Caring for our Children

Part 1: The foster carers’ perspective

Executive Summary

Most foster carers are proud of their role and find the responsibilities both rewarding and satisfying. They enjoy the challenges of each new child and consider fostering has had a positive impact on their family. Nevertheless, the challenges on foster carers are increasing with the complexity of needs of children looked after, and accommodated. Whilst the age profile of children needing to be fostered is getting lower, there is no evidence to suggest their needs are less complicated. In order to recover from their early traumas, many children looked after, and accommodated need the time, patience and skilled care of these foster carers.

The challenges of fostering are evidenced in the levels of stress experienced by foster carers, the incidents and injuries they receive and in the allegations they face in the course of their daily work. Foster carers need good individual social work support, group support and 24-hour back up. There is considerable commitment on the part of fostering services to the provision of these types of support. However, there is a need to improve the availability of respite care to give foster carers and their families a break from these responsibilities.

Foster carers are retaining their commitment to fostering for longer and caring for more children. The service is responsive to the changing needs of children and one result of the shortage of foster carers is that some of the most experienced and competent foster carers have high numbers of fostered children in their care. Where there are multiple fostered children in placement there is a need for vigilance to ensure that the quality of each individual child’s care is not being affected by the demands of the other fostered children within the family. There is a need to reduce the pressure on these foster carers and to ensure that they have access to support and respite breaks.

Increasingly, the complexity of issues of children in foster care need the involvement of specialists and foster carers are required to work alongside other professionals to maintain these children in their home, school and community. There is a need to increase the skills of foster carers, teachers, psychologists and mental health professionals in working together to improve the outcomes for children looked after and accommodated.
There is substantial dissatisfaction that the allowances that foster carers receive to meet the costs of caring for the child do not adequately cover these costs, and there is a need for a fundamental review of the current level of allowances paid to foster carers. Access to fees is limited, and for those who do receive a fee the level does not allow the majority of foster carers to leave paid employment outside their home. The level of fee means that few people are attracted from other professional posts. The educational profile of foster carers is low, and there is limited availability of accredited training, which would be required to raise the status and professional skills of foster carers.

This survey has identified the need to develop a national recruitment strategy in order to reduce the numbers of multiple placements of fostered children, increase the availability of respite care, address the increasing age profile within the service and increase the diversity of ethnic background of carers.

From the perspective of foster carers, the performance of fostering services in respect of the National Care Standards is mixed. The commitment to supporting foster carers, through link workers, group support and 24-hour back up is encouraging. However, foster carers are not given all the essential information they need, and there is a need to improve access to training and to address the logistical problems that prevent some carers’ participation. Differences are evident in retention levels of fostering agencies and these differences need to be understood and best practice disseminated. Most significantly, there are two important areas of shortfall in standards, namely the length of time taken to complete new applications from foster carers and the levels of allowances for foster carers. Both of these areas need urgent attention to maintain the flow of new applicants into fostering and retain the commitment of the existing workforce.

The majority of children looked after are cared for by foster carers who play a pivotal role in the children’s recovery from early trauma, regaining of confidence and future development. There is a need for further investment in the service to ensure that it continues to develop the skills and capacity to respond to the challenges of the 21st century and produce good outcomes for children.

**Areas for action**

In order to build on the strengths and experience of the existing foster carers action is required in the following areas:

- Reduce the stress levels experienced by foster carers.
- Increase the availability of respite care.
- Improve the allowances for the costs of caring for fostered children.
- Increase the development of skills and training for foster carers.
- Address the need for realistic fees for skills to enable more foster carers to be solely employed at home.
- Increase the training opportunities of foster carers to enable them to promote the educational attainment of fostered children.
- Reduce the disparity in service standards in recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- Develop a national recruitment strategy to meet the future needs of children looked after.
Key findings

Profile of the needs of children in foster care

- The complexity of needs of children is extending the range of skills required by foster carers and the types of support they need if children are to benefit from the close relationships offered by foster carers.
- The complexity of the needs of children in foster care requires their foster carers to work closely with a range of specialists and other professionals.
- While it is encouraging to note that 94 per cent of children looked after have a named social worker, only 70 per cent have realistic and achievable care plans, and 17 per cent do not have these reviewed within the required 6 monthly intervals.
- There is a need to improve access to specialist psychological and psychiatric services for children while they are being looked after and to improve the advice and support available to foster carers.
- A substantial element of the work of foster carers involves maintaining links with birth families, through facilitating contact and supporting the child. This means that carers need skills in working with adults as well as children.

Profile of foster carers

- There is a low level of educational attainment of foster carers before fostering, with 41 per cent of foster carers without any qualification. Only 11 per cent have gained further qualifications since becoming foster carers: this needs to improve significantly if children are to receive educationally-rich experiences while in foster care.
- Training for foster carers needs to be universally available and accessible to all carers across the country, and further consideration needs to be given to the design and dissemination of foster carer training to address the logistical reasons for non-participation.
- Current programmes for training need to be accredited to improve the qualifications and professionalisation of this workforce.
- The allowances and fees for fostering are such that many foster carers are also employed outside the home as they indicate that the allowances and fees are insufficient to replace an income.
- Where there are two registered foster carers in the home, 50 per cent of both carers are in employment outside the home, and where there is an identified primary or sole carer just over 27 per cent are in employment.
- Until the fostering allowances reflect the real costs of caring for children, and fostering fees reward foster carers adequately for their time, skills and experience, there will be a need for many foster carers to obtain additional employment outside the home.
- A significant proportion, 9 per cent, of foster carers have no other income source than their fostering allowances and the implications of this for children who are placed with such foster carers is that the fostering allowance is supporting the whole household income.
- The extent to which current allowances fall short of the real costs of care is a matter that requires urgent attention and fundamental review. The variations in discretionary payments add further confusion and create further inequities in the service.
In order to develop a professionally trained foster carer workforce, there is a need to reward the development of skills through fees for foster carers. Currently, 58 per cent of foster carers receive no fees for fostering.

The high morale of foster carers, and the fact that 92 per cent are proud of their role as a foster carer, should be promoted to recruit new foster carers to this satisfying, challenging and rewarding work.

However, there remain a number of challenges in fostering, and 10 per cent of foster carers experience incidents and suffer injuries as a result of their work. These need to be systematically recorded if they are to be reduced and foster carers are to be appropriately trained and equipped to deal with their responsibilities.

There is also a need to review the number of allegations and complaints in foster care, where 31 per cent of foster carers report they have had an allegation or complaint made against them. There is a need to agree protocols for handling allegations in order to reduce their potential adverse impact on the fostering service and on the stability of placements for children.

Changes in the foster care service

There are changes in the average length of time each foster carer remains in service, from 7 years in 1999 to 9.3 years in 2004, along with an increase in the number of children cared for by each foster carer, from 18 to an average of 22 children.

The numbers of children in each foster home indicate that 49 per cent of foster carers have three or more fostered children.

There is a greater capacity being obtained from the fostering service and there is a need to understand how this is affecting the quality and availability of care for individual children.

There is an increase to 8 per cent in the number of placements provided by the voluntary and independent sector in Scotland.

There is great variation in performance of different agencies in their retention of foster carers, and the factors that influence best practice in these areas need to be identified and disseminated.

Recruitment

The majority of children looked after come from the large city areas, while only 20 per cent of foster carers are located in these areas. There needs to be continuing recruitment initiatives within the large cities to prevent the current dislocation of children from their families, schools and communities when they are looked after.

The age profile of foster carers has increased, with only 12 per cent of foster carers under 40 years of age. Fewer young foster carers are being recruited, which needs to be addressed in future recruitment to prevent a shortfall in the fostering service within the next 10 years.

It is of concern that only 20 per cent of applications were completed within 6 months.

The profile of children in foster care in Scotland is culturally more diverse than the foster carers, with 2.5 per cent of children from an ethnic background other than British while only 0.6 per cent of the foster carers are from other cultures and communities.
Meeting the National Care Standards

- Preparation training for foster carers is available for 94 per cent of new applicants and there is a high level of performance on the National Care Standards for assessing and approving applications in all areas, except the timescales for completion of applications. Only 20 per cent of new foster carer applications were completed within the 6 month requirement.

- Written agreements are not in place for 33 per cent of new foster carers and, although 65 per cent of all foster carers report having a Handbook from their fostering service, there are significant gaps in information on child protection, complaints and insurance details.

- Link workers are available to support 99 per cent of foster carers, and group support and 24 hour back up is available in 90 per cent of cases. Training is available to 79 per cent of foster carers and respite care to 63 per cent of placements.

- The most widespread area of dissatisfaction with foster carers is in relation to allowances and fees, with 63 per cent of foster carers expressing dissatisfaction with their fees. Foster carers’ concerns have been longstanding and are increasing. This survey indicates a need for a fundamental review of allowances and fees rather than incremental increases, if the inequities and anomalies within the current arrangements are to be addressed.
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Introduction

This report has been produced following a survey of all foster carers in Scotland. Foster carers are the major service providers for children looked after and this report aims to identify how the service is responding to the changing needs of these children and how it is equipped to meet the demands of the 21st Century.

The Scottish Executive commissioned this profile of the fostering service in Scotland from the Fostering Network in order to address some of the underlying issues highlighted in Trying to meet the standards, a report published by the Fostering Network in 2003.

The Fostering Network is the UK’s leading charity for foster carers and professionals and is committed to promoting best practice in foster care. Across the UK it has a membership of 35,000, with offices in London, Glasgow, Belfast and Cardiff.

The Fostering Network aims to:

- define high standards of foster care
- assist local authorities/agencies and others to work effectively in the interests of fostered children
- inform, influence and persuade policy makers
- improve the public understanding of foster care.

The Fostering Network Scotland includes in membership all 32 local authorities, 7 voluntary fostering agencies and 4 independent fostering agencies. Nearly all of the 2,400 foster carers in Scotland are in individual membership of the Fostering Network and have access to the Fostering Network’s publications, training and independent support and advice.

This report is the first of three pieces of work that will build a profile of the needs of the fostering service in Scotland. Part 1 is based on a Survey of all foster carer households in Scotland and reports on the following:

- A profile of children in foster care
- A profile of foster carers
- Meeting the Standards.

This report will be followed by Part 2, which will involve a survey of all Fostering Agencies in Scotland and Part 3, which will identify the core skills required for fostering.
Background

There was a steady decline in the numbers of children in Scotland looked after by local authorities from the early 1970s until the mid 1990s, when the figures rose slightly but have now settled at around 11,000 per annum. The number of children placed in foster care has risen gradually, along with a decline in the use of residential placements. In 2003, 68 per cent of children looked after, who are living away from home, that is 3,288 children, were living with foster carers. *Children’s Social Work Statistics 2002-03, The Scottish Executive*.

There is substantial evidence that foster carers are successfully caring for more complex and challenging children, those with attachment disorders, behavioural problems, complex disabilities and teenagers who would otherwise have been in secure accommodation. *Walker, Hill and Triseliotis, 2002*.

A comprehensive study of the foster care service in Scotland was carried out by the Central Research Unit (1999) (hereafter referred to as the 1999 Study) and will be used in this report to identify trends and changes in the needs of children and the profile of foster carers. COSLA also published an analysis of issues facing the foster care service in 2000, and many of the findings raised in that report are also evidenced in the findings of this survey. A recent publication *Fit to Foster* (The Fostering Network, 2004) is the result of a similar survey into foster care in Wales. Where appropriate, data from those reports will be used to compare and contrast the profile of fostering services in Scotland.

In April 2002, the Scottish Executive published National Care Standards for foster care and family placement services, which outlined the service standards for all local authorities and voluntary and independent fostering agencies. The Fostering Network’s response, *Trying to meet the standards*, was presented to the Scottish Executive in 2003 to highlight some of the areas of concern arising from these standards and detailing areas for improvement in the fostering services in Scotland.

This survey also gives feedback on performance in respect of the relevant National Care Standards, which relate to the service provided by local authorities to children looked after, and by the fostering services to their foster carers.
Methodology

A questionnaire was developed, piloted and distributed to all foster carers in Scotland as the basis of this survey. The individual contact details of 2,398 foster carers were known through membership of the Fostering Network, and through names forwarded from local authorities and fostering services. This enabled the questionnaire to be posted directly to foster carer’s homes. This process was carried out with one exception, where one voluntary agency distributed it themselves to their carers and respite carers.

To include all the aspects required the questionnaire was 16 pages in length, and it was estimated to take between 30 to 40 minutes to complete. Amendments were made after it was piloted in one local authority.

The survey was issued in June 2004, with a Freepost return envelope, and a second mailing in mid-July was undertaken to those who had not returned the form as requested. Questionnaires were sent out to 2,398 households with the following returns:

- Returned gone away 43
- Retired, no longer fostering 21
- Reported missing in the post 38
- Completed returns 693

This results in a valid sample of 693 respondents from the valid total population of 2296 which is a 30 per cent return.

Foster carers who responded to this survey were from all 32 local authorities, 7 voluntary organisations and 3 independent providers of fostering services.

Some respondents declined to answer particular questions and these blanks have been excluded from the data calculations. This explains some of the varied numbers of respondents and percentages in some tables. The blanks may indicate a degree of under-reporting in some aspects of this survey. For example, 173 people did not complete details of training they had received since becoming a foster carer. This may result in some under-reporting, as it cannot be assumed that they had not received any training. A similarly high number of blank responses is evident in relation to qualifications before fostering; only 50 per cent of foster carers completed details of their qualifications, and again this could reflect some under-reporting in this area.

One part of the survey form was specifically designed for new foster carers to complete, with 136 respondents.

A copy of the questionnaire is included as Appendix 1.
Profile of the needs of children in foster care

The sample of 693 foster carers who responded to this Survey are caring for a total of 824 foster children. In 2003 there were 3,288 children looked after and accommodated by foster carers (Scottish Executive Statistics Publication, 2003). The life story, nature and needs of each of these children are unique, as illustrated by the following profile of needs.

The complexity of needs of foster children

The changing needs of children placed in foster care have been well documented as the service has risen to the challenges of caring for some of the most troubled and troublesome children (Walker, Hill and Triseliotis, 2002). Many children looked after have experienced early trauma, loss and abuse which impacts on their ability to trust adults and on many aspects of their behaviour:

‘a growing proportion of children who are fostered and adopted have been abused or neglected.’ (Minnis et al, 2001).

The combined impact of ill treatment, separation, and moves in care, has been identified as affecting the long-term mental health and emotional wellbeing of children. A recent UK survey of children in local authority care found that 42 per cent of five to ten year olds and 49 per cent of 11-15 year olds had some kind of assessable mental disorder, compared with 8 per cent and 11 per cent in the wider population (Meltzer, 2004). As will be described later, many foster carers are looking after children who need psychiatric support, counselling and psychological services. In this survey, 47 per cent of foster carers identified that their fostered child needed additional support from an educational psychologist and 28 per cent said they needed psychiatric advice. These children challenge the foster care service to develop greater skills to care for some of the most disturbed and troubled young people and to work with a range of other professionals if they are to be sustained in their foster families, in school and in the community.

This survey identified that over 7 per cent of the children currently accommodated in foster care have disabilities. These 64 children include 30 children with learning disabilities, 3 with autism, 5 with ADHD and others with complex physical and sensory disabilities and chronic or life-threatening health conditions. Some of these children may have previously been cared for in residential or hospital settings and are now able to benefit from the personal care of foster carers.

Additionally, there are a number of other children with disabilities who are cared for through respite arrangements and short breaks with foster carers, but who are not described as resident in the foster family, and their data is not included within these figures for children with disability.

Key point

The complexity of needs of children is extending the range of skills required by foster carers and the supports they need if children are to benefit from the close relationships offered by foster carers.
Age of children in foster care

This survey identifies that the average age of children currently in foster care is 10 years and 9 months. The Scottish Executive Statistical Return for 2001-2002 notes an 8 per cent rise in admissions of children under 11 years, with a corresponding drop in admissions of over 11s, and this trend is evident in the children who are placed in foster care. A comparison in the age profile of children currently in foster care with the data from the 1999 study illustrates an increase in the number of young children being accommodated by foster carers.

In addition to the findings of this survey, the Fostering Network returns from local authorities in Scotland indicating placement shortages confirm there are more young children coming into care, and highlight that they are often admitted with their brothers or sisters. Since every endeavour is made to keep families together, especially at a young age, there is an increased demand for foster carers who can care for young family groups.

Key point

The fostering service needs to be able to meet an increase in admissions of young children and to accommodate young children together with their brothers and sisters.
Ethnic profile

Children who have an ethnic background other than British constitute 2.5 per cent of the children in foster care in this survey, while only 0.6 per cent of foster carers have a minority ethnic background. Therein lies a challenge for the fostering services to meet the Care Standards requirement to recruit a wider variety of foster carers to meet the cultural and faith needs of birth families, children and young people now and in future. The children currently looked after are from such diverse backgrounds described by their carers as mixed race or black, and from Philippine, Chinese, African-Caribbean and Nigerian backgrounds.

Key point
There is a need for a more diverse range of foster carers to reflect the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of children looked after.

Birth family contact

Maintaining contact with their birth family is very important for children who are separated in public care, and it is a major task for foster carers. In this survey 80 per cent of children have contact with their birth parents and more than 31 per cent of them see them weekly or fortnightly. While foster carers are supportive of the need for contact, almost 50 per cent of them report considerable impact on the fostered children and their family as a result of birth family contact. Foster carers were invited to describe the impact this has on their family, and the following quotations give a flavour of the range of emotions and issues that arise in contact with birth families:

‘They are pleased they are able to visit their Mum. They accept they can’t live with her.’

‘It is a 100-mile trip.’ (Monthly contact).

‘One day a week has to be kept free of appointments so as not to interrupt the continuity and to be available to pick up the pieces when it doesn’t happen or is so distressing for the children.’

‘Terrible impact, foster child very upset, angry, confused. Can take up to five days to settle.’

The task of foster carers often extends to working with the child’s parents, facilitating contact, and mediating with the child to minimise the distress and difficulties that it creates. This can also include maintaining contact with brothers and sisters and extended members of the family from whom the child may be separated.

Key point
A substantial element of the work of foster carers involves maintaining links with birth families, through facilitating contact and supporting the child. This means that carers need skills in working with adults as well as children.
The service to fostered children provided by the local authority

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and associated regulations outline the responsibilities of local authorities to promote the welfare of children looked after and the need for care planning and reviews. This survey gives feedback from 693 foster carers on how the local authority is meeting these requirements in relation to the children currently, or most recently, in their foster care.

Having a named social worker for the child is critical to fulfilling many of the requirements in working with the birth family, supporting contact and developing care plans for the child. This survey indicates that an encouraging number of children looked after - 94 per cent - have a named social worker and that more than two thirds of children’s social workers visit the child’s foster home at least monthly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service to the looked after child</th>
<th>Numbers meeting requirements</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Named social worker for the child</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>94 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six monthly Reviews</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>84 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care plan is realistic and achievable</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>70 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate information pre-placement</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>69 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker visits monthly or more</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>70 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-placement visit</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>58 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with support</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>66 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Summary of performance on service to looked after children *

It is a matter of concern that 30 per cent of children do not have a care plan that their foster carers consider is realistic and achievable and, furthermore, 16 per cent of these children’s care plans are not reviewed within the regulatory requirements. In addition, only 66 per cent of foster carers are satisfied with the support they get from the child’s worker in dealing with the management of their fostered child’s behaviour.

Key point

While it is encouraging to note that most children have a named social worker, there remains concern about the viability of care plans, the shortfall in reviews and the quality of advice and support offered to foster carers in relation to the management of children’s behaviour.

* The discrepancy in some percentages is a result of excluding blank responses from the calculation
Support from other professionals

Due to the complexity of needs of children placed in foster care and their behaviour, many foster carers require additional support from other professionals to maintain the child at home, in school and in their community. In this Survey, 86 per cent of foster carers record that they work closely with other professionals. This involves, on average, 3.8 hours per week of their time, but in some cases can mean up to 30 hours per week in work with teachers, therapists, nurses and others.

Some specialist help is available, and much appreciated by foster carers, and 75 per cent of foster carers consider that other professionals respect the work they do. Foster carers were asked to identify the help they needed and then to describe its availability and helpfulness. This revealed that medical specialists were most often available and helpful. Other specialists, such as children’s right’s workers, lawyers, and advisors on drugs and careers, were available when needed. Foster carers did identify a shortfall in availability of some professionals, in particular in psychiatric and psychological services. Other foster carers of children with complex health conditions and disabilities were seeking greater access to physiotherapists, and speech and occupational therapists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professionals</th>
<th>Available</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical Specialist</td>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>98 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Rights Worker</td>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>87 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>87 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs and Alcohol Worker</td>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>87 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Advisor</td>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>82 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Psychologist</td>
<td>78 per cent</td>
<td>79 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
<td>76 per cent</td>
<td>76 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Support from other professionals

It is of concern that of the 333 foster carers who identified that their child needed the help of an educational psychologist, only 258 (78 per cent) were able to access this service, and of these 258 only 201 found it helpful. As improving the educational performance of children looked after is a major task of fostering, there is a need for improvement in joint working between these professionals.

Recent surveys of mental health services for young people in Scotland have found a significant proportion of this population are young people who have been looked after. However, there is a shortage of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, (CAMHS), and a growing awareness of the need to improve inter agency working between social workers and CAMHS. This survey identified that psychiatric services were needed by 200 foster carers, but were available to only 152, and described by only 109 of these people as helpful. This raises the concern that only 54 per cent of foster carers who needed a psychiatrist found it both available and helpful. Strategies to prioritise mental health services to children looked after while in foster care could improve this situation.

Training to improve the ability of foster carers and other professionals to work together is needed if there is to be a reduction in the prevalence of children looked after having long-term mental health problems.

Key point

There is a need to improve access to specialist psychological and psychiatric services for children while they are being looked after and to improve the advice and support available to foster carers.
Profile of foster carers

Foster carers often provide more than one kind of fostering service and the 693 foster carers in this survey offer children a range of differing kinds of placements and of differing lengths.

![Chart 2: Types of placements offered](image)

This chart illustrates that the range of placements offered is almost double the number of foster carers; for example, a foster carer may have one child long-term and offer an occasional emergency placement and planned respite for another foster child. The 59 foster carers who provide short breaks provide respite only for children with disabilities who live with their parents in the community and are not generally available to respond to the needs of other children looked after.

Location of foster carers

The greatest demands for foster care placements are from the large city authorities, although only 20 per cent of foster carers live in cities, and over 60 per cent are located in small towns and rural areas. One of the tensions within the fostering service in Scotland is that most foster carers do not live in the areas of greatest need and this can present difficulties for maintaining birth family contact, continuity of schooling and rehabilitation. It also increases the possibility of out of authority placements for children which, in turn, can create difficulties in securing specialist education, health and social work support.

In relation to the distance of foster carers from their essential support services, just over 10 per cent of fostered children have to travel more than 5 miles to school, shops or doctors, although 20 per cent of foster carers report children had to travel more than 5 miles to access leisure facilities. While 62 per cent of foster carers live less than 10 miles from their fostering agency, 17 per cent were more than 20 miles away from their agency.

Key point

There needs to be continuing recruitment initiatives, targeted within the large cities, to prevent dislocation of looked after children from their families, schools and communities.
Changing patterns within the foster care service

There has been a small rise in the number of foster carers in Scotland, from 2,107 reported in the COSLA report in 2000, to 2,398 identified in this survey. These numbers are affected by the number of new recruits in any one year, as well as by the number of foster carers who leave the service. There are also some underlying trends within the foster service which indicate a greater capacity is being obtained from within the existing pool of foster carers:

- There is an increase in the average length of time people have been fostering, from an average of 7 years in 1999 to 9.3 years in this survey.
- There is an increase in the total number of children each foster carer, on average, looks after, from 18 placements per foster carer in 1999 to an average of 22 placements per foster carer currently.
- There is a reduction in vacancies within the service from 17 per cent in 1999 to approximately 11.5 per cent in this survey.

Within this survey, 20 per cent of foster carers appear to have no fostered children resident in their home. This figure includes the 8.5 per cent of the respondents in this survey who are offering respite care and who would not describe these children as resident in their home. As a result, it is more likely that the level of foster placements without children is 11.5 per cent, which is significantly less than the 17 per cent identified in the 1999 study and may reflect the pressures on the foster service currently.

In this survey the average length of each child’s foster placement is currently 3 years and 11 months, and each foster carer currently cares for an average of 1.5 children.

However, as will be revealed later in relation to foster family composition, there are very few ‘average’ foster carers and the 1.5 figure belies the fact that a number of foster carers look after a much greater number of fostered children.

The average length of placements varies across agencies, from 7 years in one agency to 2 years in others. There is no obvious correlation between types of provision offered, size of local authority, or location in the voluntary or independent sector to explain such a difference in average length of placement, and the reasons for this are worthy of further research.

This Survey indicates there has been a significant development in the voluntary and independent sector fostering services with 8 per cent of foster carers provided by these sectors. Only one voluntary agency was included in the 1999 study and it identified that only 2.4 per cent of fostering placements were provided by this sector. There has been a growth in both independent and voluntary sector fostering services since 1999 and the implications of this will be considered further in Part 2.

These trends could benefit the quality of care offered to children if more experienced foster carers are looking after children for longer. However, it could indicate that there is less placement choice for children and more multiple placements of children in foster care, which would not necessarily improve the quality of care for children. The implications of these changes on the outcomes for children placed in foster care are worthy of further study.

Key point
There is a greater capacity being obtained from the fostering service and there is a need to understand how this is affecting the quality and availability of care for individual children.
The retention of foster carers

The retention of foster carers is an important aspect of maintaining the experience and capacity within the fostering service and it can be presumed that the increase in the average length of time foster carers commit to fostering is beneficial to the overall service.

When this trend is compared to the 1999 study it indicates that there is a less dramatic drop-out in the early years of becoming a foster carer and that there is a greater overall ability of foster carers to maintain their commitment to fostering over a substantial number of years, as illustrated in Chart 3.

![Chart 3: Years of experience of foster carers compared 2004/1999](image)

This survey also reveals there are marked differences between fostering agencies in their retention of foster carers, ranging from 18 years at best to 1.5 years. There is no single characteristic of agencies with better performance levels. Some of the smaller local authorities, some of the most remote and others within the central belt demonstrate the best performance with retention levels of 12 years and more. Two of the large cities, and one voluntary organisation, have a higher than average retention of foster carers of between 9 and 12 years. In contrast, some of the largest local authorities (centrally located) and some of the smaller, rural authorities have average retention levels of below five years. Some of the smaller and newer voluntary and independent fostering agencies appear to have lower retention levels, though this may result from the shorter length of time they have been operating in Scotland.

The variation in the length of time each foster carer is retained by their fostering service critically impacts on the capacity of the fostering service and needs to be better understood.

Key point

An identification of the factors which increase the likelihood of the retention of foster carers would be worthy of further work in order to disseminate best practice across all agencies with the aim of improving the retention levels of foster carers nationally.
The composition of fostering households

Foster carer’s homes are significantly different from most other households in Scotland, with bigger households and higher numbers of dependent children than others in the general population. Only 4 per cent of Scottish households have more than three children living at home, while 71 per cent of foster carers have three or more children living at home (Scottish Household Survey, 2003).

In 80 per cent of fostering households there are two registered foster carers. The number of declared single carers has increased from 4 per cent to 8 per cent since 1999. In addition, if you add the 69 separated and divorced foster carers to the 27 widows, the overall number of foster carers who have the sole care of children is closer to 20 per cent of the overall population of foster carers.

Many foster carers have their own children at home while also caring for fostered children; some have adopted children; others have ex fostered children staying with them as young adults. This creates some large and particularly complex families living together in the one home.

This survey highlights that there are a significant number of multiple placements of fostered children, with 49 per cent of foster carers having three or more fostered children.

![Chart 4: Number of fostered children living together in the same household](chart.png)

A small number of foster homes have 6 or more fostered children, which may indicate the pressure on the overall service and the demands made on individual carers to respond to ever increasing needs for placements. Foster carers’ ability to meet these demands, and maintain a quality of life for the whole family, needs to be carefully assessed, as does the support provided in these circumstances. Multiple placements raise the question about the amount of time afforded to each individual child. In other parts of the UK there are limits on the number of children placed in a foster home and, without such limits, there needs to be vigilance in ensuring that such complex multiple placements are adequately meeting the needs of all children involved.

Key point

The impact on the quality of care of individual children in multiple placements needs to be continually monitored.
The age of foster carers

The average age of foster carers who participated in this survey is 49 years.
A comparison of percentages by age between the 1999 study and the present survey indicates that there is an ageing profile of foster carers.

Chart 5: The average age of foster carers compared 2004/1999

The Chart illustrates that that there are more carers currently over the age of 60 years and that the overall population of foster carers in Scotland is getting older. Most of the current foster carers would have been recruited when they were between 30 and 40 years old, and this survey identified that only 12 per cent of current foster carers are below 40, while 13 per cent are 60 and over. We can anticipate a decline in the numbers of foster carers who continue to foster beyond 60, resulting in a shortfall of foster carers when the current cohort of foster carers naturally retire, unless there is a strategy for recruiting younger carers.

Key point

The age profile of foster carers has increased, with fewer young foster carers being recruited. This needs to be addressed in future recruitment to prevent the anticipated reduction in foster carers.
Employment

Where there are two registered carers in the fostering household, 50 per cent of them have both carers in employment in work outside of the home. In 76 per cent of these cases one partner was in full-time employment, and in most others a partner had part-time employment. Where there is only one carer in the household or one primary carer, 16 per cent of them are in full time employment. Overall, 57 per cent of both carers are in some employment in addition to fostering, reflecting a higher than average level of employment than the general population in Scotland where 52 per cent of all adults are in employment (Scottish Household Survey, 2003).

Some fostering agencies and specialist schemes require at least one carer to be at home full-time, in recognition of the complexity of the needs of the children they foster. The reality of the economic climate is that many families choose to have two incomes to maintain their standard of living, and the feedback indicates that the current levels of fees for fostering are insufficient for carers to give up external employment.

There is evidence of frustration that the fees for fostering do not equate with general wage levels – for example:

‘I think the carer’s fee is very low for someone who looks after a child 24/7. It’s not even the minimum wage.’

More than 10 per cent of carers indicated they anticipate a change in their future employment, and some indicated they would wish to devote more time to fostering. Improved financial reward for fostering could enable more foster carers to devote more time to fostering, which would benefit individual children and could increase the capacity of the fostering service.

Key point
Improved financial reward would attract some existing foster carers to relinquish external employment and extend their commitment to fostering.

Over 50 per cent of foster carers’ employment is also care-related, reflecting their interest and commitment to working with people. On a broad classification of the work of foster carers, many of them are employed directly in jobs such as nursing and social care, or indirectly in community services, teaching and the police.

Key point
Many foster carers are already employed in care related jobs and this could provide a focus for targeting future recruitment campaigns.
Income

In this survey, foster carers were asked to identify whether or not they had any income in addition to their income from fostering. Almost 9 per cent of these foster carers’ households state they have no source of income other than fostering (in the Table below these are included in the 28 per cent of foster carers who have an income of less than £10,000). It can be assumed, therefore, that in these households fostering allowances and fees are an essential component of the household budget.

In this survey, a number of respondents expressed the view that they would prefer to be paid a wage for the work they do:

‘Money is the children’s; we are not rewarded for what we do. It would be better if we were paid a wage.’

‘No retainer fee is paid in this council area. There are no rewards for attending training sessions. In bringing fostering into a professional arena, foster carers should be paid as professionals, ie salaries.’

Key point

Until the fostering allowances reflect the real costs of caring for children, and fostering fees reward foster carers adequately for their time, skills and experience, there will be a need for some foster carers to obtain additional employment outside the home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Bands</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Scottish Household Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below £10,000</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£10,000-£15,000</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£15,000-£20,000</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over £20,000</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Income levels of Foster Carers, (excluding fostering allowances and fees)
Standards of living in foster carers’ households

This survey indicates that the standard of living of foster carers is generally higher in comparison to the general population of Scotland. More foster carers own their own home than the general population, and more than 50 per cent of foster carers’ homes have two bathrooms and four or more bedrooms. Almost 30 per cent (206) of foster carers have made adaptations to their home to accommodate the needs of fostered children.

When compared to the 1999 study, there is only a slight rise in the number of fostered children having their own bedroom, from 63 per cent to 64 per cent (in this survey). The problem of 36 per cent of fostered children sharing bedrooms needs to be considered both from the needs of the fostered child and of the other children in the family. The growing awareness of the numbers of children in foster care who have been sexually abused in the past makes it increasingly important for all fostered children to have their own personal space. The Fostering Network report, Voices from Care, highlighted that the sons and daughters of foster carers had not only to share their home and family, but also their bedroom, with fostered children, and some expressed resentment about this.

Having a big enough home to accommodate each fostered child in their own bedroom requires major capital investment from foster carers. The present allowances, fees and discretionary payments, based on individual need, do not provide long-term security for such investments.

The increase in smoke-free foster homes compared to the 1999 study is encouraging, although a recent [unpublished] survey of City of Glasgow foster carers appears to indicate an increase in levels of smoking by foster carers.

Car ownership is well above the norm, with 93 per cent of foster carers owning a car, and more than half of them indicating that they have had to change their vehicle because of the needs of their fostered children. Almost a quarter of carers indicate they now drive a people carrier. Some 7 per cent of foster carers indicate they received financial support towards the purchase of their vehicle, ranging from grants of £500 towards a minibus to £10,000 for a people carrier. Others were offered assistance with bank loans and weekly payments to help with the purchase of a car.

Holidays are valued by most families as times to recharge batteries and enjoy more relaxed time together, and more than 80 per cent of foster carers indicate they have had a holiday in the last year.

Lastly, a colourful and consistent feature of foster carers is that they love pets and 82 per cent of foster carers have pets, mostly dogs, cats and goldfish, though several have a veritable menagerie of animals, for example:

‘2 dogs, 4 cats, 2 ponies, many sheep and goats.’

Key point

There are disparities within the standards of living of foster carers which may affect the quality of care offered in some placements.
The morale of foster carers

This survey has found that the morale of foster carers within the fostering service in Scotland is generally high. The vast majority - 92 per cent - of foster carers are proud of their role, and 90 per cent state that they enjoy the challenge of each new foster child. Despite the level of dissatisfaction with allowances and fees, reported earlier, the responses on questions of morale of foster carers confirm that fostering is a rewarding and satisfying responsibility to undertake.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morale statements</th>
<th>Percentage who strongly agree or agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proud to be a foster carer</td>
<td>92 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive impact on family</td>
<td>78 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children gained a lot from fostering</td>
<td>69 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy the challenge of each new child</td>
<td>90 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Morale of foster carers

This feedback is helpful for the recruitment of new foster carers and addresses the fear that some people have that fostering would have a negative impact on their own family.

Key point

The high morale and degree of reported satisfaction with the responsibilities of fostering should be emphasised in the recruitment of new foster carers to this satisfying and rewarding work.
The challenges of foster caring

Fostering is different from any other job, in that it is performed within the family home, impacts on every member of the household and involves considerable time, energy and emotional commitment. It is therefore of concern that in this survey 28 per cent of foster households report feeling stressed by fostering. The impact of this stress cannot be confined to one aspect of life, in the same way that other job related stress can be managed. It is therefore important to relieve the stress of foster carers in order to ensure it does not impact on the quality of care they are able to offer to children looked after, or contribute to burn-out or withdrawal from the service.

There are a number of potential sources of stress in fostering, and foster carers indicate that working with social workers and teachers, and managing children’s behaviour, are all stressful at times. A potential cause of stress and disappointment for 11 per cent of foster carers is the sense of frustration that arises in caring for some fostered children for whom their efforts made little difference. Two further areas of stress were explored specifically in this survey: Allegations and Incidents and injuries

Allegations

Foster carers are aware of the risk of having an allegation or complaint made against them. This can have a devastating impact on carers, and can dissuade some from continuing. 213 foster carers, 31 per cent of households in this survey, reported that they had a complaint or allegation made against them. This is a much higher figure than the 13 per cent in Wales, and represents a significant increase from the 1999 study, when 4 per cent of fostering households reported allegations of abuse.

There could be many reasons for this increase: our society becoming more litigious, complaints procedures are promoted, and children looked after are more aware of their rights. Alternatively, it could reflect one aspect of the greater challenges that face carers today, from the more complex nature of children who are looked after. The 1999 study identified that 5 per cent of foster carers resigned following allegations of abuse, though only a small percentage of these carers were deregistered. Certainly, the sensitivity of investigations and the quality of support to all parties involved in these stressful events are critical in retaining foster carers. In Wales, there has been a protocol agreed across agencies to develop a more consistent approach to handling investigations and allegations of abuse.

Key point

There is a need to raise awareness of the stress experienced by carers when allegations and complaints about their care are made. There is the need to agree protocols for handling them in order to reduce their potential impact on the fostering service. The processes must be fair but rigorous to ensure the safety of children.
Incidents and injuries

An aspect of fostering that is perhaps under recognised is the number of incidents and injuries that foster carers acquire as a result of the complex needs and challenging behaviours of the fostered children for whom they care. Just over 10 per cent of all foster carers – 121 - reported health problems which occurred as a result of fostering. Their descriptions included details of over 20 carers reporting back injuries and neck problems arising from their care role, as illustrated by this example:

‘Neck problems from constantly lifting severely disabled children with no equipment.’

A further 39 foster carers reported stress and other associated illnesses of depression. In addition, injuries resulting from aggression were reported by 46 carers, including 7 fractures and 19 bruising, kicking and biting incidents. The following quotations illustrate the nature of the events that precipitate injury and health problems for some foster carers:

‘Thumb dislocated by child throwing chair.’

‘Got concussed and black eyes from our foster daughter.’

‘Got salmonella poisoning suspected from child who constantly soiled and smeared excrement over the house.’

Key point

The number of incidents and injuries affecting foster carers as a result of their work needs to be systematically recorded in order to inform future support and training.
Educational profile of foster carers

The educational profile of foster carers in this survey before they took up this work indicates that at least 41 per cent had no educational qualification. This percentage appears to be higher than the equivalent population in Wales, where 34 per cent had no post-school qualification (Fit to Foster, 2004). However, the numbers show an improvement on the 1999 study where only 30 per cent of foster carers had undertaken further training or study since leaving school, whereas 50 per cent of foster carers in this survey had undertaken further training between leaving school and before commencing fostering, as illustrated below.

![Chart 6: The educational profile of foster carers](image)

The numbers of foster carers currently with a low level of educational attainment is of concern and needs to be addressed through further training. Equally, there is a need to raise the educational level on entry to fostering by attracting more qualified applicants and providing programmes for their continuous development.

As a result of the Learning with Care programme in 2003, computers were made more widely available to children looked after. In this survey, 92 per cent of foster carers have a computer, and almost 80 per cent have access to the internet (a significantly higher figure than the 41 per cent average for Scotland). The survey indicates a high awareness of the need to safeguard children from unsupervised access to the internet: many carers had computer-based safeguards; others located the computer in the kitchen or living room, where the child’s use of the internet could be monitored, or denied the child access to the internet.

**Key point**

The educational levels of foster carers need to improve significantly if children are to receive educationally rich experiences while in foster care.

**Key point**

The educational levels of foster carers entering the service need attention if the ambition to have a qualified workforce is to be realised. Attracting people with more qualifications will need improved conditions of service and reward.
Training since becoming a foster carer

Only 11 per cent of respondents in this Survey indicated that they had gained further qualifications (mostly SVQ and HNC) since becoming foster carers, and 6 foster carers had gained a degree. Around 10 per cent of foster carers are currently working towards SVQ and HNC awards and a further 54 per cent of foster carers are interested in undertaking SVQ 3.

Foster carers are key partners in the strategy to increase the educational attainment of children looked after, and it is of concern that their educational achievements since becoming foster carers are low. If foster carers are to provide an educationally rich environment to children, there must be a greater investment in their education and training to improve the current low levels of educational attainment in this workforce.

The evidence from this survey is that foster carers place high value on access to good quality training and are keen to embrace further training. Many foster carers listed a number of courses they had attended over the last five years, and some illustrated their confidence in their agency’s commitment to training:

‘We get three days training every year’.

The feedback from most of the training provided to foster carers is positive, but this training is rarely accredited and, as a result, many foster carers are unable to demonstrate their development of knowledge and skill.

Of further concern is that access to training is not consistent across all fostering agencies, and 21 per cent of foster carers indicated they had attended no training in the last two years. This was explored further and those who had not attended training in the last two years explained their reasons for this, as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for not attending training</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsuitable day or time</td>
<td>33 per cent</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to get child care cover</td>
<td>16.5 per cent</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not relevant subject</td>
<td>14 per cent</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too far away</td>
<td>14 per cent</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not offered any training</td>
<td>12 per cent</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not interested in topic</td>
<td>6.5 per cent</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not accredited</td>
<td>1.5 per cent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor trainers</td>
<td>1.5 per cent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about quality</td>
<td>1 per cent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Reasons for not participating in training
Some foster carers indicated more than one reason for not attending training, but overall, in 50 per cent of cases, the reasons for not participating in training are concerned with the timing of the training and the lack of child care cover to support foster carers’ attendance. This, combined with 14 per cent identifying distance as a factor, highlights a further logistical issue that needs to be addressed when delivering training to this dispersed population. It is of concern that 12 per cent of foster carers have not been offered any training in the last two years. The focus, quality and the lack of accreditation of training are not major reasons for non-participation.

A more detailed examination of the experience and future training needs of foster carers will be undertaken in Part 3 of this Survey and will be reported later.

**Key point**

Training for foster carers needs to be available and accessible to all carers across the country and further consideration needs to be given to the design and dissemination of foster carer training to address the logistical reasons for non participation.
Respite care

In order to sustain the ability to care for some challenging and complex children, foster carers sometimes need to be relieved of this responsibility and have a break for respite. The need for respite care varies with the differing demands of children, and almost 25 per cent of foster carers in this survey said they did not require respite. However, almost 30 per cent indicated that they did need respite but it is never available to them or their fostered child. The danger of this is that foster carers’ priority for respite might not be identified until they are exhausted and the placement may be in jeopardy of breakdown.

The frequency of respite varies; for example, it may involve a monthly weekend break, or, more substantially, two weeks per year, to allow the foster carers to have a holiday without the commitment to fostering. For some very complex and demanding children, frequent access to respite is built in as a requirement to the foster placement in order to sustain the viability of the placement for the long-term. 46 per cent of foster carers receive respite care at least on an annual basis, with 13 per cent receiving it at least monthly.

Most respite care is provided on a mutual support basis by other foster carers within the agency. This extends the demands on the fostering service overall and requires existing carers to regularly take on additional responsibilities. More respite care is needed than is currently available, and the overall numbers of foster carers would need to increase to make this provision available to the 75 per cent who need to use respite.

Key point

Most respite is provided by existing foster carers and if the provision is to be extended further it could place serious demands on the overall service.
Standards of service by fostering agencies

All local authorities and voluntary and independent fostering agencies have to meet the National Care Standards, published in 2002. Inspections of service will start in the next year. These Standards outline the requirements on fostering agencies to provide services to foster carers, from assessing and approving new applicants to information and advice, practical help, allowances and fees, and reviews of foster carers. Standards 5 - 11 are focused on foster carers and written from their perspective. This survey provides foster carers with the first opportunity to comment on their agency’s performance on these Standards.

Standard 5: Assessing and approving carers

‘You know that you will be fully assessed by the agency before being accepted as a foster carer.’

Standard 6: Completing new applications

‘You can be confident that the agency treats applications to become a foster carer fairly and without unnecessary delay’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of performance on Standards 5 and 6</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New applicants involved in preparation training</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>94 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All new applicants family involved in assessment</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>77 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants contributed to assessment report</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>97 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants were clear on relevant skills and experience for their application</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>92 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications which were completed within 6 months</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Performance on Standards 5 and 6

In this survey, only the 136 foster carers who had been approved in the last two years gave feedback on their experience of preparation and assessment. In general, new foster carers were positive about their experience of fostering and 89 per cent would recommend it to others. Some aspects of Standard 6 are well addressed, with over 90 per cent of applicants actively participating in the process of assessment. However, the level of compliance with timescales for completion of applications is a matter of concern.
Standard 6 indicates an expectation that applications will be completed within six months, but only 24 were completed in 6 months or less and the average application took 10 months to approve. However, this figure belies a very substantial range of compliance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time to complete application</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applicants were approved within 6 months</td>
<td>20 per cent</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants were approved between 6 months and 1 year</td>
<td>54 per cent</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applicants took between one and two years</td>
<td>25 per cent</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications took two years or more</td>
<td>1 per cent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100 per cent</strong></td>
<td><strong>122</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Length of time to complete applications *

Some applicants expressed strong feelings about the handling of their application:

‘The assessment time is ridiculous, it should be radically cut. Staff in children’s units are not subjected to it. The time involved would put my employment agency out of business.’

This survey only reached applicants who had eventually been accepted as foster carers and there may have been another group of applicants who withdrew during this lengthy process of assessment. The size of this sample of foster carers approved in the last two years is not representative enough to identify any pattern of differences in performance between agencies. There is, however, a need to identify the reasons for such delays and to identify best practice in agencies that are completing applications in a timely manner.

**Key point**

While the processes for recruitment and preparation of new foster carers are generally meeting Standards, there is a need to address the significant delays some applicants experience in the completion of their applications.

*The discrepancy in some percentages is a result of excluding blank responses from the calculations*
Standard 7: Information and advice

‘You have a written agreement with the agency, setting out the terms of approval and your role and responsibilities as a foster carer and the role and responsibilities of the agency’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of performance on Standard 7</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New foster carers with written agreement</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>67 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers who have handbook of policies from agency</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>65 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with copy of child protection procedures</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>55 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with copy of agency insurance</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>28 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with copy of complaints procedure</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>67 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Performance on Standard 7

A written agreement setting out terms of approval is not a new requirement since the introduction of the Standards in 2002, having been required since the introduction of the Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations in 1997, and it is disappointing to find that 33 per cent of new carers do not have a written agreement on their terms of approval.

While the majority of foster carers - 65 per cent - have a Foster Carers’ Handbook, 235 foster carers’ report they do not have such a document. The feedback on some specific information expected to be included in this reveals significant gaps. Foster carers in 45 per cent of instances stated they did not have details about their agency’s child protection procedures, and 33 per cent did not have information about complaints procedures. Again, within this Standard, only 28 per cent of foster carers had information about their agency’s insurance and a slightly larger proportion had additional insurance cover for themselves. These matters are particularly important in relation to the earlier information about allegations and injuries.

Key point

There is a need to improve the information and advice to foster carers and to improve performance in this Standard.
Standard 8: Practical help

‘You can be confident that the agency is committed to developing, preparing and training foster carers and makes sure that they work within its standards, policies and guidance.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of performance on Standard 8</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with link worker</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>99 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with access to groups</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>90 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with access to 24hr back up</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>91 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with access to training</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>79 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers with access to respite</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>63 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Performance on Standard 8

This Standard refers to the agency social worker, commonly referred to as a link worker, to distinguish their role from the child’s worker. Link workers have been consistently identified as being the major key to providing individual support for foster carers. It is therefore encouraging to note that almost 99 per cent of foster carers have a link worker, which is a substantial commitment, especially when many agencies are reporting staff shortages in child care. It is also a significant improvement from the 1999 study, when only 84 per cent of foster carers had a link worker. It is reported that 82 per cent of foster carers meet their link worker at least monthly.

The range of practical support has been extended to many foster carers, and 90 per cent of them now have access to group support and 24-hour back up. As mentioned previously, 30 per cent who need respite do not have access to it, and some of those who do use respite would like to have more regular access to it.

Key point

There is a high compliance in the availability of individual and group support to foster carers, with 99 per cent of foster carers having a link worker to support them in their task. There is a need to improve access and availability of respite care for foster carers.
Standard 9: Allowances and expenses

“You can be confident that you receive payments to cover the cost of caring for any children or young people placed with you. Payments are based on their needs and in line with the cost of caring for them.”

Standard 10: Fees

“You know that all arrangements for fees are clear.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of performance on Standards 9 and 10</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers satisfied payments cover costs of caring for the child</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>46 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers who understand how their fees and allowances are calculated</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>68 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers who receive payment for skills</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>42 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers who are satisfied that their fees adequately reward them for fostering</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>37 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carers understand how fees are calculated</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>68 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Performance on Standards 9 and 10

All foster carers receive allowances and expenses, although 54 per cent of foster carers are not satisfied that the allowances adequately cover the day-to-day costs of caring for their fostered children:

“The allowances no way cover for the care of the children, we are definitely out of pocket since taking up fostering. When you ask the Council for any extra help, ie clothing, activities etc, they say it is built into the ‘elastic’ allowance.”

“Fostered children should be treated the same as other children in the house. Sometimes the finance precludes this if you do not dig into your own pocket.”

“I provide care 24/7 for a child with Asperger’s Syndrome. I am not recognised as a specialist carer, or paid accordingly.”

The annual survey by the Fostering Network confirms that most local authorities in Scotland pay the recommended COSLA rates for the reimbursement of costs of care for a child. This rate, however, is considerably below the rates recommended by the Fostering Network, which are based on the Family Expenditure Survey and include a factor to cover the additional expenses of foster carers.

Further financial discrepancies are evident in relation to mileage allowances paid to reimburse foster carers for travel expenses. One third of foster carers said they received no reimbursement of travel expenses, and the rates paid to the others range from above 40p per mile to below 20p per mile, with the norm being 35p per mile.
Standard 9 also requires agencies to make sure that payment details are clearly explained, but 32 per cent of foster carers are confused about which part of their payment relates to allowances for the child and which is a fee or reward to them for their work. There is also considerable anger about late payments and the lack of retainers.

Key point
The extent to which current allowances fall short of the real costs of care is a matter that requires urgent attention and fundamental review. The variations in discretionary payments add further confusion and create further inequities in the service.

The payment of fees to foster carers in reward for their time, skills and experience is not a requirement. The introduction of ‘Payment for Skills’ was intended to attract more people to consider fostering as a career choice, to professionalise the service and to enhance the development of skills. Only 42 per cent of foster carers in this survey are in receipt of a payment in addition to their allowance. Seventeen local authorities, and all but one of the voluntary and independent fostering services, state that they have a system of paying fees; some are for all carers, some give ‘Payment for Skills’ and others relate to specialist schemes for young people with particularly complex needs.

This survey identifies a widespread dissatisfaction with fees, with 63 per cent of all foster carers considering that they are not adequately rewarded for the work they do in fostering. There is also significant confusion surrounding the way fees are calculated and how foster carers move from one level of payment to the next. This level of concern represents a further decrease in satisfaction by foster carers from the 58 per cent dissatisfaction recorded in the 1999 study.

Many took the opportunity offered in this survey to explain the reasons for their dissatisfaction:

*The fees do not relate to the fact this is a 24-hour job, 7 days a week. All the risks involved, paperwork, meetings, school, dealing with parents and the social work department.*

*Money received is the children’s; we are not rewarded for what we do. It would be better if we were paid a wage.*

*‘No provision made for pensions, long-term illness, loss of earnings when carers wish to go on holiday on their own and children go to respite.*

It is unclear what impact this level of dissatisfaction with fees has had on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. There is, however, a lower level of dissatisfaction, 47 per cent, with fees within the voluntary and independent sectors. It is commonly assumed that higher levels of fees are paid by some voluntary and independent fostering agencies.

Key point
In order to create a professionally trained foster carer workforce, there is a need to increase the availability of fees.
Standard 11: Reviews

‘You can be confident that the agency has the necessary review systems in place to make sure that you are able to continue to provide good quality care.’

In this survey, 70 per cent of foster carers had an annual review of their performance as foster carers. A further 18 per cent indicated that this occurred every two years and 2 per cent every five years. This highlights that 10 per cent of foster carers have never had a review. As this should include feedback on placements, a review of any incidents, allegations or complaints and should agree an action plan to meet future training and support needs, it is important for the continued development of foster carers. Reviews are a key component in maintaining standards and improving the quality of care within the fostering service.

Key point
There is a need to ensure that reviews of foster carers are happening systematically and that they inform the future development of the service.

The National Standards provide a sound benchmark for service provision. As agencies will soon be inspected on the basis of the Standards, this survey indicates several areas where major changes and improvements will be required.
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