

The National Fostering Stocktake

Call for Evidence Report

February 2018

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Introduction

In April 2017 we launched a call for evidence to seek views on the current state of foster care in England and how it could be improved to achieve ambitious outcomes for children and young people. This consultation received over 300 responses. We received submissions from a range of individuals. Approximately half of all responses were from individual foster carers, whilst other individual respondents included social workers, health practitioners, academics and consultants. A small number of submissions were directly from care-experienced young people and care leavers, as well as organisations bringing together the views of groups of children. Around 20 local authorities and 20 independent fostering agencies contributed to the call for evidence whilst approximately one sixth of all submissions were from organisations, ranging from small charities providing specialist services to large national organisations.

This summary attempts to reflect the main themes that emerged from the call for evidence, which we have then explored in more depth through a range of meetings, visits and consultation events, including with care-experienced young people, academics, statutory partners and carers. The following summary aims to highlight the shared views and sentiments of a range of respondents rather than provide an exhaustive list of every response received or a detailed account of individual submissions.

Key themes

The quality of support is crucial for those with experience of living in foster care

A number of young people with experience of foster care replied directly to the call for evidence. Some submissions comprised of feedback from Children in Care Councils, often in response to an accessible survey created by the local authority. Organisations such as Become collated the views of young people and submitted raw survey responses from children in care. Responses ranged from children in care aged seven to adult care leavers.

Children and young people's perspectives mainly centred on their relationships with foster carers and the support (or in some instances, lack of support) from their local authority. Many cited positive aspects about their fostering placements such as feeling safe, feeling part of the family, being healthy and being listened to by their foster parents. The way that foster care should enable children and young people to "have a normal life" featured in multiple responses. Young people were clear that this included going on holiday with their foster family instead of being placed into respite care. One young person shared her experience of a good placement by stating, *"It felt like home. I could go in the fridge when I wanted, go downstairs when I wanted, and I was consulted with everything in the household"*.

Many accounts of fostering highlighted the care, support and love that young people felt by their foster families. For example, a care experienced young person recounted her experience of overcoming a drug addiction with the support of her foster carers: *"I had no more weight on my shoulders and it was unbelievable and I was shocked by the outcome I had myself, because I always saw myself as a weak and feeble little girl who would never get anywhere in my life."*

Another response highlighted that not everyone has positive experiences; *"I have a great social worker and a great foster carer and it makes a massive difference – not everyone gets that but all children in care should"*. Some accounts of foster care were negative for reasons such as lack of sibling or family contact, poor relationships with social workers, and unsupportive foster carers. Respondents agreed that, overall, there needs to be a clear sense of direction towards permanency and the need for allocated professionals to be accountable for the process. Many young people were aware of the financial incentives involved in foster care, with one care leaver directly stating that *"fostering should never be promoted for the financial aspects of the role. Vulnerable children are not commodities."*

Transitions between placements featured heavily in responses, particularly as a number of young people experienced multiple placement moves resulting in a lack of stability. One individual emphasised that *"being in care, we naturally lack a sense of belonging,*

and this was compounded by this uncertainty over the stability of the placement". Another cited that there was "a degree of disillusion and uncertainty, and I always believed I could be forced to move at short notice". Young people described the negative consequences of having to move placements often, such as "never getting to take up a hobby or a sport and stick to it".

The lack of information from social workers about new placements was a strikingly common theme, with many young people recounting negative experiences of not knowing what was happening and why. A response from one individual made clear that *"it is not uncommon for children to be moved suddenly and not explained why. Social services has the impression that young children do not understand what is happening around them and it would cause too much disruption if told. I disagree. Even though we are young, we have been through more than you can imagine - the last thing we need is more dishonesty and lack of information."*

The transition out of care and into adulthood was commonly identified as challenging. Many young people noted feeling isolated and the sudden drop in support. Two care-experienced young people particularly emphasised their negative experiences when transitioning to university due to lack of support from the local authority in coordinating logistics and accommodation. Issues included being unable to find somewhere to live during the holidays and falling through the gap between university and local authority support.

Young people reported that foster care works best when they are involved in matching and decision-making, their voice is taken seriously (and sought directly rather than through review forms or through the foster carer) and when they are not seen as *"just a job"* to foster carers.

The role and status of foster carers needs greater clarification

Around half of all submissions were from individual foster carers. The most prevalent theme from foster carers was that they feel undervalued by other professionals, despite the need for increasingly specialist provision. Foster carers cite that they want to be treated as 'co-professionals' and as an integral part of the team around the child. This includes involvement in care planning, reviews and decision-making. One foster carer argues that *"the biggest problem with fostering is not being treated as a professional and not being invited to meetings or included in emails regarding a child in my care. Decisions about the child's schooling, transport and contact with siblings are taken without including me in the process. I look after the children 24/7 but I am not included or even allowed to advise on these decisions"*. Another foster carer goes further to state that *"foster carers generally feel helpless and, at times, hopeless, when other 'professionals' are making decisions about their child"*.

A number of organisations and social workers acknowledged that foster carers are not always included in decision-making when they should be, and recommended that the Stocktake should consider how to ensure that children are cared for by those who are fully equipped, respected and trained to deal with often complex needs. The need for foster carers to have the authority to make everyday decisions was also raised. A foster child aged 13 summarised this by highlighting, *"I get annoyed when I can't do something because we have to get social worker agreement"*.

The need to clarify employment status and pay for foster carers was a predominant theme emerging from the call for evidence. A number of foster carers expressed the need for rights such as job security, pension rights, retainer payments and sickness benefits. However, not all respondents were supportive of this, for example, *"foster carers having contract rights such as 'paid holiday' does not fit with the need for children to live within an environment that promotes normal family life, stability and consistency."*

Foster carers also reported financial difficulties, not only between placements, but also during placements for children with more complex needs. The common sentiment expressed was that pay, allowances and retainer payments are hugely variable between and within agencies and local authorities, and that there should be more standardisation so that foster carers are better able to become financially sustainable. The need to clarify the role of the foster carer was strongly expressed, for example one individual argued, *"As a foster carer, I am not sure where I fit, though having to register as self employed, I am a volunteer. I am a non-professional member of a professional team."* Another respondent stated that *"fostering is both my vocation and my profession. The two should not be mutually exclusive."*

A number of foster carers reported feeling insufficiently trained to manage contact with birth families and that the role of the foster carer in relation to the birth family is often unclear. Many respondents stated that contact with birth families can often be confusing,

create false ideals and is not always in the best interest of the child. A foster family highlighted this by sharing the following example;

“Our 12 year old foster daughter has monthly contact sessions with her father. In the last six months, he has attended two of those sessions in a sober state, having had to be turned away from four because he was under the influence of alcohol. Despite the disappointment suffered by the child, the social worker has arranged additional opportunities for contact with the father, which he has further failed to attend in a sober state, increasing the distress caused. At the child’s review meeting we suggested that contact should be further reduced to stop her distress and disappointment at being let down. This was not taken into account and monthly contact is to continue, despite the likelihood that the father will fail to attend appropriately and the child will continue to be distressed and disappointed regularly.”

Many respondents suggested that life story work should be prioritised to help young people understand their background and identity. A few foster carers also mentioned the importance of maintaining contact with their previous foster children as part of children maintaining healthy attachments. Responses from foster carers further illuminated that there is variability in the quality of training between providers. For example, an experienced foster carer stated her initial training was ‘*dangerously inadequate*’ and identified gaps in training such as on how to handle a child’s introduction and managing the child’s transition to adoptive placements. A number of foster carers consistently raised the need for training in therapeutic support.

The need for better preparation and support when handling allegations was raised frequently, with multiple foster carers recounting negative experiences which, in some cases, contributed to a decision to leave fostering altogether. A prospective foster carer responded to the call for evidence and shared that she decided not to foster due to the procedure and fear of allegations, despite successfully passing the fostering panel. Many foster carers highlighted the importance of peer support networks, not only in relation to allegations, but also as a way to improve resilience for everyday challenges.

Supporting children and young people's needs must be central to the system

A range of respondents raised the need to improve transitions between placements and transitions into adult life, in particular, but not exclusively, with reference to Staying Put. Overall, Staying Put was viewed positively and was described as '*an excellent policy*', '*an essential tool*', '*a success*' and '*a great system*'. However, it was also described as '*critically underfunded*', '*underdeveloped*' and that '*the realities of it make it very hard to work*'. Foster carers described challenges such as financial difficulties, loss of social worker support to manage complex needs, and no option to reinstate Staying Put if independence does not work. One foster carer described Staying Put as '*essentially a decision between the best interests of the young person and the financial viability of the carer*'. A number of foster carers also emphasised their concern that Staying Put changes the dynamics of the caring relationship and does not represent a normal family situation. For example, "*we went from a family to a landlord type relationship within weeks*". A few respondents commented that Staying Put actively encourages young people to start their adult life on benefits.

Many foster carers described that placement endings at any age are often abrupt, without adequate preparation for the child or the foster carer. Respondents highlighted that placement endings needed to be managed better in order for children to form and maintain healthy attachments.

Ensuring that children are adequately supported in their mental health and wellbeing was a frequently mentioned theme. Foster carers in particular called for quicker access to mental health support services for looked after children and the need for earlier assessment of mental health needs. It was argued that access to mental health support and assessment should be part of the child's care plan, regardless of the expected outcome or permanency of the placement. TACT advocated for priority assessments for children in care with emerging mental health issues whilst the NSPCC's *It's Time* campaign outlined the link between childhood abuse and developing mental health difficulties.

The high turnover of social workers was regularly cited as a barrier to positive outcomes for children and young people, specifically in relation to developing and maintaining relationships. A deputy head teacher and designated teacher for children looked-after reported that this disruption causes increasingly challenging behaviour both within and outside of school, which can often lead to placement breakdowns. A number of submissions also cited the inconsistency in competency and approach of social workers. Care-experienced young people, who reported their frustrations regarding their social workers' lack of understanding and availability, shared this view.

There needs to be improvement to the commissioning of foster care placements

Many responses, particularly from large organisations, local authorities and independent fostering agencies, appealed for improved commissioning practices. Responses cited that current frameworks are ineffective and that there is little consistency within the system. Respondents worried that this results in reduced placement choice and ultimately the risk that children are not being best matched to foster carers.

It was repeatedly reported that placement decisions are often made by market drivers, rather than placing children at the centre of the system. The Fostering Network suggests *“decisions are being made based on short term affordability rather than what are in the long-term best interests of the child”*. A foster carer went further to argue, *“what fostering is really about is money – who can save the most and who can charge the most. The children are incidental”*. Barnardos shared their concern that, in some local authorities, price is becoming a greater driver than quality in tendering for frameworks and that there is reluctance to designate placements as 'high need' or 'specialist' due to affordability. Independent providers commonly stated that local authorities select in-house provision first due to the perception that these placements are cheaper.

Providers also voiced concerns regarding the tension between local authorities and independent fostering agencies. The majority of local authorities that discussed commissioning want to see a more collaborative rather than competitive relationship between local authority fostering services and the independent sector. Local authorities referenced this not only in relation to the commissioning of placements but also in terms of foster carer recruitment. One local authority described the recruitment of foster carers as 'competing for scarce resources', which results in additional time and effort on targeted recruitment campaigns.

Many local authorities expressed concerns over profit-making in the independent sector, which was also a commonly shared view by individual foster carers, social workers and smaller fostering providers. A number of respondents called for an investigation into the role of profit in the foster care market to explore how resources might be better focused on meeting children's needs. It was agreed that the sector would benefit if there was more transparency in the cost of providing foster carers, including how independent foster agencies' income is spent.

Foster carer capacity and the sufficiency of placements was also discussed. Whilst a number of respondents cited a national shortage of foster carers, responses highlighted that the supply of and demand for foster carers is not consistent across geographical locations or for meeting certain needs of children, such as older children or unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. ICHA commented that there is currently a mismatch between the number of 'hard-to-place' young people who require foster care and the number of foster carers willing and able to work with young people with complex

needs. The Fostering Network supported this view and cited that recruitment in foster care is often driven by increasing numbers rather than meeting the needs of children currently in the care system. Many respondents stated that Staying Put was adding pressure to existing capacity issues in the system as young people remain in placements that would otherwise be available.

A large proportion of those who discussed capacity proposed a national database for foster carers in order to improve the referral and matching process. However, some respondents were more cautious about a national approach and argued the benefits of a local approach that ensures children are placed near to their families and friendship networks.

The importance of sharing best practice

Individuals and organisations responding to the call for evidence were keen to identify and share their own perspectives and research on what works to secure positive outcomes for children in fostering. One of the key themes was that fostering is a positive and viable route to permanence that can provide stability for children. The 'Your Life, Your Care' survey as part of Bright Spots, an initiative developed by Coram Voice and the University of Bristol, illustrates that 83% of looked after children think that being in care has improved their lives.

Examples of best practice include instances where there is peer support between foster carers, fostering services empower carers, achievements are celebrated for children in care, and there is strong communication between social workers and foster carers. Collaborative arrangements between providers, particularly in relation to out of area placements, was identified as a way to improve current practice.

Many organisations shared learning from their own services and initiatives, such as the Head, Heart, Hand programme led by The Fostering Network. This model highlights the impact of a social pedagogic approach on outcomes for fostered children and young people, including helping children to feel more confident, empowered and valued. Coram shared their work in developing a Story Centre as an example of how best practice life story work should be championed and sustained. In addition, local authorities shared successful approaches to care, such as Kent County Council's placement stability service 'A Sense of Belonging' which targets the most vulnerable children. Many local authorities focused on therapeutic models, such as Southwark's Secure Base Model and Nottinghamshire's approach based on Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and PACE, an approach to communicating with children based on playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy.

The Mockingbird Family Model was cited multiple times as a positive example of peer and community-based support, with one respondent suggesting that this model should be extended to Staying Put arrangements.

Responses were clear that the voice of children and young people should shape the system. Brighton and Hove shared an example of this through their 'Me and My World' project, which prioritises the relationship between the social worker and child, and introduces a child-focused approach to recording information. In this regard, some respondents called for better advocacy services, improving the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, and more ways to involve young people in the selection, recruitment and training of foster carers.

A number of respondents referenced the need to review the frameworks around foster care, including the National Minimum Standards. Ofsted cited "*a need to establish aspirational, outcome-based quality standards for all children living away from home*", which was supported by Become who stated that the "*the National Minimum Standards*

for fostering do not go far enough to put the child at the centre of care. They do not set out standards for care that are aspirational and of the highest possible quality.” Whilst CoramBAAF argued that the current legal framework does not need major revision, some changes would make the system work better, increasing flexibility in certain areas and driving up standards in others. For example, the two stage fostering assessment process was described as *‘unhelpfully bureaucratic and confusing’* and the process for foster carers to transfer between fostering services is too complicated. Many foster carers supported this view and called for a simpler way to transfer between fostering services.

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