own family. The breadth of experience that older foster carers can offer is welcomed, and the value of their knowledge and skills is recognised; it is essential that people who are 50 and over continue to come forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Triseliotis J and others *Delivering Foster Care* (BAAF, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> *Caring For Our Children* - part one (The Fostering Network, 2004)

Fostering services also now need to appeal to the untapped pool of those with relevant skills, qualities and experience in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Given the increased trend towards long-term fostering, where a foster carer may look after the same child or sibling group for anything up to 15 years or more, this group is also generally best placed to provide stability to the children who need long-term care.

### **Why aren't sufficient people coming forward?**

It is difficult to say without further research why many more people are not coming forward. However, fostering services highlight the following reasons:

- There is a general misunderstanding of what is involved in fostering, and a lack of knowledge about the different roles that are available.
- Many people do not know that a wide range of people foster – some have their own children, some do not and approximately one in five is single. There needs to be a better understanding of who can and cannot foster.
- Many people do not understand the financial remuneration available to foster carers; although many do not receive fees, for some types of fostering people can be paid 52 weeks of the year and have regular respite (and leave).
- People count themselves out by basing decisions on inaccurate information and do not take the opportunity to find out more from their local fostering service or foster carers.

There is a need to understand more about why people do and do not come forward to foster at particular times in their lives and what makes fostering attractive. In particular, there are many reasons why people might hold off from fostering until in their 40s or even 50s, including:

- Waiting until their own children are older, either moving out of the family home or into their teenage years, when they can understand more about fostering and adjust to the impact it has on family life;
- Ensuring they have built up financial security – although all foster carers receive an allowance to cover the cost of looking after a child, only 60 per cent of foster carers receive any sort of fee for their work<sup>3</sup>;
- Reaching a time in their lives when they are looking for a change in career, and for some building on skills acquired in another career or as a volunteer.

### **Long-term foster care**

Foster care placements can vary in length from a few days or months to 15 years or more. The average length of a placement was found in 2000 to be seven years<sup>4</sup>.

A trend towards longer placements is anticipated for two reasons. Firstly, in the UK there is growing concern about the number of children who are moved from placement

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<sup>3</sup> Swain V *Can't Afford to Foster* (The Fostering Network, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> *Delivering Foster Care* (2000)

to placement, and who consequently do not have stability in their foster family, their community or their education.

Secondly, while the general age for leaving care has now been raised (from 16) to 18, there is growing recognition that many young people need the option of staying with their foster carers at least up to the age of 21, especially given that in the general population the average age for leaving home is 24. This has been acknowledged in Northern Ireland where a scheme now allows young people to remain with their foster carers after 18 and by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in England, which is currently running pilots for young people to stay with their foster family until 21. If successful these should be rolled out nationally.

The trend towards long-term fostering requires more foster carers who are able to offer a home to children for as long as 15 years or more. It is those in their 20s, 30s and 40s who will, in general, be best able to meet this need.

Moreover, the decision to become a long-term foster carer is not always immediate. It may be taken a few years into a fostering career, once the foster carer has more experience. Alternatively, it is sometimes decided that it is in the best interests of a child who arrived on a short-term placement to stay with the foster family for the long term.

### **Recommendations for fostering services**

The Fostering Network will continue to work with fostering services to help them improve the ways in which they recruit and retain foster carers and gather a better understanding of what attracts people to foster. In order for this potential crisis for foster care to be prevented, fostering services must aim to increase their recruitment of foster carers. To do this they will need to:

- Review their current promotional activity and the age and type of person applying to foster.
- Identify any gaps in their recruitment of younger people and work to identify what factors would motivate this group to foster in the future.
- Undertake a full audit of their current workforce to assess the potential retirement age of their foster carers and put a strategy in place to ensure the replacement of these foster carers before their expertise is lost from the fostering service.
- Make use of their current foster carers to mentor and help newer recruits develop their own skills and experience.

### **Recommendations for governments in the UK**

This report's warnings come at a time of great significance for fostering. The sector is currently undergoing extensive cultural change regarding the importance of the role of foster carers in transforming outcomes for children in care. The Fostering Network wishes to work with the governments in all four countries of the UK to address our concerns about fostering services being able to recruit sufficient foster carers to provide children with the highest quality care while they are fostered.

If enough foster carers are to be recruited and trained so that all children coming in to care can live with a family that can meet their needs, enable them to live near their family, friends and school and help them to reach their potential, the governments in all four countries of the UK must require local authorities and health trusts to increase their supply of foster carers through their own recruitment or commissioning arrangements. This will not happen without:

- Ensuring that fostering services are adequately funded so that all foster carers are in receipt of appropriate levels of fees and allowances so that they can afford to foster.
- Working alongside fostering services and awarding bodies to develop nationally accredited training courses which are accessible by all foster carers, at times and in ways that fit in and around their working lives, and a standardised, accredited framework for professional development.
- Foster carers being recognised as equal partners in the team surrounding the child, and being accorded the status and authority that allows them to help children in their care lead a 'normal' life.
- Making statistics of the current foster care workforce available annually, including a breakdown of demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity and religion as well as the type of foster care approved to offer and length of time fostering.
- Exploring the opportunities through social marketing and other methods to motivate a greater number of people of all ages to consider a career in fostering alongside other roles within the children's workforce.

## APPENDIX

### The Fostering Network's findings

The Fostering Network sought to establish a profile of foster carers' ages in 2009 by means of a sample of its individual members. Dates of birth were available for 11,014 of the estimated 72,000 foster carers in the UK.

#### National and regional breakdown of ages of foster carers

	Total number	Age of foster carers (%)					Mean (years)
		30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	
<b>UK</b>	<b>11,014</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>England</b>	<b>8,829</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>53</b>
East Midlands	768	7	27	38	25	3	53
Eastern	996	5	27	38	25	4	54
London	1,115	4	26	39	26	5	54
North West	832	5	34	34	24	3	53
North East	435	5	27	43	23	2	53
South East	1,751	7	32	36	23	3	53
West Midlands	1,221	8	26	39	25	2	53
Yorkshire and Humberside	752	7	31	40	22	1	53
South West	959	5	31	39	22	3	53
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>1,190</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Wales</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>54</b>