

# Keep Connected

Maintaining Relationships When Moving On



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The  
**Fostering  
Network**

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## 1. Introduction

Good relationships help to build trust, and help children create a sense of belonging and identity. All children need to understand their past and to build confidence in their ability to sustain relationships in the future. Maintaining good relationships can matter more than anything else for children in care. In contrast, damage to children can occur when strong relationships are broken, against their wishes.

Foster carers provide stable environments and secure attachments for children in short-term and long-term placements. Yet, The Fostering Network has been hearing from many foster carers that they have been unable to maintain relationships with a former fostered child, despite the child wanting to stay in touch.

A foster carer contacted The Fostering Network about a 2014 court case. They were prevented by the local authority from having any contact with a former fostered child. The judge ruled in the child's/foster carer favour observing;

*“In a world of shifting family relationships in which children increasingly grow up with a wide range of connections that are seen as normal we need to take stock of why our approach to children in care is different. Why do we persist in breaking children’s old relationships when we introduce them to future carers, despite knowing that so many children who do not happen to be in care manage to negotiate complex family relationships as they grow up.”*

This led to The Fostering Network developing two questionnaires to find out the extent of the problem – one for children and young people in foster care, and care leavers and one for foster carers.

We were staggered by the nature of the responses we received from both the foster carers and children and young people care and care leavers. Far from being an issue which affected only a few, the results showed that this is a wide-scale problem with huge numbers of foster carers and young people being prevented from maintaining contact when they move on to another family. The overwhelming majority of children and young people who responded to our survey placed a high value on being able to stay in contact with a former foster carer. Likewise, foster carers recognised the importance of continuing to support that young person when they moved on.

It seems extraordinary that the importance of these relationships is not being recognised despite the attachment theory, originating in the work of John Bowlby, being around for over 40 years. There has been no shortage of research and reports recognising the importance of relationships in the care system, most recently the Care Inquiry Report, Making not Breaking which concluded that the relationships with people who care for and

about children are the golden thread in children's lives, and that the quality of a child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do.<sup>1</sup>

This report looks at the findings of the two surveys ending with recommendations which The Fostering Network believes are vital in order to ensure that the experience for a child of moving from one placement to another is as positive as it can be, minimises stress, and is able to provide the support that the child needs to be able to go on and develop new relationships.

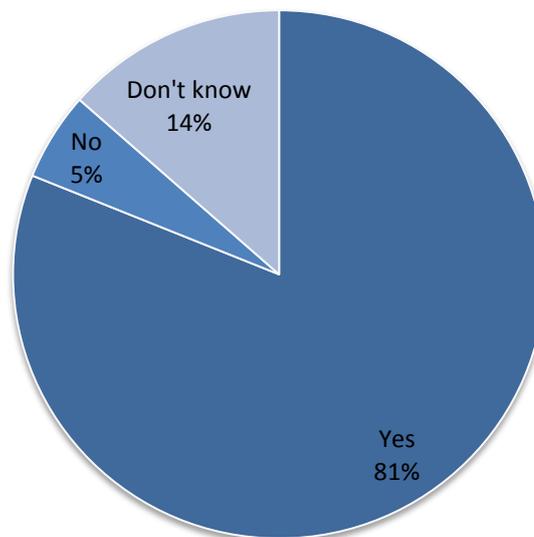
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<sup>1</sup> The Care Inquiry (England) was group of eight charities exploring how best to achieve stability. They published their findings in April 2013, Making not Breaking.

## 2. Survey of children and young people in care, and care leavers

The Fostering Network developed a questionnaire for children and young people in care and care leavers. This was promoted through our networks and online during November and December 2015. We received 179 responses.

**Do you think it is important to be able to keep in touch with foster carers you have lived with?**



### Key findings

- An overwhelming four in five children and young people in care, and care leavers said that it was important to be able to keep in touch with foster carers they have lived with.
- Only one in 20 said it wasn't important.

*"It's important because they are often the closest thing you will have to parents under circumstances where your biological family cannot support you."*

*"They were my family and shared my life. They loved and cared for me and I trusted them."*

*"I think it is vital for children to keep in touch with foster carers they have lived with because we are human, we grow attachments, we grow feelings and we grow the bond between one another. I think it is also important because some children have*

*been moved around a lot and finding that one family that has made them promises, helped them along their journey and took them in as their own...they should be carried out through their life, it is important because attachments do not go away and as a child who has experienced not being able to do this because of attachment issues it is hard, it sort of has an impact on your everyday life. This is why I think it is important."*

*"Continuity of care. And attachments. Knowing someone still cares."*

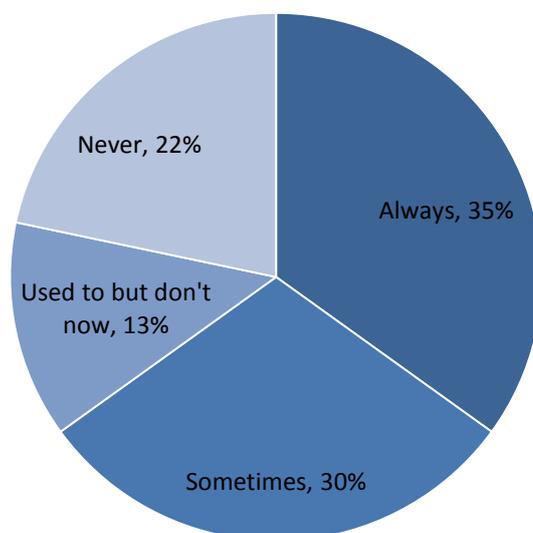
*"Foster parents are, or can be, like parents: they are the ones who care for you on a day-to-day basis. The idea that you can live in a home for years and then be expected to move to a new home and never look back is abhorrent."*

*"They're a part of your life, your history and part of the reason you are who you are. They've taken you in when you had nothing or when the situation in your life was so dire and that means something. Often, it's the only attachment you have."*

*"My foster carer was the only 'mother' figure I was aware of from 16 weeks old til 4 years old. I am now adopted but need to be aware of my past and how the parts of my life fit together. The life story work from my LA was very poor, and not available when I really needed it."*

*"I think it can do more damage if you're not allowed to stay in contact with your foster carers."*

## Do you keep in contact with any foster carers you have lived with?



### Key findings

- Over one in five children and young people in care, and care leavers never keep in contact with former foster carers.

*"I have asked but it wasn't allowed and they want to see me too we had a good bond. It should have happened"*

*"Not allowed to".*

*"I have maintained a close relationship with two sets of foster carers"*

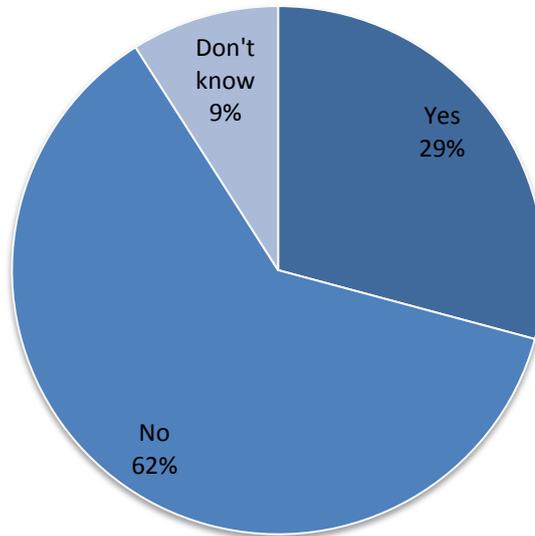
*"Because... I don't even know! I'd like to, I keep in touch with one of my foster families. But the ones I really want to keep in touch with are not allowed, and I think it is wrong that we can't do so as maintaining a secure relationship with foster families makes the child feel valued and still loved and cared for. I hope in the future that this changes"*

*"I like to always stay in contact with my foster carer due to how much she helped me change my life."*

*"I've been told I'm not allowed by my social worker."*

*"Because they kept my sister, it is hard for me to keep in touch. They couldn't look after me because I had difficult behaviour and they didn't know how to look after me. I left them the day before my birthday without any notice. It's very hard."*

**Have you ever wanted to keep in touch with a foster carer but not been able to?**



**Key findings**

- Around one third of children and young people in care and care leavers have been prevented from having contact with a former foster carer.

*“Their agency will not allow it as I have attachment issues.”*

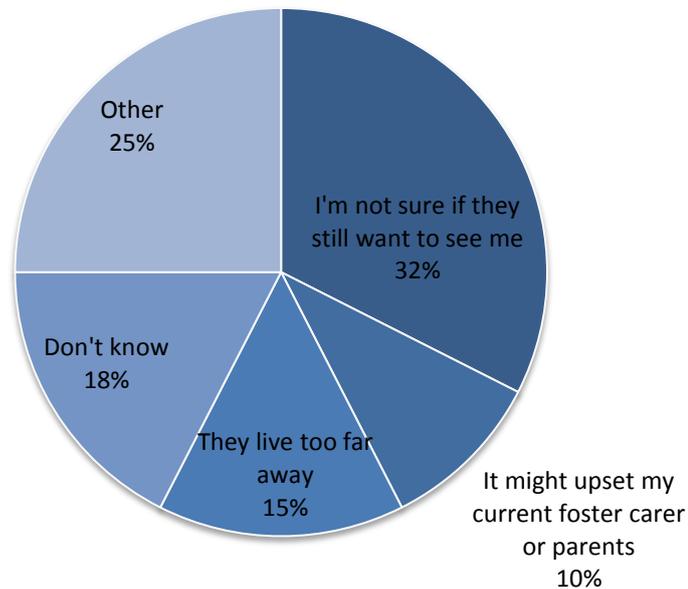
*“Yes but never allowed to.”*

*“I didn't keep in contact with any foster carers. I'd lived with one from when I was six until when I was 10, but after a few post-adoption placement visits, I didn't see them again until I was 25.”*

*“Never been arranged.”*

*“I ran away and wish I hadn't.”*

## Why have you not been able to keep in contact with foster carers you have lived with?



### Key findings

- A quarter of children and young people in care, and care leavers have been unable to remain in contact with former foster carers because the fostering service has not allowed it.
- One third of children and young people in care, and care leavers have not kept in contact with their former foster carers because they were unsure that they still wanted to see them.

Respondents were able to leave comments. Looking at those who answered “other”, all but one of them said they were unable to keep in contact with their former foster carers because the fostering service did not allow it.

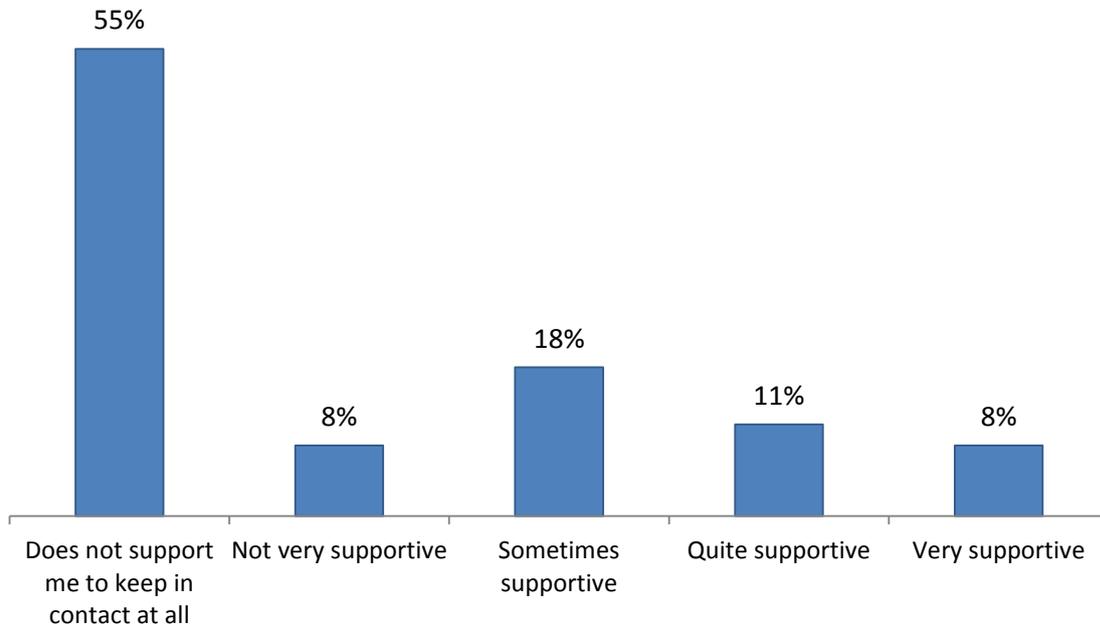
*“Foster carers can’t form friendships, it is restricted.”*

*“Sometimes young people feel that they are no longer the foster carers long term responsibility.”*

*“Not allowed by social services.”*

*“Social workers always say it's not allowed.”*

**How well does your social worker support you to keep in contact with your former foster carers?**



**Key findings**

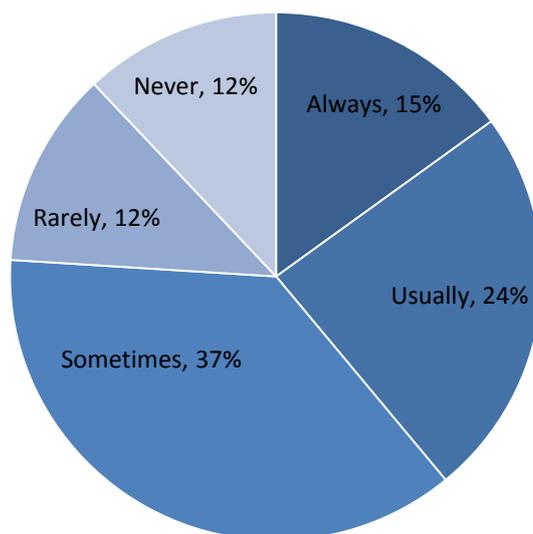
- Over half of children and young people in care, and care leavers said their social worker does not support them to keep in contact at all.
- Only one in 10 said their social work was very supportive.

It is evident from the responses from children and young people in care and care leavers that the vast majority want to be able to stay in touch with former foster carers, many are prevented from doing so and most do not receive the necessary support from their social worker.

### 3. Survey of foster carers

In May 2015, The Fostering Network published a short online survey asking foster carers about contact with former foster children. The survey was promoted via our website, member e-news and social media. 1,106 foster carers took part.

#### Do you keep in contact with former foster children?



#### Key findings

- Around a quarter of foster carers rarely or never keep in contact with former foster children.
- Only four in 10 foster carers always or usually keep in contact with former foster children.

We asked for comments (optional) and 383 foster carers responded. There were three themes:

#### 1. Foster carers did not stay in touch because the new family did not want contact to continue

*"We would have loved to, but the new permanency carer did not wish us to keep in touch"*

*"If possible I do but sometimes the new parents don't want this."*

*“It depends if their adoptive parents want us to keep in touch.”*

**2. Foster carers did not stay in touch because they were not allowed to do so by the fostering service**

*“I'd like to, but it seems to be discouraged by local authority social workers.”*

*“My agency has made it very clear I am not to keep in touch.”*

*“Local Authority don't allow this. SHOCKING and upsetting at times”*

*“Usually told the child needs to move on so no contact allowed”*

*“They say it's in the best interest of the child not to see us so they can settle in new placement & you are forgotten about then.”*

**3. Foster carers did stay in contact – it was important for the relationship to continue**

*“One child moved to an aunt and they have asked us to be part of his extended family which is a great privilege”*

*“Most of them want to and keep regular contact and visits even into adulthood*

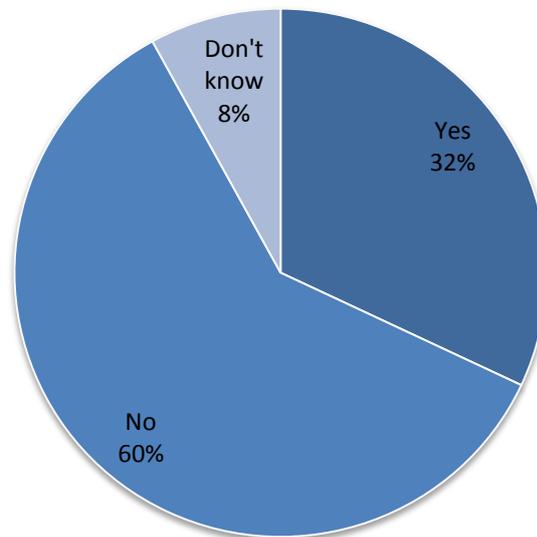
*“This is vital part of our role they need to know we will always be here “*

*“Still in contact with our first from 20 years ago who stayed with us from age 5 -17”*

*“It's really important for us to stay always in contact with them, as our children have become sisters and brothers to them and we look at everyone's emotions.”*

It was clear from the responses that foster carers recognised the importance of the relationship between themselves and their former foster child – and their role in supporting the child once they had moved on. Yet 25 per cent of foster carers never or rarely stayed in contact with their former foster child.

## Have you ever been prevented from having contact with a former foster child?



### Key findings

- Around one third of foster carers have been prevented from having contact with a former foster child

Foster carers were given the opportunity to leave comments, and 272 did so.

Many foster carers said that they were prevented from having contact either by the social worker or new family because it was in the child's best interest i.e. they needed to move on or they weren't yet settled and needed time to bond with their new family. There were many instances where the child had been with the foster carer for a very long period time.

*"Very painful experience where we knew the child wanted contact with us and was denied this by local authority."*

*"There was talk of the last wee boy and I meeting up, but last time there was contact, I was told it was too soon, he had not settled yet."*

*"The child was with me for 3+ years. Adopters decided no more contact at all after she moved in. Heartbroken. So are my children who lost a sibling"*

*"Two siblings that were adopted, the new parents didn't want any contact with their past life"*

*“Sometimes people think children need to make new relationships that aren't affected by attachments to previous carers”*

*“A child I had for four years, I was not allowed contact to allow the child to bond with new carers”*

*“An assessment centre stopped our contact as the child was too close to us. He came to us at five weeks and we looked after him for 22 months.”*

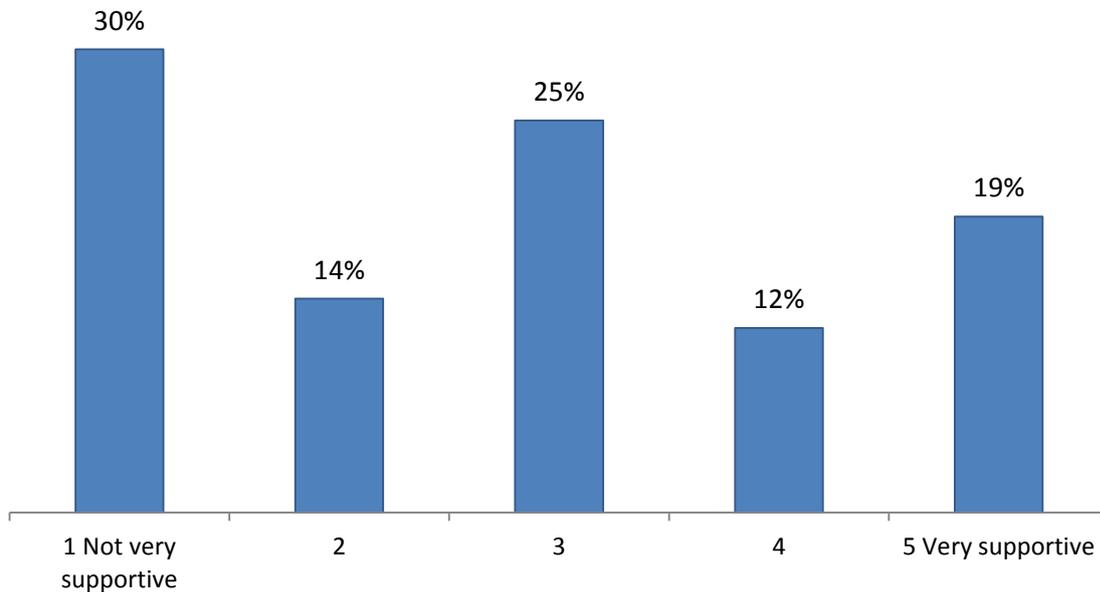
*“New adoptive parents couldn't cope with the grief experienced by the child leaving me and asked us to no longer visit. Very sad for the child and for us.”*

*“I've been told a break in contact was important for them to 'move on' & that I am in danger of being 'over attached' - even when this contact is what the young person has asked for”*

*“Prevented when child moved to permanent placement to 'help child settle'. This approach does not work for every child, particularly those with severe emotional/behavioural issues. The trauma caused to the child in not being allowed to see us resulted in behaviour which the new carers could not manage, and the placement broke down.”*

*“Apparently not for the benefit of the child who keeps asking for us and foster siblings”*

**How supportive is your fostering service in enabling contact with former fostered children, where appropriate, on a scale of 1 - 5 (with 1 being not very supportive and 5 being very supportive)?**



#### Key findings

- Nearly one third of foster carers said their fostering service was not very supportive in enabling contact with former fostered children
- Only one in five said their fostering service was very supportive.

*"I think the current focus is on the short term needs of the new family and not on the long term needs of the child"*

*"Once a child is moved, the fostering service makes no attempt at all to enable contact. It is down to us and the new carers."*

*"It's just something that doesn't seem to happen with any foster child, though there is the odd exception"*

*"They are very good in encouraging contact & recommend it to most of my adoptive families. I keep in contact through friends also."*

*"We are expected to act as if these young people had never been here".*

*"I've rated this on the basis of being average, neither + or -. The real question here is - beyond "lip service", how supportive are the child's SW, the new carers, or their agencies at promoting the contact the child may wish to have with their previous*

*carers? Not everyone appreciates the investment a child makes in their carers. Once you destroy this investment the child sees no reason to be loyal or make attachments to people.”*

*“There seems to be mixed views on whether this is beneficial to a child. Some SW advocate a clean break.”*

The findings of the foster carers’ survey mirror those of the survey of children and young people in care, and care leavers. Foster carers recognised the importance of being able to stay in touch with their former fostered children and yet one third have been prevented from doing so and most do not receive any support.

#### **4. Case Study Devon County Council**

Devon's adoption team repeatedly found that there were cases where children did not fully understand that their adoptive families were offering them a permanent home. There were occasions, even months after being placed with adoptive parents, when children believed that they would be returning to their foster families, or that they had been taken from their foster carers, or even that their foster carers did not know where they were.

At the same time supervising social workers in their fostering service, found that children were often unprepared for the major transition from foster family to adoptive family.

Delving further into the subject of 'transition' Devon found that there was no formal guidance on the process. Involving both the fostering and adoption teams, they developed a child-focused policy to support the move to permanent placements. They built on their existing Life Story work, in order to improve best practice and bring about positive change for children moving to their growing up family.

Each child moving from foster care into adoption has a 'Transition Plan' put in place. The plan extends well beyond the placement move, and includes ongoing contact with former foster carers.

To help foster families and adopters along their journey, Devon created guidance including templates for transition meetings with the child, ideas scripts, top tips, and even a game to play to support the process. They prepared training sessions for social workers and managers to bring everyone up to speed.

Devon have started to see that their new approach means children are experiencing less traumatic transitions. It's also made a difference to their foster carers and adoptive families who are fully informed and guided each step of the way, meaning they are less anxious too. Having developed the policies and training for children who are moving from foster care to adoption/special guardianship, Devon intend to roll it out across the whole of the fostering and adoption service to cover all transitions including from one foster care placement to another.

A spokesperson from Devon said "it's the seemingly small things that make such a difference, for example we hope that children living with adoptive families are able to live without fear that if they have a sleepover, or go on holiday, they will not go back home; any anxiety will be manageable".

Finally, Devon are working on evaluating the impact of their work but are already seeing anecdotal evidence of much smoother transitions.

## 5. Conclusion

Foster carers have a crucial role to play in supporting children as they move on, whether this is a move home or a move to a permanent placement.

Children and young people in care and care leavers told us in no uncertain terms that being able to stay in touch with their former foster carer was very important to them. We know that the bond between a foster carer and their foster child can be stronger than that of the child and their birth parent and we know the importance of valuing and supporting attachments particularly for these children in care who will most likely have previously experienced loss.

However, The Fostering Network's surveys showed one third of foster carers and one third of children and young people had been prevented from having contact and over half of the children and young people in care and care leavers said that they were not supported at all to keep in contact with their former foster carer. It was clear from comments from foster carers and young people that the view from many in social work is that a quick, clean break is considered best.

Attachments impact on social and emotional development, educational achievement and mental health. Children who have secure attachments have better outcomes in all these areas than those who do not have secure attachments.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of cutting off the relationship between the child and their foster carer is damaging and social work practice needs to change as a matter of urgency.

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<sup>2</sup> Children's attachment: attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care, NICE guideline, 25 November 2015.

## **6. Recommendations**

The Fostering Network believes that foster carers and young people must be supported to develop positive and strong bonds, and be encouraged and enabled to maintain contact once they no longer live together.

1. We call on the UK's governments to ensure that guidance and regulations require that children and young people in care are enabled to remain in contact with their former foster carers and that foster carers are enabled to support their former fostered children as they move home, move to a permanent placement, or move into and through the leaving care process.
2. Local authorities and health and social services trusts must ensure that this happens, challenging the prevailing culture where necessary.
3. When and where local authorities, health and social services trusts and independent fostering providers are inspected, proper attention should be paid by the inspectors as to how these relationships are being built and supported for children and young people in care.